South African Labor Relations: The Truth and The Lie

The South African Embassy has been circulating documents claiming that black workers in South Africa now enjoy a "right to collective bargaining" and a "right to strike." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Employers in South Africa are under no obligation to recognize or bargain with any union. Since there is no legal mechanism to compel a company to sign a recognition agreement they have to resort to strikes. Not all of these strikes succeed, and some have ended with the workers fired or temporarily defeated.

Virtually all strikes are illegal. A legal strike can only be called after the union completes a lengthy conciliation process which typically takes a year to eighteen months.

Picketing is forbidden by law for any strike. Employers have the absolute right to dismiss any striker and this is a very frequent occurrence. For any worker classified by the government as a "migrant" the loss of a job brings deportation to a barren rural area incapable of supporting life. Since up to 60% of African workers have been classified as migrants this is a grave threat.

In 1981 the police intervened in over half the strikes. If direct government strike-breaking has become somewhat less common since then, black workers and those who dare to organize them are still subject to intense repression. Leaders of the black unions have died during interrogation, been tortured, and sentenced to prison. A few recent incidents will convey something of the reality the black unions deal with daily:

*In March 1984 security police fired tear gas into a crowd of workers who were walking home from work because of a bus boycott called to support striking bus drivers.

*In February 1984 riot police were called to a strike at a Johannesburg factory and arrested Jeremy Baskin, an organizer for the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union for "convoking an illegal gathering." "Shakes" Sikhane, General Secretary of the Food and
Beverage Workers and Robert Mkhinze, a shop steward for the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union were arrested in the same month.

*In June 1983 Oscar Mpetha, the 74 year old National Organizer of the African Food and Canning Workers Union, was sentenced to 5 years in prison on a bogus "terrorism" charge. Despite his advanced age and the fact that he suffers from diabetes, which later forced the amputation of his left leg, Mpetha was forced to sit through portions of his lengthy trial shackled with leg irons.

In the last year a new anti-union tactic has emerged—the use of the puppet governments of the "tribal homelands" to outlaw unions. These "homelands" are creations of the South African government which, although granted a fictitious "independence," remain totally dependent on the white minority government.

In July and August 1983 the Ciskei government, one of these puppet regimes, launched an all out war against the black unions which cost 90 people their lives. Police fired into crowds of workers, hundreds of people were detained without charge or trial, women were raped and many people were brutally beaten. The South African Allied Workers Union was declared an illegal organization. This year another "homeland" government, Bophuthatswana, has enacted legislation which will prevent any of the existing black unions from operating in its territory. Delegating the repression to the supposedly independent "homelands" has the effect of deflecting international criticism from the South African government.

The very fact that the South African Embassy goes to such lengths to spread misinformation about the black unions shows how seriously white South Africa takes US public opinion. When a delegation of American labor leaders protested Oscar Mpetha's conviction to the South African Consul General in New York it was front page news in South Africa. It is vitally important that Americans take the time to learn the facts for themselves rather than being misled by South African government propaganda.

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Black Unions in South Africa The first US report on the new black unions. $.60 each. Over twenty $.30 each. 8pp.

Black Workers Under Siege: Repression Against Trade Unions in South Africa A new report on the torture, imprisonment and even death which faces black workers when they try to organize unions in South Africa. With a preface by Victor Gotbaum, Executive Director of District Council 37 AFSCME. $.60 each. Over twenty, $.30 each. 8pp.