

WITH LEADERS OF THE AFL-CIO

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AIDE MEMOIRE FOR DISCUSSION WITH LEADERS OF THE AFL-CIO  
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Black South African trade unionism is in the process of development. Development in trade unionism must be observed on two different levels. An important point I want to make is that trade unions need to develop trade union expertise. They need the kind of in-house expertise which has to do with the running of a union and to do with intimate knowledge of legislation and common practice within which worker management discussions and conflicts take place. The second area of trade union development which is going to be fascinating to watch relates to the question of what kind of force trade unions in South Africa are going to emerge to be.

I make this distinction because I believe that the AFL-CIO could play an ever-increasingly vital role in Black trade union development in so far as its role is to increase the operational competence of trade union officials. Shop floor stewards who gravitate upwards into full-time trade union posts do so without the realisation of the technical expertise which is in fact required in a good trade unionist. Because trade unions have been so long suppressed in South Africa and they can count the years of their experience very frequently on the fingers of one hand, they have just not had the time to develop competent expertise. Tremendous demands are going to be made on trade unions and there is an urgent, almost desperate, need for Black trade unionists in South Africa to learn from whomever they can the whole technical business of running trade unions. Without this basic competence, trade unions handling worker issues and worker funds will not stand the test of time and will fall into disarray. Internal conflict which has in the past so characterised Black trade union development in South Africa will be magnified by technical incompetence, and real opportunities of negotiating worker advances will be foregone by incompetence.

It is in this context that I express my deep gratitude to AFL-CIO for displaying the interest they have displayed in Black South African trade unionism.

It is my hope that the AFL-CIO will continue to make every endeavour to spread its interests across the whole spectrum of Black trade unions in South Africa. For the AFL-CIO to become the hand-maiden of one trade union faction will, I think, in the long run detract from its ability to be meaningful in our situation.

The exclusion of Blacks from the industrial process during past generations has left South African Blacks lacking in vital experience which a sophisticated industrial economy demands. We talk quite rightly of the horrendous backlogs which Blacks face in every walk of life. They face backlogs in education; they face backlogs in health, welfare and essential services; they face backlogs in housing; and when we talk of backlogs, it is all too seldom recognised that the most important backlog there is in South Africa is the backlog of diverse and appropriate experience to enable Blacks to take their position in society, and as society changes, to give them the positions they should have had generations ago.

In our educational field we face a desperate shortage of teachers, for example, and with a Black population now being characterised by a huge bulge in the school-going age, every forecast of class-room requirements and teacher requirements has been confounded. Over 50 per cent of all Black South Africans are under the age of 15 and emergency action to train tens of thousands of teachers needs to be got under way as a matter of urgency. Even if we have built the class-rooms and even a decade hence if we have trained the teachers, we will have a teaching profession with a vast influx of newcomers and a teaching profession therefore which has not consolidated experience to develop the kind of expertise and feel for teaching which only time gives. Education therefore has a backlog of class-rooms and teachers, but it also has a backlog of experience.

Formal Black trade union development is only a recent thing in South Africa and there are pitifully few experienced and competent Black trade unionists to tackle the vastness of the job which awaits them. Anything that the AFL-CIO can do in recognition of the urgency to meet the backlog in trade union training schemes will be greatly appreciated.

For better or worse South Africa will remain locked into a north/south economic axis and the most rapid industrialisation possible is the only realistic course open to us. Agrarian revolutions are not going to stay starvation in South Africa. Ideologies are not going to stay starvation in South Africa. The only thing which will avoid hunger and starvation for millions in our country is the maximum production of jobs in the sustained development of an ever thriving economy.

We must recognise that the South African economy will continue to suffer the vicissitudes of international developments, and the struggle between the mark and the dollar or the yen and the pound, or the dollar and the yen, will not take into account Black South African requirements. International capitalism will continue to be careless about the plight of Black South Africans. The recent rise of the dollar must be traced to circumstances in which Black workers in South Africa were never ever considered. The best we

can do to provide jobs for Black workers in South Africa will continue to be affected by international circumstances.

This is the experience of the whole of Africa. There is desperate unemployment and under-employment across the length and breadth of Africa, and Africans in Africa still bear the brunt of Third World conditions created by colonialism.

The Black South African population is truly cash dependent and every extra rand earned and every extra benefit gained, and every improvement in conditions of employment, and in particular every job advancement possibility, are things which Black workers will strive for. They will only strive successfully for these things if there is a rapid development of competent Black trade unions in South Africa. Trade unionists have an immense task to face and grave responsibilities rests on their shoulders. Nobody can do too much too soon, and I urge the AFL-CIO to speed up whatever they are doing in South Africa and to do more of what they have been doing and a great deal more of what yet is to be done.

Outside agencies can do a great deal to develop the technical competence of Black trade unions but it is trade unionists themselves, and the trade union movement in South Africa, which must tackle the question of the backlog of trade union experience and develop an effective guiding tradition of trade unionism within the framework of which technical expertise can best be employed.

The recruitment of trade unionists will remain problematic for some time to come. The flair to talk, the burning indignation and the desire to fight for worker rights, are qualities which are central to a process of selection. These qualities are also the qualities which the political process in South Africa looks for in the selection of up-and-coming political leaders. We will continue to face a situation in which individuals who should be party politicians enter the trade union scene. There is as yet insufficient realisation in South Africa of the distinctiveness of the role of the political expert and the trade union expert. I perceive this difference to be so vital that I have kept Inkatha out of becoming involved in worker matters. The separation of the full-time politician and the full-time trade unionist is a necessary separation in our country, as I presume is the case in all countries. Trade unions are not party political organisations and any attempt to make trade unions play party political roles will detract from the whole process of liberation and have a backlash for workers which will be terribly detrimental to their interests.

This is why Inkatha makes provision for trade unions to affiliate to it and gives affiliated trade unions a seat on the Movement's Central Committee. Inkatha does not demand reciprocal responses from a trade union, and we in Inkatha have never sought seats on

Black political decision-making, but Black politicians should keep out of trade unions.

Black trade unions in South Africa have for decades been bedevilled by them being regarded as the hand-maiden of political bodies. The activities of SACTU have been detrimental and the ANC Mission in Exile's attempt to use trade unions as political tools is lamentable. Trade unionists will know that in the field of seeking international aid, the ANC's Mission in Exile has always been there behind the scenes telling international donor agencies who to fund and who not to fund. They have tried to dictate the direction of trade union development and they have tried to act as a filter through which assistance to Black trade unionism in South Africa should pass.

There is every reason why we should have Black unity of political purpose among all Black political organisations in the country, but I fear that this is an idealist's hope and that we must face the fact that in desperate situations involving complex issues of life and death, in circumstances where even the smallest thing succeeds only with massive endeavour, there are bound to be differences of opinion about what should be done and what should not be done. There are bound to be different analyses of what went wrong, and why things have failed, and because of the depth of the issues involved, there is bound to be heated opposition between one set of ideas and another. Perhaps this is democracy at work. Perhaps this is the way a society struggles to determine its own future, but the Black/Black conflict in South African politics is growing to levels which frankly scare me. If Black trade unionists allow themselves to be the cat's paws of party politicians, the trade union movement will be rent asunder and Black workers to whom they are responsible will continue to under-achieve in their places of employment.

The lessons which wise and experienced heads have learnt in South Africa will still have to be learned by young trade unionists, and for a considerable time ahead we must anticipate that young and eager men and women, fired with indignation about the terrible circumstances of Black workers, who enter the trade union scene will spread themselves too widely and too thinly over too many areas of concern and achieve nothing of note in any area. Black trade unionists need to be politically sophisticated, and sophisticated enough in fact to draw the line between trade union activity and political activity to which I am referring. And here I come back to the point I made initially, that it is in our circumstances urgently necessary for the AFL-CIO to spread themselves across the widest possible Black trade union spectrum and earn the right to do so by providing the expertise which every trade union faction needs, and at all times and in all manner of ways avoid involvement in factionalism in Black trade unions produced by the divisiveness of Black politics.

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