

*We can't allow the fight to be isolated*

# International solidarity

Solidarity with the liberation movement in South Africa is a duty for workers everywhere — and especially a duty for workers in Britain given British imperialism's historic and current connections with the white-supremacist state.

One particular form of solidarity has been highly controversial in the British labour movement.

Should British trade unionists visit their fellow trade unionists in South Africa? Should they encourage South African

trade unions to send representatives here? Should they support international combine meetings to which South African trade unionists are invited? These and other related issues make up what has come to be known as the 'direct links' issue.

To answer these questions we need to know what the independent unions want; what sort of union-to-union links have occurred and what is feasible; what purposes such links serve, and what dangers are associated with them.

Direct contact between officials and rank and file members of British and South African trade unions has been a crucial element in building effective solidarity. Since 1973 the independent unions in South Africa have developed a stream of contacts with European trade union bodies.

Union officials and shop stewards from South Africa have visited overseas and union officials and shop stewards from here have visited South Africa. All the independent unions in South Africa are seeking international trade union contacts.

The most active and largest groups — FOSATU, SAAWU, GWU, CUSA — have

Barclays Bank is the largest foreign company operating in South Africa. At the beginning of this year, the bank's total South African assets stood at around £10 billion. Its pre-tax profits for 1984 were £58 million.

Barclays lends vast amounts to South African state institutions. In 1976 it bought £6 million worth of South African government Defence Bonds, thereby directly funding the armed forces. The bonds were sold after an international outcry, but Barclays has helped finance arms sales to apartheid.

Barclays directors are trustees of the South Africa Foundation, which distributes pro-apartheid propaganda abroad.

In 1980 Barclays published a report, 'Doing Business in South Africa', that encouraged investment in the country. It commented, 'the [political] situation is well under control and generally the labour force is content.'

Barclays' operations in Namibia contravene United Nations rulings.

A recent Barclays video film, 'The Visionary Eagle', shown to all new staff, covers South Africa, but does not even mention apartheid. As the 'Barclays Shadow Report' for 1985 comments: 'It is a classic example of how Barclays views its place in South African society, as part of the existing economic and social system.'

all called for direct links in the form of visits to South Africa in support of particular struggles.

The most important result of direct contact — as of all forms of solidarity action — is the boost for the morale of black workers in South Africa when they learn of it. With all the power of the repressive state apparatus backing the employers with whom they are in dispute, it is invaluable to workers there to know that they are not alone and that they have informed and willing allies on their side. There is no better way of achieving this morale-boosting effect than by dealing directly with the workers themselves who are locked in struggle.

It is this factor more than any other which leads us to support the South African unions' call for direct links in the form of visits by overseas unionists to the scene of the struggles in South Africa.

Direct links also break through barriers of ignorance and apathy inside the British trade union movement on international questions. They enable trade unionists here to see for themselves the people and organisations which they are being asked to support: to learn at first hand the conditions under which black workers in South Africa are forced to live by their employers and the state; to find out for themselves the real background to indus-

trial disputes and to know exactly and quickly what kind of solidarity is sought by the independent unions when they are in dispute.

Such considerations are crucial when managements counter pressure by British trade unionists by saying that this pressure is jeopardising the 'progress' of talks with South African unions, or claiming that the dispute in question is an 'inter-union' dispute.

### Useful

It is also crucial given the complexity of the South African trade union situation and the need of trade unionists here to find out which unions are bona fide representatives of the workers. The building of direct links at all levels helps to counter the insularity of ordinary trade union members just as it helps to counter the limits on solidarity imposed by top levels of the TUC.

Direct links are not a miracle cure for the problems of solidarity. Rather, they provide a basis upon which it is much easier to build a whole range of further solidarity actions.

Workers in Britain can put pressure on companies denying black workers their rights by raising the issue in their negotiations and by registering, if the company refuses to concede, a formal dis-

pute with it. Even when these quite small actions are taken, the effect of such pressure can be very significant.

Letters of protest to management, messages of support to unions, material and fraternal aid to unions in dispute in South Africa, coordination with unions involved in other overseas subsidiaries of the parent company, sympathetic strike action and boycott of goods to and from South Africa are some of the actions open to British trade unions.

Strike action and union boycotts, of course, demand a high level of commitment from UK unions. They are often called for by the situation but smaller levels of activity are also useful.

Are there dangers? The TUC has multiple links with South African unions; but its tendency has been to keep them within bureaucratic limits and to use them to restrict the most progressive aspects of South African trade unionism.

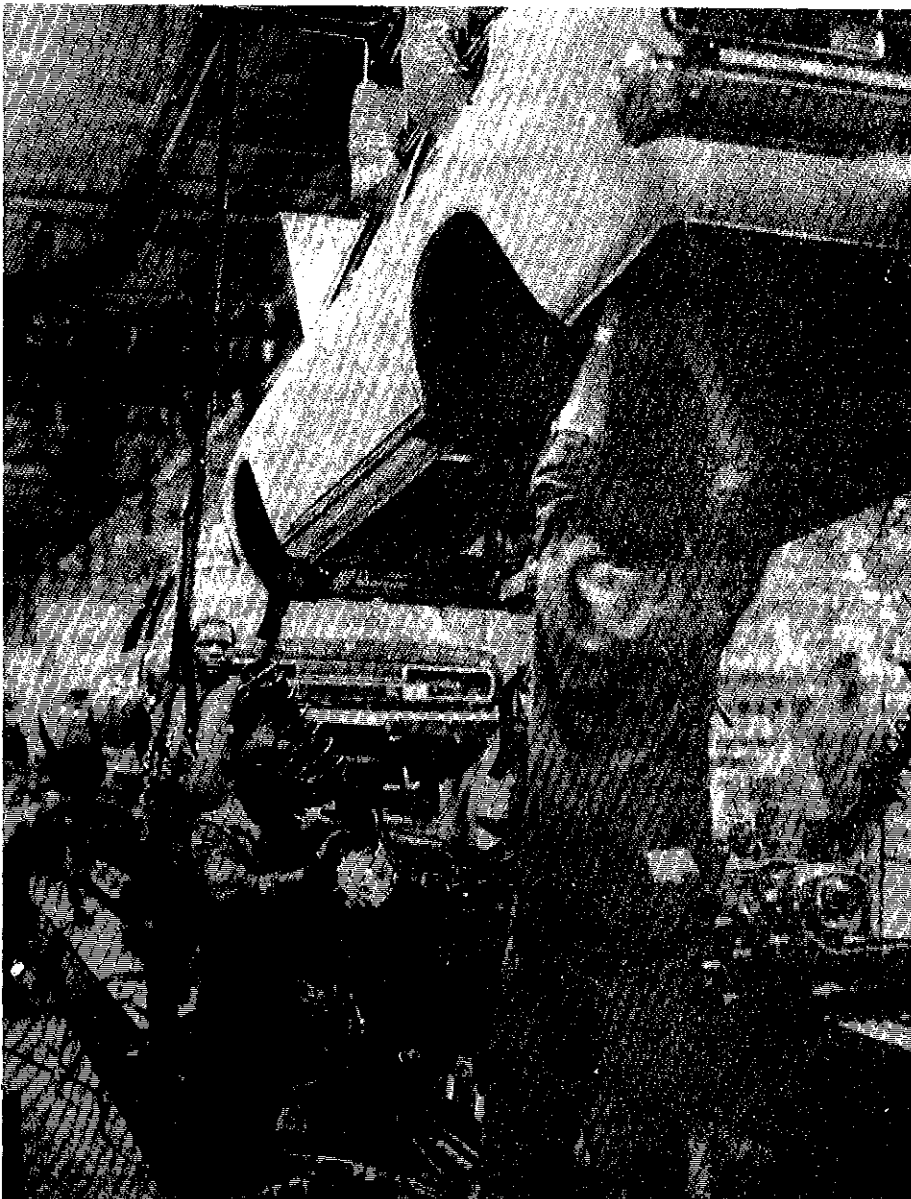
For a period during the 1970s the TUC International Department, to its shame, maintained support of the racist TUCSA unions and sometimes appeared to block initiatives from independent unions, particularly when TUCSA 'parallels' and independents were in conflict with each other.

More recently the TUC International Department has rectified this stance, but it still falls short of providing solidarity on the lines sought by the unions.

Many independent South African unions have links with international labour organisations like the ICFTU (which deals directly with national trade union centres like the TUC International Department) or like the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS which link unions in particular industries like chemicals, metals or food). These organisations have performed an ambivalent role: at times useful — especially in the case of the ITSS — and at times passive or even oppositional.

A classic example of the unconstructive side of their policies was the planned visit of Bill Sirs and Terry Duffy, general secretaries respectively of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and of the AUEW, to South Africa in 1981. Sirs and Duffy said that they had been invited by black unions inside South Africa. But what emerged was that the invitation came from the British section of the International Metalworkers' Federation, who had not consulted its non-racial, South African affiliates. The first these heard about the visit was when it was reported in the press in the UK.

Sirs' idea of the purpose of the visit had



*We must forge international links across industries*

Rio Tinto Zinc (RTZ) is the 46.5% owner of the giant Rossing uranium mine in Namibia, and also has substantial interests in South Africa itself.

The following organisations still have shares in RTZ:

Lewisham Borough Council;  
Liverpool Council Social Services;  
Central Regional Council (Scotland).

Oxford University.  
York University and York University Pension Fund.

Durham University.

(Information from 'RTZ Uncovered', published by Partizans, 218 Liverpool Rd., London N1).



Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn arrested outside South Africa House.  
Photo: Paul Mattesson

nothing in common with what the IMF's non-racial affiliates want", Sirs declared: "We have black affiliates who desperately need our assistance. The objective is to pull them out of the dark ages and provide the sort of training shop stewards have here".

This patronising attitude demonstrates vividly how important it is that the IMF be answerable to its independent affiliates and that its contacts be set up only in collaboration with these unions. Although the IMF FOSATU affiliates were opposed

to this particular trip, they expressed themselves unequivocally in favour of direct contacts, provided that they are guided by the interests and requirements of workers.

The South African metalworkers' unions stated:

"The independent non-racial IMF affiliates in South Africa found it very difficult to support the proposed visit because of the statements made by Sirs before the visit. The unions felt his statements to be insulting and ill-informed when he spoke of bringing black workers out of the "dark ages". These IMF affiliates made their views known to the IMF secretariat in Geneva. The visit was subsequently called off.

"The three IMF affiliates believe that their principles on fraternal contact between unions are clear. We strongly favour fraternal contact between workers in South Africa and workers in other countries, at all levels, provided this is guided by the interests and requirements of workers.

"Visits to South Africa and visits overseas should be based on the concrete needs of workers.

"Visits should involve not only top officials, but also plant-based worker representatives.

"The aims of these visits should be to strengthen fraternal ties between organised workers in different countries and to carry forward the struggle for workers in South Africa to win the same rights as have been won by workers in other countries.

"Several visits to and from other unions have already taken place, with shop stewards and union officials from Europe visiting unions and factories in South Africa and shop stewards and officials from our unions travelling to Europe and the USA. This contact has been valuable and will be encouraged in the future, provided it takes place in accordance with the above principles and guidelines".

The ANC, SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid Movement have, however, opposed direct links.

SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid executive combined in defeating moves in Anti-Apartheid in support of direct union-to-union links, in the 1981 AGM. Their major argument is that such visits constitute a violation of their policy of boycotting South Africa.

### Boycott

But it is — or should be — quite clear that boycott of South Africa refers to the apartheid regime and the economic forces which prop and profit from it: not to the black workers' organisations which are fighting back. Indeed it is the regime which is attempting to isolate the non-racial unions.

SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid's executive say that "black workers themselves...have consistently called for the isolation of South Africa". But non-racial unions are an authentic voice of black workers and it is clear that many are now calling for direct links. They do not want to isolate themselves.

An official SACTU representative in the UK declared his opposition to direct links in December 1981's AA News. He said that "once in a while the regime will resort to guile by allowing in a person who is not going to be of much benefit to the workers in South Africa or will — wittingly or unwittingly — serve the regime's interests." In other words the only links he sees as possible are those countenanced by the state.

He ignores the strength of the trade unions — inside the country and out — to develop contacts of use to themselves, and assumes that the state will only allow in and out of the country individuals friendly to apartheid.

Consider a situation in which a solidarity delegation is sent over. If the state lets them in, well and good; if it refuses, it would provide good propaganda material for solidarity work and encouragement to black workers. Either way, black workers in question would receive a boost to their morale knowing that they are not isolated.

The apartheid state would *like* to stop all progressive links; indeed it would *like* to crush the whole union movement. But whether it can remains open to question. It has not succeeded so far. Moreover, support for direct links increases pressure on the state's ability to restrict visits. Our aim is to make life more difficult for the state machinery, not voluntarily accept their controls.

Anti-Apartheid and SACTU do not of course advocate that non-racial unions in South Africa should be isolated or

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deprived of support. What they say is that British trade unions should channel all their support through SACTU, that SACTU has an extensive underground network in South Africa and has "perfected its methods of making contact".

They further argue that most trade unionists are "organising in semi-legal or clandestine conditions" and that the establishment of direct links can "jeopardise these trade unionists' work". In other words, rather than form direct contact with other non-racial unions in South Africa, trade unions should place all their support — moral and financial — behind SACTU.

It is not true that non-racial unions in South Africa work in 'semi-legal or clandestine conditions'. While it is true that they are semi-legal bodies, nevertheless they openly organise black workers.

They see their openness as a crucial aspect of their strength as trade unions; for it enables them to bring together the mass of workers in a particular industry or area in a way which would be impossible for an underground organisation. It also enables them to maintain a far higher level of democratic discussion among the membership than is ever possible in a tightly-knit underground group.

Whatever the advantages of underground organisation, many of the non-racial unions do not feel it is appropriate for *trade unions*, except as a last resort.

Many of the non-racial unions consider it adventurist to work with an organisation like SACTU which is underground and for all practical purposes illegal. This is particularly the case with respect to

For over a year, eleven workers at Dunnes stores in O'Connell Street, Dublin, have been on strike in protest at apartheid.

In July 1984 Mary Manning was suspended for implementing the policy of her union, the Irish Distributive and Allied Trades Union, for a boycott of South African goods. After refusing to handle South African grapefruit, she was suspended indefinitely. Ten full-time work-mates [and initially, two casuals] walked out in her support.

Dunnes management have drafted in part-time scab labour to beat the strike and to beat the union. But the strikers have fought on.

The strike has focused attention in Ireland on apartheid and has pointed the way forward to building solidarity with South African workers. It has, rightly, become an international cause celebre, too.

The strikers and the company chair, were invited to go to Soweto last month to see apartheid for themselves. Ben Dunne Jr turned down the offer but the strikers agreed to accept the invitation from Desmond Tutu. In the event they were held for eight hours under armed guard in Johannesburg and then flown back.

One of the strikers, Theresa Mooney, told the Guardian [July 23] of her feelings and summed up the enormous value of the experience.

"We said from the beginning we didn't come out as martyrs for South African blacks. We were just following union directives. We didn't know much. But now we know more. And when, if, we go back, we won't take the same shit as before. This hasn't just taught us about South Africa, it's taught us a lot about how the system operates here."

international links. When it is possible for non-racial unions to forge direct links with overseas unions, it clearly increases rather than diminishes the risks to mediate these links through an underground organisation.

There is danger in all non-racial trade unionism in South Africa; but SACTU's claim that the exchange of visits can 'provoke further harassment' is a risk many of the non-racial trade unions con-

sider worth taking and have taken, consistently for the last ten years in some cases, and seems minimal compared to the risks of involvement with SACTU.

Lastly, there are enormous advantages in direct links in their own right. Rather than attempting to mediate contact through overstretched lines of communication, officials, shop stewards and ordinary workers will be able to exchange experiences directly and build support on



Black strikers, Durban 1973

this basis. Such links are especially useful when speedy and effective support is called for during industrial disputes.

Behind the ANC/AAM/CP opposition to direct links is an attempt to maintain a political monopoly and to marginalise the independent voice of black workers — to substitute the ANC's perspective of diplomatic pressure plus guerilla warfare for an international solidarity of a distinctly working class type.

So we should support direct links. But arguments on this issue should not overshadow the other solidarity work that can be done. And specific solidarity with workers' struggles in South Africa must go together with, rather than replacing, more general solidarity with the whole liberation movement.

Demonstrations, lobbies and pickets are as important for South Africa as they were for Vietnam. The Anti-Apartheid Movement also stresses four other forms of activity: disinvestment; getting people

and organisations to withdraw business from Barclays Bank, whose South African subsidiary is the biggest bank there; stopping sporting links; and pressing for government economic sanctions.

These activities are limited, and cannot substitute for working class forms of solidarity. Investors who are withdrawing from South Africa do so out of concern for their profits, not moral pressure. If the big capitalist governments impose sanctions, they will do so only in a crisis and in order to get a solution tailored to their interests.

### Crucial

Nevertheless, the movement in South Africa, including the non-racial trade unions, has supported these forms of solidarity. And even if their immediate effects are limited, some of them can be extremely useful for building awareness.

Not everyone is a trade unionist working in a company with subsidiaries in South

Africa, or handling South African trade. Everyone has a local Barclays Bank, and many people have local councils, colleges, or trade unions which may bank at Barclays or have investments in companies heavily involved in South Africa or Namibia.

No-one needs to subscribe to a whole theory about bringing down apartheid by diplomatic and consumer pressure in order to make the moral gesture of withdrawing an account from Barclays or selling shares in RTZ or ICI.

Any Labour Party Young Socialists branch, Labour Party, or college Labour Club, can organise a picket at its local Barclays and use it to get across the facts and the arguments about apartheid.

In that way we can build a mass solidarity movement — and lay the basis for the more decisive form of support for the black resistance in South Africa, through trade union boycotts of South African trade.



A victim of the Soweto massacre. Photo: IDAF.