

THE STAR

-1 FEB 1973

NEW HOPE FOR BLACK WORKERS

Labour Reporter

CAPE TOWN — Indications of co-operation between the left and right-wing sections of the South African labour movement emerged at the Abe Bailey Institute conference on organised labour, which ended here yesterday.

Mr Arthur Grobbelaar, general secretary of the South African Trade Union Council, yesterday gave his support to a call by his opposite number, Mr Wally Grobler, of the right-wing Confederation of Labour, for a Government commission of inquiry into legislation on Black trade unions.

Delegates to the conference were almost unanimous on the causes of the Natal strikes — poor working conditions and slow-rising wages, worsened by the upsurge in the cost of living and almost total lack of communication between employers and their African workers.

The conference was in little doubt that the fault rested with employers, who were accused of resisting efforts to unionise their workers.

There was less agreement on solutions to the problem. Some delegates, mainly employers' representatives, were in favour

of speeding up the establishment of works committees under the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, but Mr J. H. Liebenberg, former president of the Artisan Staff Association, summed up the feeling of the majority when he said:

"The Wage Act and the Bantu Labour Act have both failed to close the wage gap. There are only 18 statutory works committees in existence — the system has not worked."

But Mr Liebenberg and his colleague, Mr Grobler, were not part of the majority which agreed that African trade unions were the only long-term answer to the communication gap.

Although delegates agreed on this need, there was considerable dissension on the methods by which it would be achieved.

Most felt the White unions, particularly those belonging to TUCSA, should take the lead in setting up African unions, and in putting pressure on

Government and employers to recognise them.

But a significant minority thought Black workers were too suspicious of White unions to accept their leadership. Africans would rather organise first and meet White unions later on an equal footing, according to some delegates.

ACTION

Another point on which there was unanimity was that urgent action was needed to close the so-called "skills gap," caused by a severe lack of education and training for African workers. Many, including Mr Grobbelaar, saw this as one of the most important causes of the wage gap.

In their move towards conciliation, both TUCSA and the Confederation of Labour showed intentions of discarding outworn attitudes.

In his call for consultation on Black unions, Mr Grobler showed the confederation was moving away from its rigid refusal even to discuss the matter.