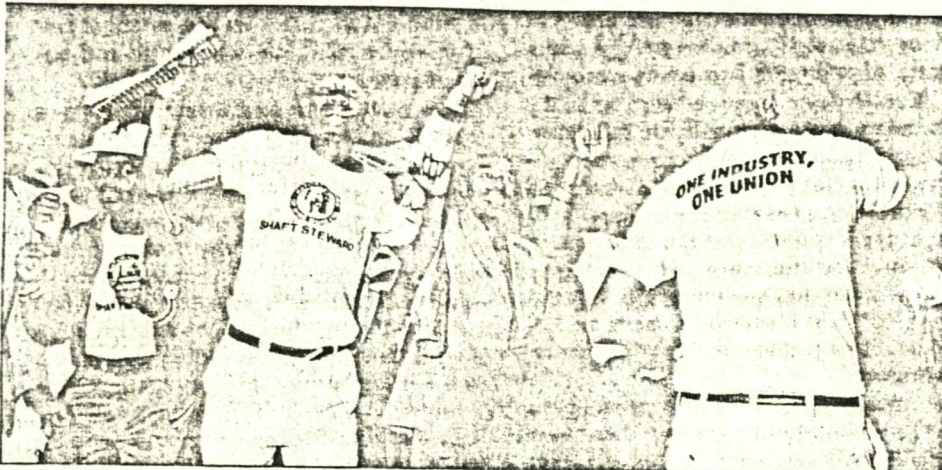


SOUTH AFRICA

Strength in unity

In the face of large-scale detention of labour leaders, the trade union movement is moving to the forefront of the national struggle, reports Akwe Amosu.



National Union of Mineworkers: detention of union leaders is placing industrial relations in jeopardy

SINCE the start of the state of emergency, 920 trade unionists have been detained in South Africa out of a probable 6,000 taken into custody. Over 80 per cent of them are active in unions affiliated to the huge federation Cosatu, founded late last year.

There should be no surprise that organised labour has been thus targeted. Recent years have seen giant steps being taken in the unions' power to defend their members and within the present rebellion, the regime is fearful of the depth of worker power and commitment.

Cosatu's assessment of the situation is bitter: "We are seeing a situation in which over 70 key leadership people have been detained under emergency laws and many others forced into hiding. These figures excluded scores of other workers and shop stewards detained as a result of strikes taking place spontaneously in response to the state of emergency".

Among those detained is the president of Cosatu himself, Elijah Barayi (also the vice-president of the National Union of Mineworkers), along with the treasurer, the general-secretary, the editor of *Cosatu News*, and other regional officials. Their names appear on a list of 165 names collected by the exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), alongside others from other federations like Cusa (Council of Unions of South Africa) and from particular unions. The South African government continues to refuse to list those they have detained.

As the first mass detentions were made immediately after the state of emergency was declared, a number of strikes developed in six major supermarket chains led by trade unionists in the retail sector. They sought to force their employers to insist on the release of union leaders and their co-workers.

Then early this month, despite extremely difficult conditions, reportedly 90 NUM shaft stewards from eight of the union's regional areas met to discuss

what action to take in defence of their detained leaders. Within a few days, 2,000 miners struck in the first of selectively targeted actions, in four diamond mines owned by De Beers. And at Anglo American's Free State Consolidated gold mine, 8,000 workers imposed a go-slow. As that news broke, a story of 1,000 trade unionists at a meeting in Tembisa being arrested and detained *en masse* also came to light.

For once, employers are as upset by the repression as the workers are angered. Nowhere is this more true than in the mining industry itself. The state of emergency and ensuing detentions have walked roughshod over pay and conditions negotiations between the Chamber of Mines (representing the six big mining companies) and the NUM. De Beers's chairman had already warned of the effect that the government's repressive actions would have on industrial relations. As the strikes in four of his mines began, he sent a telegram to the Minister for Law and Order, Louis le Grange, asking that police should release the NUM's detained leaders because negotiations were impossible under these conditions.

A statement issued after a recent meeting of Cosatu leaders in hiding, warns that the whole system of industrial relations "established through bitter struggle and negotiations with employers over the past seven years" is in jeopardy. The equality between employers and workers in negotiation is seriously compromised if key leadership is in hiding or in detention while the union is in negotiation. "At present there are more than a million workers involved in negotiations at a very delicate stage, particularly in the metal, mining and food sectors. We believe that the actions of the government are therefore prejudicial to continuing industrial peace".

A string of demands by Cosatu on behalf of trade unionists suffering the

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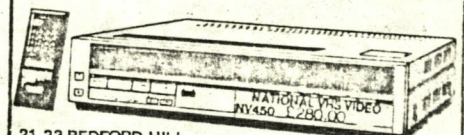
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effects of the clampdown, to be met by a July 10 deadline, shows that the state of emergency has inflamed rather than silenced demands for change. A Sactu representative in London confirms this. She points out that in one case, metal and steelworkers are continuing to work without any agreement in force since it has not been possible to conduct negotiations to replace the one that has expired. Workers are angry about the delay.

Some bosses, she says, have used the state of emergency to crack down on their workforce and quotes a reactionary mining management, Gencor, as one which called in police-trained vigilantes to break workers' industrial action. Others realise however that workers are increasingly militant in the face of the repression. The mines have lost millions of rands as a result of industrial action this year, 14.85 billion rands in the gold sector alone.

The economy is barely in a state to cope with such a situation, despite President Botha's taunting of the international community, as if he positively wants sanctions imposed. Business confidence in the constant round of repression and resistance is very low. 38 US companies left South Africa last year. Inflation is running at 20 per cent. One million people became unemployed in 1985. And the impoverishment of the people is having a severe impact on buying power and therefore markets. The economy is in any case distorted in terms of what it pro-

duces and what it sells internally. As the Sactu commentator remarks, there is a central contradiction in capitalist South Africa. You cannot develop industrial production for a local market unless your population is in a position to buy your product. And in South Africa, the mass of the population is paid too little to do so.

One analysis says that the government is trying to restore confidence by using the state of emergency to destroy opposition. But the enormous cost of military and security repression will force government spending up and therefore push interest rates, taxation and inflation up once more, at the same time as inevitably failing to get rid of popular resistance. Any initial business confidence in the policy will be quickly dispersed by the prospect of higher taxation and an increasingly belligerent and uncompromising workforce.

The incapacity of the government to find any solution other than increased repression only spurs on the increasingly "political" nature of trade union demands. Although prior to the formation of Cosatu, it was only Sactu which founded its policies on the necessity for the elimination of apartheid, it is now taken for granted. Cosatu itself called for a removal of the hated pass laws within six months of its foundation. Sactu and Cosatu are usually considered to be in close alliance, Sactu having been driven underground at the start of the 'Sixties.

Sactu, points out that it was founded on the basis that workers issues cannot be separated from national issues. Apartheid is an aspect of everyday life. Workers are without such basic rights as pensions not only because they are workers but because they are black. Thus Cosatu has joined with the ANC and Sactu in saying that the solution to the problems in South Africa lies in the establishment of majority rule in a democratic and non-racial state.

The goal is first and foremost to try to get all unions into (the 650,000-strong Cosatu, on the principle that unity is a hugely powerful weapon in both the workers struggle and the wider one. Cosatu has also set itself the aim of "one industry, one union" in order to unify workers in different sectors. It is a task the movement hoped would take six months but, under prevailing conditions, as the Sactu representative notes, this is optimistic. There is progress however. Five unions have amalgamated to form Fawu, the Food and Allied Workers Union. Domestic workers are moving in the same direction and the General Workers Union and the Transport and General Workers Union have united under the latter title after long negotiation. Other goals are to organise the unemployed, now around the 3 million mark, and the non-unionised sectors like the farm-workers.

But in the wider context workers are also playing a political role, using the

weapons they have, ranging from their buying power to industrial sabotage. The Sactu representative points out that workers are imposing hardship on themselves in defence of political aims. Workers who refuse to spend their money at concession stores or liquor stores backed by the company are an example. And she stresses that this is also true among migrant workers who have a reputation for being in conflict with communities taking political action. Political alliances join workers in their disputes with community-based struggles around education, rent and other issues. But Sactu's representative comments that there is no conflict between labour action and the armed struggle either. When motor industry workers took action in their own defence, there were military actions by Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, against the companies concerned, in support of the workers campaign.

The natural alignment of trade union and democratic struggles in South Africa

is neatly expressed by the recent decision of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) to take the government to court on the ground that the state of emergency is illegal. While the miners' action and some spontaneous strikes kept up a more direct pressure, Mawu's national organiser filed papers with the Natal Supreme Court applying for the state of emergency to be declared invalid and for union leaders to be released. The application is made on the basis that the government failed to follow legally prescribed procedure when declaring the state of emergency and new police powers. The hearing is due to take place this week.

Organised labour, like other centres of organisations in the community-based struggles, is proving its ability to withstand the white regime's onslaught, despite the incredible battery of repressive law and weaponry facing the people. Organisation and increasing unity are themselves powerful weapons in the hands of those without freedom.