

Lum/089/0055/47  
London,  
17 July 1979.

TO: The National Executive Committee of SACTU

(Copies to the Secretariat and to other SACTU formations with responsibility for work.)

Comrades,

We have, over the past few days, been informed of the decision of the NEC (London) to close down the Technical Sub-Committee which was established only six months ago. We have been told that the reason given by the NEC for its decision is that, with the expanding work of SACTU, the contribution of the committee is no longer required.

We are deeply disturbed by this decision. It has been made and communicated to us in an arbitrary way, without discussion, so that it is only through this letter that we are able to express our views on it. We are also disturbed by the reasons put forward by the NEC for closing down the committee. Growing demands are being placed on SACTU in the carrying forward of its work at home and abroad, and this pressure of work requires the drawing in of more, not fewer, activists to assist in this work. When the committee was closed down, its members were involved in a number of ongoing projects and its work was expanding.

In communicating its decision to dissolve the committee, the NEC has thanked us for our work. We appreciate these thanks, but at the same time we wish to make it clear that our commitment to this work is a commitment to carrying forward the tasks of SACTU at home and abroad. Progress in this direction is the reward we seek. It is for this reason that we are protesting at the decision to close down the committee, and at the explanation given for it by the NEC.

Our experience during the life of the committee has raised numerous questions in our minds. These questions are greatly reinforced by the arbitrary action of the NEC. We are left with the impression, to be blunt, that the closing of the committee is a deliberate political act to stifle debate in SACTU on vital issues facing the organisation and the workers' movement. We will explain what we mean by this.

The Technical Sub-Committee was set up by the NEC in January this year as a working committee to help co-ordinate SACTU's expanding work. The committee consisted, not of SACTU office-bearers, but of SACTU activists, many with recent practical experience in the workers' movement in South Africa. Most had, during their time in Britain, addressed envelopes, licked stamps, distributed "Workers' Unity", undertaken research and the preparation of memoranda, helped in administrative work, addressed meetings, etc.

Until six months ago, such work for SACTU had been conducted in an isolated and ad hoc manner. The comrades involved had no access to any forum within SACTU to discuss the work they had been assigned and how it fitted into the work of the organisation as a whole, or the general policies of SACTU and their own ideas on them. One comrade, for example, wrapped,



stamped, and despatched "Workers' Unity" for two years without being included in any SACTU group or committee, before the Technical Sub-Committee was finally created. It was largely in response to the frequently expressed desire by such comrades for proper integration into the work of SACTU that the committee was formed.

Most comrades drawn into SACTU here during the recent period, devoted themselves with enthusiasm to the work particularly because of the potential development of SACTU reflected in the re-emergence of "Workers' Unity", and in the content of that paper. For over two years "Workers' Unity", as the official organ of SACTU, took a militant working-class and anti-capitalist approach to the struggle against the apartheid regime. In addressing questions of working-class organisation in the country, "Workers' Unity" was confronting issues and tasks which many had felt were long overdue for SACTU to take up. On the committee there were many staunch defenders and supporters of the line developed in "Workers' Unity" (and in "Looking Forward", which took up the same position).

At the first of the fortnightly meetings of the committee, the General Secretary outlined its functions: to help with the distribution of "Workers' Unity", with research, memoranda and background briefings, and with speaking engagements. It was to be involved in the co-ordination of a solidarity campaign within the British trade union movement, involving a considerable increase in the number of speaking engagements for SACTU.

But from the start, limits were placed on the character of the Technical Sub-Committee which restricted its potential to contribute in the most effective manner to the tasks of SACTU as a whole.

The proposal by some members of the committee that its office-bearers should be democratically elected was over-ruled: the committee was forced to accept the decision by the NEC to appoint the Convenor and Secretary. The committee's decision-making powers within the sphere of its own work were never defined. It was hampered by the all too rare attendance of NEC members at its meetings, and by the absence of reports from the office on the progress of SACTU's general work. However, despite these unnecessary difficulties, the whole committee was committed to carrying out its work as best it could.

The committee felt that an indispensable part of its work must be political discussion of the vital issues facing the workers' movement, and the policies of SACTU on these questions. Much of the work of the committee (speaking, research, preparation of a slide-tape) could not be effectively undertaken without such discussions on the committee itself, and where necessary jointly with the NEC members in London.

One key issue which came up during the existence of the committee was the publication of the Wiehahn Commission's Report. We identify the proposals of the Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions as the most urgent question facing the South African trade union movement at this time, and the central question for solidarity organisations of the international labour movement to address.



To undertake its tasks more effectively, the committee made repeated requests to the NEC for joint meetings to discuss the progress of the committee's work, the Wiehahn Commission's Report and other important questions. The NEC consistently delayed in responding to these requests. The request for a meeting on the Wiehahn Commission, for example, was first made in early May. At the time of the dissolution of the committee, over two months later, the NEC had still not responded. The same was true of our other requests, despite repeated reminders. By the time the committee was dissolved, it had never been able to hold a joint meeting with the NEC members in London.

This apparent lack of interest by the NEC in the views of rank-and-file SACTU activists was most seriously displayed after the NEC's decision to dismiss the editor of "Workers' Unity", who was also a member of the Technical Sub-Committee. The committee was informed of this decision in May. In view of the strong support of many of the members of the committee for the positions put forward in "Workers' Unity", we saw this decision by the NEC as a serious action, with important implications for our work. The whole committee registered its concern. It was told that the Editor had not been given reasons for this decision, other than that he was "putting forward policies which were not those of SACTU." Which policies?

The Editor of "Workers' Unity" submitted a memorandum to the meeting of the NEC in April -- the meeting which decided to dismiss him. This memorandum was subsequently circulated to the members of the Technical Sub-Committee. The memorandum addresses issues and problems of vital importance to the workers' movement in South Africa and to SACTU, in a manner fully consistent with SACTU's principles. We agree with the position taken in this memorandum, regarding it as a scientific analysis of the character and tasks of the South African revolution and the role of SACTU in the struggle.

In conjunction with other requests by the committee to meet with NEC members, a request was also made to meet them to discuss the dismissal of the Editor of "Workers' Unity" and the policy questions facing SACTU. It was urgently necessary to have clarification of the reasons for the dismissal of the Editor, and whether or not this represented a fundamental change in political line away from the militant working-class positions of "Workers' Unity". If this was the case, we could not allow this to happen without a full and open discussion throughout the ranks of SACTU.

We first requested a meeting on these questions on 3 May. The request was repeated at fortnightly intervals. When the committee was dissolved, this request had still not been answered. During the period of its existence, the committee was never given an explanation for the Editor's dismissal, or told what policies he was dismissed for putting forward.

The uncertainty that was raised in the ranks of SACTU by the dismissal of the Editor, and the apparent refusal of the NEC



to justify, explain or even discuss it, was sharply thrown up over the issue of speaking on public platforms for SACTU. The intensified solidarity campaign was leading to a rapid increase in the demand for speakers -- sometimes four engagements on a single day. These speakers were expected to put forward clearly SACTU policy on a wide range of questions. Those of us committed to the positions of "Workers' Unity", "Looking Forward", and the memorandum, wanted to know if we could continue to speak on this basis on public platforms. While we waited in vain for the NEC to clarify the political issues, the Editor was in fact prevented from speaking at a trade union solidarity meeting for SACTU. (This meeting was actually cancelled because no SACTU speaker other than the Editor was available.)

This placed a question mark over all those who agreed with the political views of the Editor. The committee was divided on how to approach this. But, while speaking engagements continued to pour in, the NEC never clarified this question.

At the time the committee was closed down, every one of these requests by the committee for meetings with NEC members -- on its work, on Wiehahn, on the dismissal of the Editor, on the political direction of SACTU -- remained unanswered. The last request for an answer was made by the Secretary of the committee to the General Secretary over the phone on Monday 9 July. He replied that the NEC was at that moment meeting, and that the issue would be raised. What he did not say was that the letter dissolving the Technical Sub-Committee had already been written, and must indeed have already been sitting on the Convenor's desk!

How, given this series of events, is it possible to accept that the committee has been closed down because the expanding work of SACTU no longer requires its contribution? This reason is ridiculous. It must surely have been given to conceal some other reason. Our experience on the committee forces us to the conclusion that the NEC has dissolved the committee because it is unwilling to discuss the issues that have been raised -- all central to our work and to the workers' struggle.

The NEC has recently issued a statement on the Wiehahn Commission. This statement represents a fundamental departure from the approach put forward in "Looking Forward" and in issues 12 and 13 of "Workers' Unity", and gives no clear lead to the workers struggling in the country. This, together with the dismissal of the Editor of "Workers' Unity", indicates to us that a rightward shift in the position of the SACTU leadership is taking place -- a shift which is being effected without reference to or regard for the rank-and-file activists of the organisation. The removal of the Editor was the first open sign of this change, but his dismissal proved insufficient to effect a smooth change of policy. A further obstacle presented itself. A layer of activists, committed to working-class unity and independence, the fundamental principles of SACTU, also had to be silenced. This, we believe, is the real reason for closing down the Technical Sub-Committee.

Since political differences exist within the ranks of our organisation over its future course and the manner in which



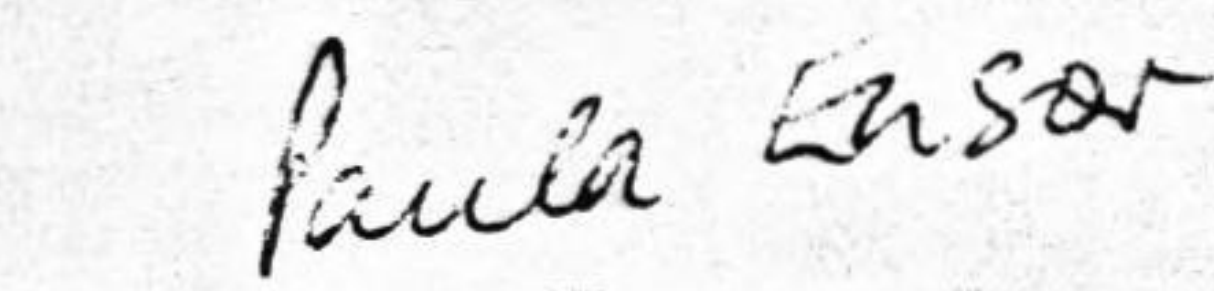
it is to be built, it is vital that these are openly and fully discussed, in accordance with the democratic traditions which belong to the workers' movement. Our revolutionary duty requires us to continue the struggle for a clear and consistent working-class position in SACTU. We are committed to continuing the work needed to build SACTU as a revolutionary trade union organisation in whatever ways may be left open to us.

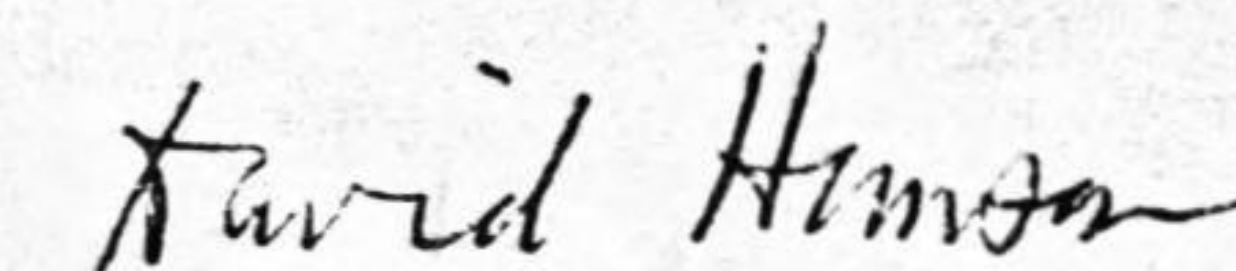
We protest against the closure of the Technical Sub-Committee and we call for its immediate re-instatement, as well as the re-instatement of the Editor of "Workers' Unity". At the same time we call on the comrades of the NEC to open a full, free and democratic discussion throughout the ranks of SACTU (at home and abroad) on the political issues raised in the memorandum of the Editor, and to circulate this memorandum together with the NEC's position on it. We call on the NEC also to open up a discussion of the same kind on the Wiehahn and Riekert strategy of the ruling class, its implications, and how it is to be fought.

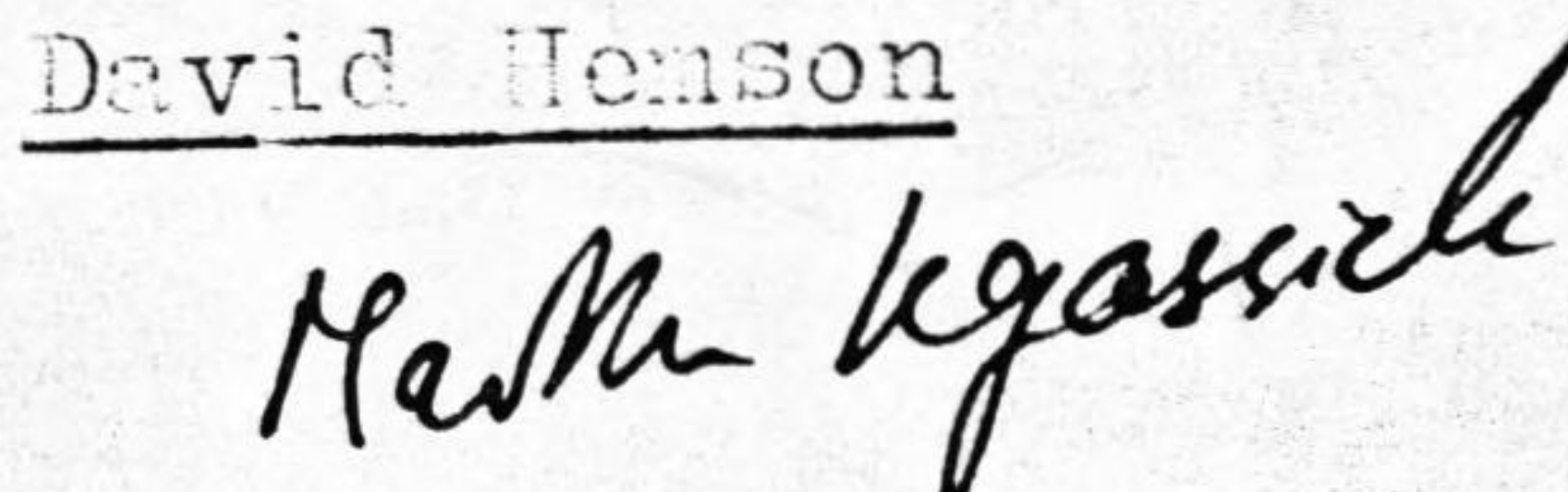
So vital do we consider these issues, and so enormous the consequences for SACTU if they are not clarified and resolved, that if the NEC refuses to open up this debate, we shall have no option but to do so ourselves. We therefore call on the comrades of the NEC, within the next two weeks, to undertake to open these discussions. Failing this, we shall be compelled, on our own initiative, to place the issues before the rank-and-file members and supporters of SACTU, and before the oppressed workers of South Africa -- who must be the final judge.

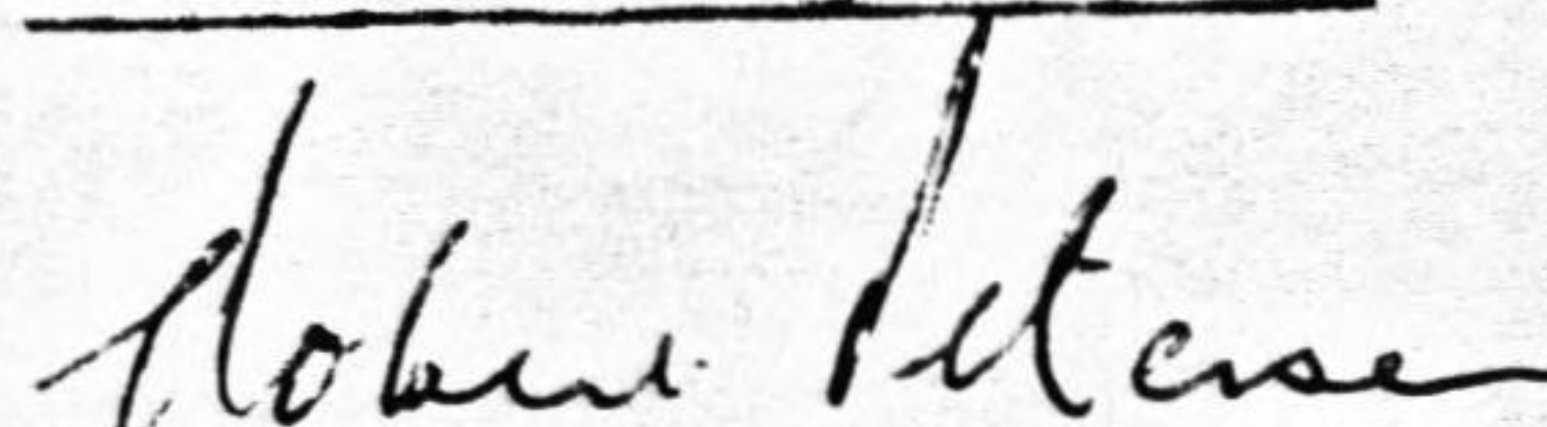
Fraternally in the struggle,

  
Peter Collins

  
Paula Ensor

  
David Hemson

  
Martin Legassick

  
Robert Petersen