

# Labor *Against* Apartheid

Winter 1986, Vol. 3, No. 1



## **COSATU!** **South African Unions** **Form New Federation**

November 29, 1985, is a historic date in the struggle against the apartheid labor system. On that day, leading black unions joined together to found the Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU. The new federation is the culmination of many months of negotiations and grassroots discussion over the direction of South Africa's dynamically growing labor movement. (continued on back page)



In August, the LCAA joined unions throughout New York to hold the City's largest anti-apartheid rally. The demonstration drew thousands of union members in a march from the UN to the South African consulate.

## Free the Four!

The South African government recently dropped charges of high treason against 12 of 16 leaders of the United Democratic Front, which has led the non-violent protest campaign against South Africa's state of emergency. But charges remain standing against four—Thozamile Gqweta, Cisa Njikelena, Sam Kikine, Isaac Ngcobo—who not coincidentally are black leaders of the South African Allied Workers Union.

The Labor Committee Against Apartheid has already gathered 3,000 signatures on a petition calling for their release. The petition drive will continue until the charges are dropped. To get copies of the petition, call LCAA coordinator Bill Henning at (212) 227-4880.

## Solidarity

Transport workers unions in Finland, Sweden and Norway have begun a

boycott of trade with South Africa. In related activity, an international conference of maritime unions held in London issued a declaration that participants would undertake "direct action" against any vessels of any companies supplying oil to South Africa. There is a worldwide ban against exporting oil to South Africa, which private companies have circumvented by transferring oil cargoes to South African ships on the high seas.

## In South Africa

Since the Botha regime declared a state of emergency in July, over 1,000 black people have been killed by the police and military—many of them children and many shot in the back. Police have placed over 3,000 people in indefinite detention, often not releasing their names or stating charges. Reports of police brutality and torture are

mounting, despite the press blackout imposed on foreign journalists and the continuing censorship of local press...

According to labor experts, South Africa lost nearly 500,000 workdays due to more than 100 strikes in the six months between January 1 and June 30, 1985. About 75% of the strikes were in the mining industry, including a massive action in July to protest unilateral wage adjustments by mineowners. Three black miners died in the protest, when police attacked the strikers with whips, tear-gas and rubber bullets. An estimated 1,500 black miners were fired by the General Mining Union Corporation. The auto and metal industries also experienced a high level of strikes. An important trend was the increasing number of sympathy strikes and job actions...

The South African Chemical Workers Union has launched a boycott of paint and other products manufactured by the African Explosive and Chemical Industries (AECI) corporation in New Castle. The union has been in a dispute with the company over a wage increase since 1983. Meanwhile, the government has banned all meetings in the New Castle District to disrupt organizing among the workers...

A study prepared for the International Labor Organization (ILO) has found that an average of 1,600 South African farmworkers die every year from pesticide poisoning or related causes. The report's author, Dr. Norman Levy of Great Britain, also commented that "the only limit on how low South African farmworkers wages can go is physical starvation."

## Learn More

"The History of South African Labor" is a 4-credit course being offered this Spring at the Empire State Labor College, led by instructor Andrew Lukele, an exiled South African activist. The course meets once a week for 16 sessions, on Thursday evenings from 6-9 p.m., at 330 West 42nd St., New York City; the first session is February 6. For more information, call the Labor College.

## Join the Movement!

If your local union or workplace wants to participate in the fight against apartheid, the New York Labor Committee Against Apartheid can help: Films: We can bring our educational program to your meeting, with a speaker and the film, "Adapt or Die," about the South African labor movement.

Action: We can inform you about solidarity actions, like last August's

demonstration at the UN or the petition drive to drop treason charges against four South African labor leaders.

Forums: We can invite you to special forums, like the recent visit by COSATU leaders or the conference, "For a Free South Africa," co-sponsored

with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

Contact: We can work with your union to establish exchanges and mutual support with counterparts in South African unions, based on common employers, industries, health and safety problems, contract disputes, etc.

For more information, call LCAA coordinator:

Bill Henning (212) 227-4880

# Labor Against Apartheid

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## The SARMCOL Strike: Destructive Engagement

"Negotiate or get out!" is the rallying cry of 925 members of the Metal and Allied Workers Union, on strike since last May against the British multinational BTR at its SARMCOL rubber plant in Howick, South Africa. The slogan illustrates both the determination of the SARMCOL strikers and the current terms of battle between black workers and foreign capital under the apartheid labor system.

The strike began as a walkout on April 30, with workers demanding union recognition and collective bargaining rights. Black workers at SARMCOL had been organizing for ten years, and in the past two years, had entered a complex mediation process under South Africa's Industrial Court. BTR's adamant refusal to negotiate with the union left no recourse but to strike, providing a rare instance where a strike could be considered legal in South Africa.

On May 3, BTR responded to the walkout by dismissing all the strikers and hiring 800 scabs. Despite the legal status of the strike, South African labor law offers no protection against lock-outs and no mandates for union recognition or good faith bargaining once a union has established majority representation.

Predictably, the government has used every means to aid BTR in crushing the strike. Picketing and mass meetings have been banned. The union's ability to raise money for the strikers is severely restricted under the Fund Raising Act. Police have instituted 24-hour patrols of Impophomeni, the black community in Howick. Last September, police attacked a local solidarity rally, killing one child and wounding four others. Over 50 union activists have been detained and face court charges.

In the face of this repression, the strikers and their community have remained united and militant. On July 18, black unions and progressive organizations in Howick and the neighboring city of Pietermaritzburg banded together to stage a mass "stay-away." The action was supported by 92% of the black workforce and shut down all schools, transport, businesses and factories (except two where workers were locked in). Over 2,000 workers at the Dunlop rubber plant in Durban, recently acquired by BTR, also joined the action. The stay-away was followed by a two-month boycott of white shops in Pietermaritzburg and other solidarity actions continue.

The greatest difficulty facing the SARMCOL workers is feeding their families as the strike stretches into its ninth month. The strikers cannot find other jobs, since SARMCOL is Howick's major employer and since they are forced to live there under South African pass laws. Moreover, the strikers have no transportation to worksites outside Howick and are blacklisted by area employers.

MAWU supplies strikers' families with meager food parcels through union collections. And recently, SARMCOL workers started their own T-shirt cooperative, sustained by purchases from the new labor federation, COSATU. Unionists throughout South Africa see the SARMCOL strike as a critical test of labor rights in South Africa and have called on international labor to aid them in raising the stakes against BTR.

### MULTINATIONAL APARTHEID

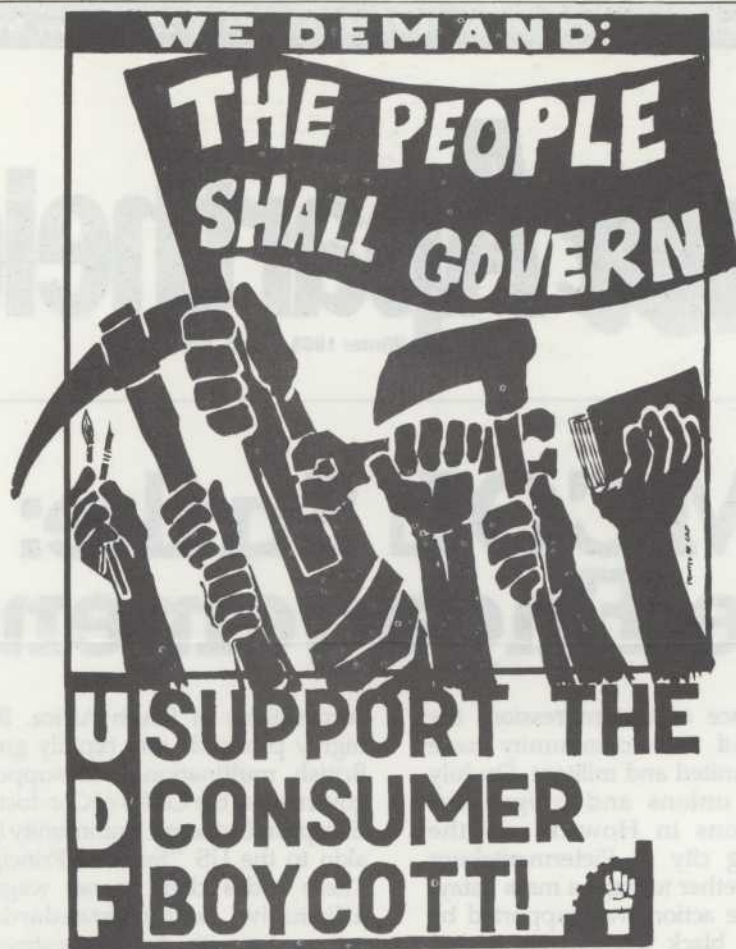
The struggle at SARMCOL tells a larger story about the role of foreign

corporations in South Africa. BTR, a highly profitable and rapidly growing British multinational, is supposedly governed by the Codes of Conduct of the European Economic Community (EEC), akin to the US "Sullivan Principles." These codes claim to set wage and affirmative action standards for companies with direct investments in South Africa.

Yet, BTR has flagrantly violated the EEC codes for many years. SARMCOL wages have been far below minimal living standards and EEC guidelines. At the start of the strike, a local health clinic found that 20% of the children of SARMCOL workers were suffering from malnutrition and 80% were underweight. The British government has refused to publicly name any company breaking the EEC codes and there are no sanctions against proven violators such as BTR.

The codes not only defy enforcement, they also have no impact on the union rights or the job security of black workers. The codes do not challenge South African labor laws, which stifle union recognition and bargaining demands. The codes do not touch the pass laws which hold black workers captive to their employers. The codes do not alter the mass firings and selective layoffs, the forced relocations, the imprisonment of union leaders, the suppression of demonstrations, or the starvation of protesting communities.

NEGOTIATE OR GET OUT is not only the message of the SARMCOL strike—it is the handwriting on the wall for multinational corporations in South Africa, codes or no codes.



Images taken from posters of the United Democratic Front.

## Boycott Movement Grows

For the past six months, an alliance of independent black trade unions and community organizations of the United Democratic Front (UDF) has conducted a consumer boycott campaign to send a message to white businesses in South Africa. The message is: break with the apartheid government or go down with it. As a boycott leader in East London explains, "business must take sides in the struggle between us and the racist minority they voted into power."

The campaign began in July in Port Elizabeth, where labor and community groups organized residents in black townships to boycott white-owned retail stores. Their demands were to end police and army occupation of the townships, revoke the state of emergency, and release political detainees. In the following weeks, the movement quickly spread to other regions, where local grievances were added to the basic demands.

After consulting with their memberships, the major independent unions also joined the effort, bringing considerable organizational resources and experience to the campaign. At its inaugural meeting, the Congress of

South African Trade Unions (COSATU) pledged to carry on the united campaign, suggesting it would also bring pressure on white businesses through selective strikes.

The boycott is now a national movement, with specific targets and strategies decided by local coordinating committees, according to conditions in their areas. For example, organizers in Soweto declared a Black Christmas, halting customary holiday shopping in Johannesburg as a symbol of mourning for over 1,000 victims killed since the government decreed the state of emergency.

Since residents of black townships generally must travel miles to shop in the white central cities, organizers have focused on transportation routes to publicize and enforce the boycott. Signs and stickers are posted in buses and trains and pickets are able to stop cars on the main roads to look for parcels. In Pretoria, the local taxi association agreed to distribute pamphlets and to refuse rides to anyone carrying goods from white shops.

The boycott has brought added pressure on the few shops within the

black townships where supporters can buy food and other essentials. Despite the temptation to raise prices, many local black shopkeepers have agreed to keep prices low. Those who haven't have found themselves boycotted in turn and, in a few cases, their shops have been burned.

The South African police have attempted to starve township residents into ending the boycott. They have barred trucks from delivering goods to the townships and have closed stores whose owners are sympathetic to the campaign. Community and union leaders have been detained and there are numerous reports of torture and violence against boycott organizers.

On November 17, riot police fired on a boycott meeting held in a church in Mlungisi township in the Eastern Cape, killing 17 people. Retaliation has not been limited to the police. The Queenstown and East London Chambers of Commerce won legal exemption from negotiated pay increases for black store employees while the boycott lasts and have threatened to cut wages by 80%.

Despite these hardships, the boycott has won support from a majority of township residents—and it has produced results. In Port Elizabeth, the boycott forced the Chamber of Commerce to pressure the government to remove troops from area townships and, in early December, the army withdrew. Following this victory, a jubilant crowd of 50,000 boycotters held the first legal outdoor rally since the ANC was banned in 1960. They decided to suspend the boycott but pledged to begin again in April if the state of emergency is not lifted.

In many other areas, local business groups have entered into negotiations with local boycott committees. In October, some of the most important national businesses—including the Association of Chambers of Commerce, the Federated Chamber of Industries, Pick 'n Pay chain stores—joined the Anglo American Corporation and other industrial and mining groups in signing a newspaper advertisement, "There Is a Better Way." In this unprecedented move, they demanded that the government begin negotiating with legitimate black leaders.

The consumer boycott, combined with the current recession and the economic impact of international sanctions, can only intensify the pressure on the South African business community to recognize the black majority. As the administrative manager of a Pretoria department store lamented, "We've just found out that our lives are in their hands."

## Labor Committee Against Apartheid International Visits Highlight Fall Program

The New York Area Labor Committee Against Apartheid (LCAA) works through action and education to support the South African labor movement and to promote ties between unions in both countries. This fall's activity was highlighted by three visits from overseas unionists fighting against apartheid, two delegations from South Africa and one from Ireland.

### COSATU Leaders in New York

On December 14, two weeks after the founding of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), three representatives of the new federation spoke in New York to a joint meeting of the LCAA and the NY chapter of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. The delegation included Maxwell Xulu, new treasurer of COSATU, Geoffrey Vilane, president of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), and Bernie Faranoff, national organizer for MAWU.

Xulu called COSATU's formation "a great step forward against the government as well as the employer" and urged US unions to continue solidarity work. Faranoff stressed that while the disinvestment campaign is still important, pressure must also be brought to bear on companies which do not afford South African workers such fundamental rights as the right to strike.

At an earlier meeting, organized in September by LCAA, four South African union leaders spoke out against the "codes of conduct," such as the US Sullivan Principles, which multinational

corporations in South Africa claim are putting pressure on the apartheid labor system.

"In reality, the codes have become a smokescreen for sophisticated anti-union practices," asserted a representative from the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU). "They have no positive role to play in the real labor disputes which are emerging in South Africa. These disputes center on the organization of workers, on workers' rights on the shopfloor and on union rights to bargain collectively."

The unionists also described the democratic structure of South African unions. All elected union leaders must be shop stewards, actively working in their plants. There are few paid staff people and they are hired and fired by a governing committee of stewards. The South Africans expressed eagerness to establish wider contact with American unions at the shop steward level.

### Dunnes Strikers Come From Dublin

If you think that a handful of ordinary workers can't do much about apartheid, you should have heard two Irish sales clerks who came to New York last October. The two have been on strike for 19 months for refusing to handle South African goods at the Dunnes department store in Dublin—an action which has become an international issue.

Karen Gearon and Michelle Gavin spoke to a meeting co-sponsored by the LCAA and the Irish-American Labor

Committee. They explained that the Dunnes strike began when Gearon, a new shop steward, interpreted quite literally the Dublin Labor Council's directive against union members handling South African goods. When she refused to sell grapefruit from South Africa, she was fired and her 10 co-workers walked out in support. Their stand has generated widespread attention in Ireland, including a boycott of the striking shop. Although the store has lost 80% of its business, Dunnes still refuses to drop South African produce.

In the course of the strike, the Dunnes workers have learned a great deal about apartheid, some of it first hand. At the invitation of Bishop Desmond Tutu, they flew to South Africa for a visit, but were denied entry, held incommunicado at the airport, and sent back to Ireland the next day.

The Dunnes workers are surviving on strike benefits of 21 pounds a week (about \$28), but have received international support to continue their campaign. The New York visit raised \$3,000 and also sponsored Gearon and Gavin in testifying before the UN Subcommittee on Apartheid.

The strikers hope that the furor created by their example will push the Irish government to ban the sale of South African goods in that country. Until then, the workers will remain on strike—knowing, as Gearon put it, "We've already won. We've awakened the conscience of Ireland."

The September visit of South African labor leaders included (from left to right) Maxwell Xulu of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), Phiroshaw Camay, general secretary of the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), Jabulani Gwala of the National Union of Textile Workers and Geoff Schreiner of MAWU.



(continued from front page)

## COSATU!

COSATU represents 500,000 union members in key sectors of the South African economy: mining, auto, chemical, metals, transport, food, shipping, and government, among others. The largest COSATU affiliate is the National Mineworkers Union (NMU) and NMU leader Elijah Barayi has been elected COSATU's first president. While COSATU does not include several exclusively black unions, it is hoped that they will join later.

In forming the federation, COSATU unions are pledged to non-racial membership, an industrial union structure, worker control within each union, and internal democracy in the federation's decision-making process. COSATU's first task is to coordinate the merger of 36 affiliates into 10 unions for each major industry over the coming months. The federation will also

coordinate international relations and political action among its members.

At COSATU's inaugural rally, it was clear that union members are ready to take on several critical battles against apartheid. One is the issue of divestment, ending the support foreign corporations lend the Botha regime by their holdings in South Africa.

A second issue is the pass laws, which require blacks to carry passbooks at all times, regulating where they can reside, work and travel. The pass laws are a key instrument of employer control over black labor, as well as a hated symbol of apartheid's tyranny over the entire black population.

COSATU's significance to unionists around the world is summed up in a message of welcome, issued by Jack Sheinkman, secretary-treasurer of the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union and a sponsor of the NYC Labor Committee Against Apartheid:

"The potential of COSATU is not only as an opposition force. COSATU is founded on the principle of non-racialism, the insistence that South Africa is one society and cannot be segregated, partitioned or stratified according to race or ethnicity. COSATU is an instrument of solidarity which defies apartheid in practice as well as in policy.

"The thousands of American unionists who have joined the anti-apartheid struggle celebrate COSATU's achievement and promise. We recognize that COSATU faces unique and difficult tasks, which must be tackled independently, according to conditions and developments in South Africa.

"We also recognize that the advance of the South African labor movement contributes profoundly to our common cause—the cause of economic justice in a global labor market, the cause of human rights the community of nations."

**NY Labor Committee  
Against Apartheid**  
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