

American Committee on Africa



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September 26, 1974

AN OPEN LETTER OF PROTEST

Mr. Donald B. Easum
Assistant Secretary of State for
African Affairs
Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Easum,

On behalf of the American Committee on Africa, we would like to convey to you our protest over the decision of the Department of State to arrange for the visit to the United States during September and October of C.P. Grobler, General Secretary of the South African Confederation of Labour. We are certain that you are well aware of the racial policies espoused by Mr. Grobler and the labor confederation he represents. His visit is an affront to all American trade unionists and to all Americans opposing the racist policies of apartheid in South Africa.

Mr. Grobler and his labor confederation stand openly and unabashedly for the maintenance of the supremacy of the white worker in South Africa. The Confederation is an all-white organization, one of the bulwarks of the ruling Nationalist regime, a loyal supporter of the policy of apartheid. The Confederation has given strong support to the white government's policy of Job Reservation, which it regarded as a cornerstone of the system guaranteeing security to white workers against "unfair" (i.e. poorly paid) African competition. Under Job Reservation legislation the Minister of Labor can declare any type of work a "reserved area" for whites only. Other types of South African labor legislation specifically prevents Blacks from being apprenticed in certain industries, from ever supervising white workers, from working in certain areas of the country.

Now the expansion of the South African economy and the consequent shortage of skilled labor have forced Mr. Grobler's confederation into some debate concerning a desirable (from a white point of view) status for Black workers. This is a debate conveniently

being carried on without the participation of any Black workers, such men and women being allowed no political or recognized trade union rights in South Africa. Thus his confederation has shifted away from advocacy of Job Reservation for white workers to a policy calling for strict "rate for the job" regulations. Job Reservation was not working well enough to prevent employers from hiring low-paid Black workers. The "rate for the job" rule would block the use of low-paid workers and maintain jobs for the white workers more effectively; it would do nothing to create more open access to jobs for Black workers.

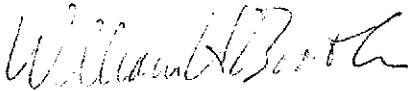
Another debate in Mr. Grobler's confederation has concerned the unionization of Black workers. With a rash of successful illegal wildcat strikes by Black workers in recent years there has been pressure to develop some form of Black workers organization to allow for bargaining, in the hope of avoiding strikes and defusing militancy. Mr. Grobler's confederation has not been prepared to support the Black workers' demand for recognized, independent trade unions. At best, some elements within the Confederation are prepared to countenance Black participation in the "works committees", negotiation machinery which was designed by the government to prevent the formation of Black trade unions.

In discussions by our staff with State Department representatives concerning Mr. Grobler's visit, it was emphasized to us that this invitation is part of the "communication" policy with South Africa. It is suggested that since other South African trade unionists, including representatives from the unrecognized Black unions, have visited the United States, Mr. Grobler should be included. The overall rationale is that "communication" with the proponents of apartheid will lead to an erosion of the racist system.

We believe that this "communication" policy does not challenge apartheid and in fact has resulted in a growing pattern of collaboration by the United States with apartheid. The visit of Mr. Grobler illustrates this. He and his organization openly promote racial oppression, yet the Department of State brings him to this country to be received by trade unionists here. He may meet with many behind closed doors. Some trade unionists, not fully aware of conditions in South Africa and of the policies of Mr. Grobler's confederation may be swayed by the language of apartheid, his talk of "separate racial development" and "progress for the African" - under white control.

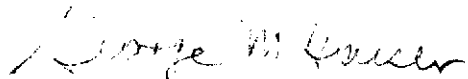
This visit assumes that there is common ground for communication where none should exist. Whatever communication there might be about trade unionism should be overshadowed by the central fact of racism, for in South Africa the white regime has made racism the dominant force and this is reflected in the racially-based trade unionism promoted by Mr. Grobler. To implement "communication" under such circumstances is to yield to the racism of South Africa, to allow the central issue of apartheid to be set aside for other business. The alternative is a policy which recognizes that apartheid is the central issue and which works to give substance to verbal condemnations of apartheid by ending collaboration with its racism and to actively aid those opposing it.

The visit of Mr. Grobler represents a small part of the "communication" policy in action. We believe that it is a bad policy and that the invitation to Mr. Grobler is a serious error.



Hon. William H. Booth
President

Sincerely,



George M. Houser
Executive Director