

*Apartheid's friends at the Stock Exchange. Photo: John Harris.*

# Apartheid's British friends

Of 2,000-odd multinationals present in South Africa, 1,200 are British.

British capital's total investments in the apartheid state, direct and indirect, are worth about £11 billion — 40 to 45% of all foreign investment in the country. British direct investment in South Africa represents almost 10% of all British investment world-wide.

The biggest British companies in South Africa are ICI (through its associate AECI); Metal Box; Blue Circle; NEI; Dunlop; Barclays; Standard Chartered and Hill Samuel banks. Leyland, Rio Tinto Zinc, Shell and BP also have interests there.

Altogether Britain draws about £1.2 billion per year from South Africa in profits, dividends, and other 'invisibles'. South Africa is, or at least was until recently, one of the most profitable capitalist economies in the world, with rates of return of 25% in mining (14% in the rest of the world) and 18% in manufacturing (13% elsewhere).

As of March this year, only 29 out of the 139 biggest British companies in South Africa recognised non-racial trade unions. At least 1800 black workers in British firms were paid below minimum subsistence levels, most of them employed by the notorious privatisation-merchant Pritchards.

British capital profits from the white-supremacy state. That gives British workers a special responsibility — but also special leverage.

As part of the broad campaign of solidarity with the liberation movement in South Africa, British workers in firms with South African subsidiaries should establish links with the non-racial unions in those firms and take action in Britain to force the firms to concede the non-racial unions' demands.

(Information: International Defence and Aid Fund, 'Apartheid: the facts'; Financial Times, August 2 1985; Economist, March 23 and 30 1985; Morning Star, May 13 1985).



# The black working class

Three facts lie behind the current explosion.

*One:* the collapse of white racist rule in countries surrounding South Africa.

On April 25 1974 Portuguese army officers, driven into rebellion by the impasse of Portugal's colonial wars in Africa, overthrew the dictatorship in Lisbon. In 1975 Mozambique and Angola became independent. South Africa assisted two nationalist groups, FNLA and Unita, which it thought more pliant, against the main nationalist movement,

the MPLA. It directly invaded Angola in October 1975. But the MPLA won.

In Zimbabwe the black nationalist movement ZANU took power in 1980, after a long guerilla war.

Thirty or forty years ago, South Africa was one of a vast number of African and Asian countries where a white administration of foreigners or settlers ruled over a black majority. Now it is the only one, apart from its own colony, Namibia.

After the Sharpeville massacre of black protesters in 1960, South Africa brutally

and efficiently repressed black opposition. The regime was triumphant, prosperous and seemed dauntingly powerful, until the 1973 strike wave at least.

Now every black militant in South Africa can feel confident that the days of white supremacy are numbered. Whether in one year's time or ten years' time, and after whatever horrors and setbacks, the people will win.

*Two:* a developing crisis of the economic structure set up in South Africa after 1948 under the policy of apartheid. (This is des-

cribed in the section on Capitalism In South Africa, below).

*Three:* a big growth of the black working class. In 1960 there were 540,000 black workers in mining and 450,000 in manufacturing. In 1980 there were 740,000 in mining and 1,150,000 in manufacturing.

In January-February 1973, 100,000 black workers — shipbuilders, stevedores, drivers, textile, brick and tea workers — round the Durban area struck over pay. This marked the beginning of a new wave of resistance to white supremacy in South Africa, one in which workers and trade unions became central.

In 1969 there were only about 16,000 organised black workers. In 1981 most observers put the number at over 200,000. While in 1969 about 3000 black workers were involved in stoppages, the figure was near 100,000 for 1981.

Unions have substantially consolidated their grass roots organisation among black industrial workers; they have begun to build themselves into a national organisation. FOSATU — the Federation of South African Trade Unions — was born in 1979.

Unions have struggle for and won scores of recognition agreements with managements who have been pushed to concede to them rights of negotiation, access to the plant, full-time shop stewards, stop-order payments (i.e. the deduction of union dues from the wage packet), grievance procedures and so forth.

Increasingly black workers have shown themselves capable through their unions of winning or partially winning their immediate demands through industrial action or the threat of it. The black trade union movement, as the embryo of a broader working class movement, has become in the last ten years the major organisational form of resistance of black workers.

It is the key to the development of a working class movement in South Africa and its future will shape both the character and efficacy of the struggle against apartheid as a whole.

Why has this development taken place? The underlying cause is that the growth of capitalism in South Africa has also meant the growth of the black working class. And the concentration of capital into ever larger factories has meant the concentration of workers into large collective units.

The development of manufacturing industry has brought with it the concentration of resident black workers in large urban townships and has made possible a rise in the level of education and skills of black workers. Most black workers in manufacturing industry have largely cut their ties with a rural past.

All these causes have contributed to the growth of worker organisation and consciousness.

Black workers have had a long tradition of trade union organisation and activity in South Africa. In 1920 there was a strike of some 70,000 black mineworkers; in the 1920s the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union grew to over 100,000 members; in the late 1920s and 1930s industrial unions like the Garment Workers' fought against the racial divisions which the state was fostering in the workforce; in 1946 there was a massive strike of mineworkers organised by the African Mineworkers' Union and backed by growing industrial unions; in the mid-1950s the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) rapidly mobilised black industrial workers culminating in mass demon-

strations and stay-at-homes around the time of Sharpeville in 1960.

However, each of these waves of trade union militancy was eventually contained by the state and the capitalists and met at times with terrible defeats. Most recently, after SACTU was driven underground and then into exile in the early 1960s, the level of organisation and activism among black workers collapsed for a decade, while South African capitalism grew at an unprecedented rate. But it was organising its own gravediggers.

There are two national union federations among black workers. The larger is FOSATU. Committed to building a national federation of industrial unions, it has concentrated on the development of a strong and democratic shop floor base complemented by a structure of trained and accountable officials and shop stewards.

The smaller federation is CUSA (the Council of Unions of South Africa) which was founded in 1980.

SAAWU (the South African Allied Workers' Union) was formed in 1980 as a split off from BAWU, a black consciousness organisation. It tends to concentrate on the linking of community and workplace issues, and to take a high-profile political position on wider struggles against apartheid. As a consequence it has suffered the brunt of state repression.

The GWU (General Workers' Union) has organised predominantly among low-paid African migrant workers in the Cape but is now developing a national organisation in the docks and railways especially, with a commitment to principles of workers' control and trade union independence.

### Registered

The FCWU (Food and Canning Workers' Union) is the longest standing of the independent unions and was attached in the past to SACTU. It consists of a 'registered' section of white and coloured workers and a 'parallel' African section (the AFCWU), but the two parts work closely together on a democratic basis. It is based mainly in the Cape.

These and other smaller unions in South Africa comprise what is known as the 'independent trade union movement'.

In spite of severe legal restrictions, they all operate overground and have in common commitments to the organisation of black workers independently both of employers and of the apartheid state. All are formally non-racial though some focus on African workers at the expense of Coloureds and Asians. In many of these unions individuals from the white radical intelligentsia play a key supportive role.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s SACTU was the principal non-racial and independent trade union federation. At its peak in 1960 SACTU organised around 85,000 workers. It was forced into exile and underground after Sharpeville and very few of the 16,000 black workers who were still unionised in 1969 had any contact with SACTU.

Today SACTU is based in exile. It claims to have some level of underground existence in South Africa. It no longer has any affiliated unions but it remains the official trade union wing of the ANC and the South African Communist Party.

In the 1950s and '60s the CP subordinated trade unionism to the politics of the popular front. In the '60s SACTU directed its energies away from organ-

isation in the workplace to support for Umkhonto We Sizwe, the military arm of the ANC. Its specific role included acting as a feeder for Umkhonto We Sizwe by sending some of the best worker militants away from the factories and into the field. Working class organisation was subordinated to the armed struggle rather than the armed struggle being subordinated to working class organisation.

Many trade unionists have reacted by cutting their ties with political movements altogether and by concentrating on the narrow, economic issues of the workplace.

Many of the trade unions which have grown up in the 1970s focussed their energies on building strong organisation on the shop floor, on developing a network of trained shop stewards and union officials, on fighting for improved wages, conditions and for management recognition, and on extending channels of democratic control by rank and file members over the union.

There was a tendency to interpret trade union independence to mean independence from politics altogether. SACTU's problem was seen not so much in terms of the substance of the politics to which it attached trade union organisation, but rather in terms of its attachment to politics altogether.

Trade unionism as such was identified with the interests of the working class; politics with the dominance of the petty bourgeoisie.

Three more or less distinct strands have emerged, sometimes dividing one union from another and sometimes cutting through particular organisations.

The first moved toward orthodox 'apolitical' trade unionism, rather conservative political positions and a tendency towards bureaucracy in its internal structures.

The second adopted a more syndicalist position, distrusting any kind of officialdom (bureaucratic or otherwise) and arguing for a militant, political trade unionism that refuses as far as possible any dealings with the state.

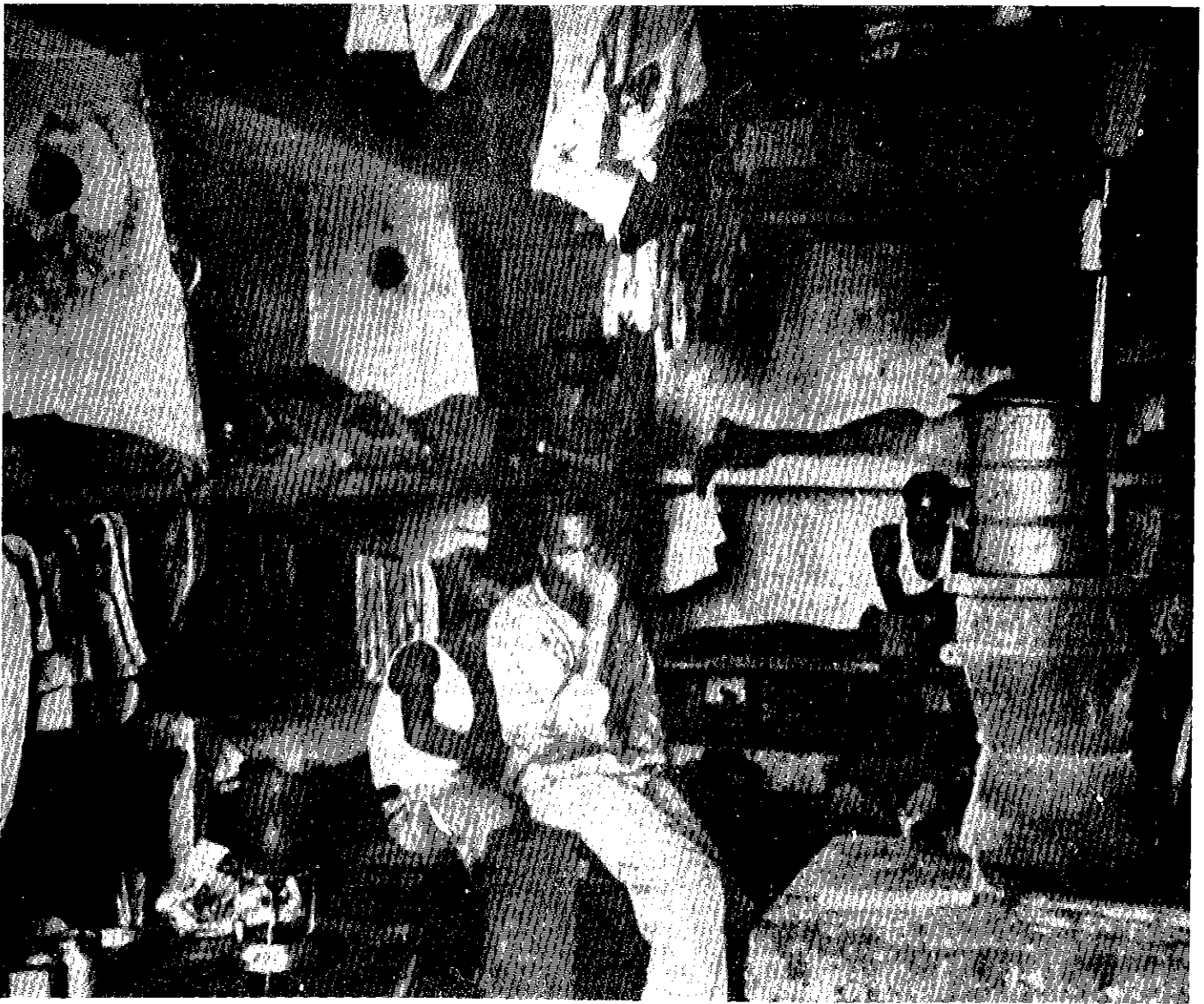
The third tendency moved towards a position that a working class movement needs to be built on the basis of the independent trade unions, but that a working class movement cannot be equated with a trade union movement. They see the trade unions as providing the economic foundations for a movement that is political as well as economic.

They argue that the question of state power must be taken up but on the basis of a working class politics and not the politics of the nationalist petty bourgeoisie.

The content of what is meant by working class politics remains unclear; but it includes a strong commitment not to dilute trade union struggles as well as a commitment to workers themselves placing demands on the state for immediate reforms prior to whatever future day of reckoning is in store for the apartheid regime. In other words the fight for immediate reforms is not *counterposed* to the overthrow of the state.

The 'registration' debate illustrates these divergences. The apartheid state attempted to meet the growing power of the unions by making it possible for them to register under its Industrial Conciliation Act — a status previously reserved for white, coloured and Asian workers and denied to Africans.

It represented the state's attempt to draw the independent unions within the law, grant them a few concessions in



Inside a miners' compound. Photo: IDAF.

return for neutralising their political militancy and thereby, since it could not destroy them, induce them to accommodate.

The response of the independent trade unions was mixed. The more 'orthodox' trade unionists like CUSA welcomed the state's proposals with few reservations and sought registration roughly on the terms laid down by the state. The more syndicalist-inclined (like the GWU) argued that registration would mean the kiss of death for independent and democratic trade unionism and called for a boycott of any official machinery of state recognition of the unions. The more nationalist trade unionists (like those in SAAWU) also rejected what they regarded as recognition of apartheid and made an alliance with the syndicalists on a boycott platform.

FOSATU came nearer to a working class political perspective. They argued that *new* restrictions which registration threatened against independent unions — like a ban on the registration of multi-racial unions or unions which include migrant workers — should be boycotted; *old* restrictions on trade unionism to which registration makes no or little difference — like restrictions on strike and political affiliations — should continue to be fought against; and that *new rights* afforded by registration should be exploited by the independent unions and, whatever the intentions of the government, could be

turned to advantage by the unions.

In practice this meant that FOSATU unions applied for registration on their own terms; that is, as non-racial unions comprising all categories of workers. It also meant that FOSATU maintained their commitment to fight for unrestricted rights of free association for black workers.

This strategy met with considerable success. The government gave in on the question of banning 'mixed' unions and migrant workers from registration. Registration allowed the unions to sidestep management excuses about refusing to recognise non-registered unions.

### Control

At the same time registration *de facto* did not subject the unions — as some of the boycotters feared — to levels of control by the state which would stop them being militant and democratic.

The South African liberation movement has long argued about the relations between socialism and black liberation, reform and revolution. Is black liberation a separate stage, to be completed before socialism can be put on the agenda? Or is it the same thing as socialism? Is apartheid so integral to South African capitalism that the only possible successful form of struggle for black liberation is in fact class struggle for socialism? Or should there be a broad cross-class

alliance against apartheid?

Can apartheid be reformed? Should the liberation movement adopt a stance of total non-cooperation and permanent confrontation?

The experience of the black workers' movement in recent years has shown in practice that many of the debates are scholastic.

The non-racial unions have fought for the most limited demands while not compromising their revolutionary aims. They have cooperated with broad cross-class organisations like the United Democratic Front on many issues, while retaining working class independence.

The relation between the different aspects of struggle is similar to what Rosa Luxemburg observed in the mass strike movement in Russia in 1905.

"But the movement on the whole does not proceed from the economic to the political struggle, nor even the reverse. Every great political mass action, after it has attained its political highest point, breaks up into a mass of economic strikes. And that applies not only to each of the great mass strikes, but also to the revolution as a whole.

With the spreading, clarifying and involu<sup>tion</sup> of the political struggle, the economic struggle not only does not recede, but extends, organises and becomes involved in equal measure. Between the two there is the most com-

The latest comprehensive figures on trade union strength in South Africa were published by the International Labour Organisation in 1984, giving 1983 memberships.

There were then about 888,000 unionised black workers, as against 16,000 in 1969.

There are two non-racial union federations. FOSATU had 106,000 affiliated members in 1983. CUSA had 148,000, of which 70,000 belonged to the National Union of Mineworkers.

In mid-1985 the NUM declared 150,000 members, but in early August it was reported to have withdrawn from CUSA because of CUSA's "lack of seriousness" in pursuing unity with FOSATU and other non-racial unions. (Irish Times, August 7).

There are a number of black or non-racial unions outside both FOSATU and CUSA.

The Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union had 40,000 members in 1984; the Food and Canning Workers Union 20,000 (1982); the General Workers' Union

12,000 (1984). The South African Allied Workers' Union claimed 50,000 members in 1982 but the South African Labour Bulletin estimated the real figure at 20,000.

There are two white-dominated trade union federations. The South African Confederation of Labour (126,000 affiliates in 1983) is white-only; its most prominent union is the white Mine Workers' Union, 23,000 strong.

The Trade Union Council of South Africa is the continuation of a long series of white-dominated trade union centres in South Africa. Historically these centres usually had some black affiliates, usually among coloured workers. TUCSA was established in its present form in 1954, as a whites-only organisation.

It relaxed the whites-only rule in the '70s, and in the early '80s claimed that 12% of its affiliated members were Africans organised in 'parallel' unions subordinated to white unions in the same industry. It had 446,000 affiliated members in 1983.

plete reciprocal action.

Every new onset and every fresh victory of the political struggle is transformed into a powerful impetus for the economic struggle, extending at the same time its external possibilities and intensifying the inner urge of the workers to better their position, and their desire to struggle. After every foaming wave of political action a fructifying deposit remains behind from which a thousand stalks of economic struggle shoot forth.

And conversely. The workers' condition of ceaseless economic struggle with the capitalists keeps their fighting energy alive in every political interval; it forms, so to speak, the permanent fresh reservoir of the strength of the proletarian classes, from which the political fight ever renews its strength, and at the same time leads the indefatigable economic sappers of the proletariat at all times, now here and now there, to isolated sharp conflicts, out of which political conflicts on a large scale unexpectedly explode.

In a word: the economic struggle is the transmitter from one political centre to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle.

Cause and effect here continually change places; and thus the economic and the political factor in the period of the mass strike, now widely removed, completely separated or even mutually exclusive, as the theoretical plan would have them, merely form the two interlacing sides of the proletarian class struggle in Russia. And *their unity* is precisely the mass strike."

But if experience of struggle provides the basis for an answer to the strategic problems, it does not automatically spell that answer out and imprint it on people's minds. It does not automatically sweep away false answers, misconceptions, and the influence of middle-class politicians on the working class. Still less does it spontaneously provide solutions to all the tactical problems that arise.

To do all that requires a workers'

political party with a vigorous internal life.

The non-racial trade unions, especially FOSATU, have been trying to develop working class politics. But trade unions, by their very structure, cannot substitute for political parties.

The best way forward would be a workers' party based on the trade unions. In form it could be similar to the British Labour Party, which was founded as a federation of trade unions and socialist groups and later developed an individual membership structure in addition. It should be much more democratic than the British Labour Party, and could be so, given that the non-racial unions in South Africa do not have encrusted bureaucracies like the British unions already had to a considerable extent in 1900.

They have concentrated on building up

strong rank-and-file organisation, shop stewards structures and direct worker involvement. Strict accountability of leaders — who are to obtain mandates from their members for all that they do — has helped prevent the leaders from being coopted by industrial conciliation bureaucracy.

Full time union officials are paid similar rates to the workers they represent.

Politically such a workers' party could be very different from the British Labour Party, developing a programme for working class revolution rather than stodgy tinkering with the system. How successfully it did that would of course depend on the work of organised socialists and Marxists within the party.

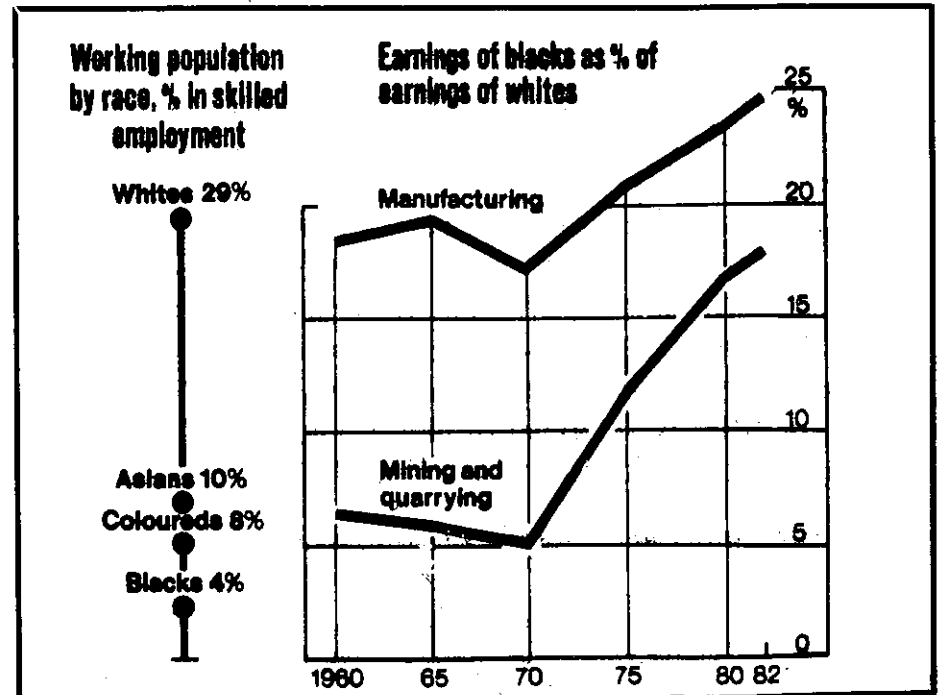
There are many difficulties with this project of a workers' party based on the trade unions, and consequently many South African trade unionists sympathetic to the general idea feel that now is not the time for it.

The unions have so far failed in repeated attempts to get some unity between their splintered forces: wouldn't this political project cause further splintering? Even in Britain, the Miners' Federation, by far the strongest union at the time, refused for several years to affiliate to the Labour Party.

The unions have had to work hard to gain semi-legality without compromising themselves: wouldn't an explicit entry into politics immediately bring down state repression?

The problems are real. But in the present turmoil the unions are being dragged into high profile politics whether they like it or not. Many of the younger shop stewards are active supporters of the UDF or the black consciousness National Forum. Unless the unions develop politics of their own, they will willy-nilly be dragged behind the UDF or the National Forum.

If the white racist regime survives the present explosion, then it will follow up with brutal repression, attempting to prevent a repetition. Even then it may not be able to crush the new trade union movement completely, but it can certainly set it back a long way. If an open working class party is not created now, there may not be another chance for some years.





A speech by FOSATU general secretary Joe Foster to the FOSATU Congress in April 1982 outlined FOSATU's political perspectives.

He rejected narrow trade unionism.

"As a trade union federation we are clearly concerned with workers and their aspirations. If we were to think in terms of our members only, we would have a very limited political role. If, however, we are thinking more widely of the working class then we have to examine very much more carefully what our political role is."

He also rejected social democracy and Stalinism as models of working class politics.

"In the capitalist economies these working class movements have power and organisation yet politically the working class is still subject to policies and practices that are clearly against their interests."

And "as the struggle of Solidarity shows . . ."

"Even the fact that a country is said to be socialist does not guarantee that workers control their own destiny. Solidarity was not struggling to restore capitalism in Poland, its struggle was to establish more democratic worker control over *their* socialist society."

The relations of a working class movement to a broad cross-class liberation movement like the ANC should, he said, be friendly but independent. In the past militant trade unions (he must have SACTU in mind) have become subordinate parts of such broad movements.

"So what has developed in South Africa is a very powerful tradition of popular or populist politics. The role of the great political movements such as the ANC and the Congress Alliance

has been to mobilise the masses against the repressive minority regime.

"Where virtually all the population is voteless and oppressed by a racial minority then a great alliance of all classes is both necessary and a clear political strategy. Furthermore, building such an alliance was a great task.

"The effective political role of progressive unions and of worker activity was to provide a crucial part of any popular struggle and that was to give it its 'Worker Voice'.

Yet the real world is not just one of apartheid and anti-apartheid, but of capital and labour.

"Behind the scenes of the great battle between apartheid regime and its popular opponents the capitalist economy has flourished and capital emerges now as a powerful and different force.

"In the economy capital and labour are the major forces, yet politically the struggle is being fought elsewhere."

Moreover, from a working class point of view the ANC's politics are alien. In particular:

"To the major Western powers it has to appear as anti-racism but not as anti-capitalist. For the socialist East it has to be at least neutral in the super-power struggle and certainly it could not appear to offer a serious socialist alternative to that of those countries as the response to Solidarity illustrates. These factors must seriously affect its relationship to workers."

Foster also refers to the general experience of Third World nationalism.

"All the great and successful popular movements have had as their aim the overthrow of oppressive — most often colonial — regimes. But these movements cannot and have not in

themselves been able to deal with the particular and fundamental problem of workers. Their task is to remove regimes that are regarded as illegitimate and unacceptable by the majority.

"It is, therefore, essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters."

And so:

"From what has been said we believe that FOSATU must set itself the task of giving leadership and direction to the building of a working class movement.

"FOSATU as a trade union federation will clearly not constitute the working class movement nor would this place FOSATU in opposition to the wider political struggle or its major liberation movement.

"FOSATU's task will be to build the effective organisational base for workers to play a major political role as workers. Our task will be to create an identity, confidence and political presence for worker organisation."

Foster's idea seems to be more that a working class movement should operate in parallel to the ANC, safeguarding workers' specific interests, than that the workers' movement should challenge the ANC for the leadership of the whole liberation struggle. But for certain the idea of independent working class politics is developing in the new trade unions.