

# THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

## Two Trade Union Congresses in South Africa.

By James Shields (Johannellburg).

During the month of April two trade union congresses of South African workers were held in Johannesburg. The first was that of the white trade unions, known by the name of the S. A. Trade Union Congress, and the second the annual conference of the black workers union, known as the I. C. U. (Industrial & Commercial Workers Union).

Without a doubt the conference of black workers was the most important, for it served to show the rapid development of native organisation and its approach towards a militant class conscious outlook. The congress of white trade unions was also important in its way, particularly so this year when it is considered that there was to be seen for the first time, a distinct change in the outlook of the majority of the delegates with regard to the question of the blacks.

Apart from this point however, both congresses presented a remarkable contrast to each other, for whereas the one (S. A. T. U. C.) showed a woeful confusion on many vital trade union matters and the existence of many racial prejudices, the other (I. C. U.) was a striking example of how a body of comparatively young trade unionists, in the midst of an acute racial atmosphere, can square up to the realities of capitalist exploitation.

A brief summary of both will serve to show how matters stand at the moment in the trade union field in S. Africa.

The S. A. Trade Union Congress opened proceedings on April 2nd., with approximately forty delegates present representing 20,000 workers. During the first day the time was devoted to the ratification of a new constitution drawn up by the Executive Council, and nothing of importance marked the course of affairs with the exception of a heated argument amongst the delegates as to whether the word "workers" or "employees" should be the term of reference with regard to the membership. Most of those present evidently thought that such a word as "workers" was liable to frighten away such organisations as Bank Clerks, Municipal Employees, etc., and so the term "employees" was ultimately adopted. On the second day, business opened with an address from C. F. Andrews, Ex-president of the All India Trade Union Congress, who appealed

for co-operation between S. A. Labour and Indian Labour to defeat the Pact Government's Anti-Asiatic Bill. From the remarks which the speaker made about trade unionism in India, one was led to the conclusion that he had been extremely active on behalf of the Indian workers. This seemed very surprising in view of the fact that not once did he interest himself or even remark about the lot of the Indian labourers on the sugar plantations etc., in Natal, during the course of his S. African Visit.

There was no discussion on his address, and one could see that the assembled delegates did not feel any too friendly towards him, probably due to his ignoring the trade unions until practically the last moment.

Almost immediately after this, the granting of a regular donation to the W. I. R. was raised, and though a considerable amount of opinion was expressed in its favour, a hazy motion to the effect that a S. A. organisation for relief purposes be set up with power to donate, was carried.

Then followed the most important feature of the whole congress, viz., a discussion on the native workers. In this connection a resolution was passed with only one dissent, which declared that the demand of the native workers for increased wages was a very reasonable and modest demand. Several delegates pointed out that everything possible must be done to assist the native workers to raise their wage level, and the whole congress was unanimous in condemning the Government for interfering with the activities of the I. C. U. organiser.

It was indeed surprising to hear one-time reactionary elements state that the boss class was only attempting to play one section off against the other, and urging the giving of complete freedom to the black trade union movement. On other matters, however, one frequently heard some of these same delegates describing the strike weapon as being obsolete and extolling round table conferences with the masters. Most of the delegates present disagreed with this viewpoint, but nevertheless a motion to end the present Industrial Conciliation Act was referred to next Congress. The only other important items were a decision to convene an Afro-Indian Labour Conference during the current year, and the stand taken on International Affiliation. In connection with the latter, it was unanimously agreed "that the congress do not affiliate to either of the existing Internationals, but associate itself with the unity campaign of the British T. U. C. in its efforts to bring about one united trade union International, which efforts were being impeded by Amsterdam".

The whole congress was full of contradictory aspects, and lacked that breath of class struggle that one would expect to find at such a gathering.

How vivid and striking was the contrast shown by the black workers congress. It lasted for a full week, April 5th to 12th., and its 75 delegates representing 40,000 workers, were typical of the new rising spirit which is beginning to permeate the minds of the vilely down-trodden black proletariat. About 200 enthusiastic spectators filled the hall each day during the debates and listened with close attention to the various problems discussed.

In a rousing speech the National Secretary outlined the work of the past year and stressed their objective as being the achievement of labour solidarity and the waging of the fight against the parasitical employing class for its complete overthrow. It was the same throughout the whole of the proceedings when dealing with such items as Segregation, Colour Bar Bill, Wage Demands, etc., the class character of the struggle being continually stressed and muddle headed racial prejudice left out of the picture entirely.

Several delegates eagerly pressed for immediate action being taken, but the conference as a whole decided to continue strengthening and consolidating the organisation more thoroughly whilst still pressing for the immediate demands of the workers.

When the Colour Bar Bill was discussed an unanimous condemnation was registered against this measure, "because it divides one section of workers from another by a racial barrier, and distracts the minds of the workers from the all-important struggle of their class against the common enemy, the exploiting capitalist". The same sentiment was voiced by the resolution on Hertzog's Segregation Policy. This resolution declared that segregation was designed to safeguard the present system of exploitation, and went on to say that "the African worker considers himself a part of the international proletariat fighting for the workers, and will not tolerate any measure intended to bring

about seperation from other workers fighting for the same cause".

That the majority of the delegates present realised the economic character of their struggle was obvious from the numerous speeches, delivered outlining, the vicious exploitation that was being undergone in factory, mine, and workshop. The horrors of the recruiting system, the oppressive tyranny of the bosses, and many other evils were laid bare with telling emphasis which made a deep impression on all who heard.

Then came the unrolling of a banner during one of the sessions, emblazoned with the words — workers of the world unite — and this acted as the immediate signal for vociferous applause from all present. That this reference to the international aspect of the workers struggle was no mere pious gesture can be easily judged by the decision taken to get into touch with the British T. U. C. with a view to linking up with the workers of other countries. A further addendum added to this resolution which suggests ultimate presentation of the native workers position to the League of Nations, demonstrated the imperative need for supplying greater clarity amongst the native workers on international affairs, and making them acquainted with the nature and character of this robber clique.

A startling contrast to the white T. U. C. was presented by the attitude taken up on trade unionism and politics. Whereas the "No politics in the union" phrase was often reiterated by the white trade unionists, the native workers insisted on the speedy formation of a Political Bureau to keep the union informed on political oppression.

One of the concluding decisions was a recommendation to the E. C. to concentrate on organising the mass of native mine workers who form the most important section of the native working class. This recommendation is certain to receive proper attention now that it has also been decided to shift the headquarters of the organisation from Cape Town to Johannesburg, the centre of the mining district.

The conference throughout was a real inspiring force which demonstrated the rapid growth of class consciousness amongst the native workers. It was easily the most important event that has ever been held in the annals of S. African trade unionism and presages great things for the future. If only half the same degree of progress manifested itself in the white trade union ranks, the accomplishment of one united trade union movement for all South African workers would be brought to a speedy realisation.

## MAY DAY

### The E. C. C. I. on the Bloody Events in Warsaw on May Day.

To all Workers.

It is with great sorrow that we have learned of the many victims resulting from the May Day celebrations in Poland. Seven killed and hundreds wounded — such is the result of the sanguinary attack of the hirelings and lackeys of the bourgeoisie on the revolutionary vanguard of the Polish proletariat.

We are full of admiration for the heroism of the Warsaw workers, who although unarmed, resisted the savage attack of the P. P. S. bands and under a perfect hail of blows continued their demonstrative procession.

The workers of all countries will brand the shameful role played by the P. P. S. which, together with the police and the fascists, attacked the workers marching under the banners of the Communist Party of Poland. We are convinced that the P. P. S. rank and file will also condemn the ignominious acts of these bands and will rather join the united front against the capitalist offensive and fascist reaction for the establishment of the workers and peasants government than join in a fratricidal struggle of the working class. Let the blood spilt by the miscreants hasten the split between the workers and the opportunist leaders and let it strengthen the revolutionary unity of the proletariat.

Honour to those who fell, struck down by the social traitors on May Day in Poland!

Shame on the assassins who spilt workers' blood in the streets of Warsaw!

Fraternal greetings to the Communist Party of Poland!  
Executive Committee  
of the Communist International.