International solidarity

Solidarity with the liberation movement in South Africa is a duty for workers everywhere — and especially a duty for workers in Britain given British imperialism’s historic and current connections with the white-supremacist state.

One particular form of solidarity has been highly controversial in the British labour movement.

Should British trade unionists visit their fellow trade unionists in South Africa? Should they encourage South African trade unions to send representatives here? Should they support international combine meetings to which South African trade unionists are invited? These and other related issues make up what has come to be known as the ‘direct links’ issue.

To answer these questions we need to know what the independent unions want; what sort of union-to-union links have occurred and what is feasible; what purposes such links serve, and what dangers are associated with them.

Direct contact between officials and rank and file members of British and South African trade unions has been a crucial element in building effective solidarity. Since 1973 the independent unions in South Africa have developed a stream of contacts with European trade union bodies.

Union officials and shop stewards from South Africa have visited overseas and union officials and shop stewards from here have visited South Africa. All the independent unions in South Africa are seeking international trade union contacts.

The most active and largest groups — FOSATU, SAAWU, GWU, CUSA — have
all called for direct links in the form of visits to South Africa in support of particular struggles.

The most important result of direct contact - as of all forms of solidarity action - is the boost for the morale of black workers in South Africa when they learn of it. With all the power of the repressive state apparatus backing the employers with whom they are in dispute, it is invaluable to workers there to know that they are not alone and that they have informed and willing allies on their side. There is no better way of achieving this morale-booster effect than by dealing directly with the workers themselves who are locked in struggle.

It is this factor more than any other which leads us to support the South African unions' call for direct links in the form of visits by overseas unionists to the scene of the struggles in South Africa.

Direct links also break through barriers of ignorance and apathy inside the British trade union movement on international questions. They enable trade unionists here to see for themselves the people and organisations which they are being asked to support: to learn at first hand the conditions under which black workers in South Africa are forced to live by their employers and the state; to find out for themselves the real background to industrial disputes and to know exactly and quickly what kind of solidarity is sought by the independent unions when they are in dispute.

Such considerations are crucial when negotiations counter-pressure by British trade unionists by saying that this pressure is jeopardising the 'progress' of talks with South African unions, or claiming that the dispute in question is an 'inter-union' dispute.

**Useful**

It is also crucial given the complexity of the South African trade union situation and the need of trade unionists here to find out which unions are bona fide representatives of the workers. The building of direct links at all levels helps to counter the insularity of ordinary trade union members just as it helps to counter the limits on solidarity imposed by top levels of the TUC.

Direct links are not a miracle cure for the problems of solidarity. Rather, they provide a basis upon which it is much easier to build a whole range of solidarity actions.

Workers in Britain can put pressure on companies denying black workers their rights by raising the issue in their negotiations and by registering, if the company refuses to concede, a formal dispute with it. Even when quite small actions are taken, the effect of such pressure can be very effective.

Letters of protest to management, messages of support to unions, material and fraternal aid to unions in dispute in South Africa, coordination with unions involved in other overseas solidarities of the parent company, sympathetic strike action and boycott of goods to and from South Africa are some of the actions open to British trade unions.

Strike action and union boycotts, of course, demand a high level of commitment from UK unions. They are often called for by the situation but smaller levels of activity are also useful.

Are there dangers? The TUC has multiple links with South African unions, but its tendency has been to keep them within bureaucratic limits and to use them to restrict the most progressive aspects of South African trade unionism.

For a period during the 1970s the TUC's International Department, to its shame, maintained support of the racist TUCSA unions and sometimes appeared to block initiatives from independent unions, particularly when TUCSA 'parallels' and independents were in conflict with each other.

More recently the TUC's International Department has rectified this stance, but it still falls short of providing solidarity on the lines sought by the unions.

Many independent South African unions have links with international labour organisations like the ICTU (which deals directly with national trade union centres like the TUC's International Department) or like the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs which link unions in particular industries like chemicals, metals or food). These organisations have performed an ambivalent role: at times useful - especially in the case of the ITSs - and at times passive or even oppositional.

A classic example of the unconstructive side of their policies was the planned visit of Bill Sirs and Terry Duffy, general secretary respectively of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and the AUEW, to South Africa in 1981. Sirs and Duffy said that they had been invited black unions inside South Africa. But what emerged was that the invitation came from the British section of the International Metalworkers' Federation, which had not consulted its non-racial, South African affiliates. The first these heard about the visit was when it was reported in the press in the UK.

Sirs' idea of the purpose of the visit had
nothing in common with what the IMF’s non-racial affiliates want. Sirs declared: “We have black affiliates who desperately need our assistance. The objective is to pull them out of the dark ages and provide the sort of training shop stewards have here.”

This patronising attitude demonstrates vividly how important it is that the IMF be answerable to its independent affiliates and that its contacts be set up only in collaboration with these unions. Although the IMF FOSATU affiliates were opposed to this particular trip, they expressed themselves unequivocally in favour of direct contacts, provided that they are guided by the interests and requirements of workers.

The South African metalworkers’ unions stated: “The independent non-racial IMF affiliates in South Africa found it very difficult to support the proposed visit because of the statements made by Sirs before the visit. The unions felt his statements to be insulting and ill-informed when he spoke of bringing black workers out of the “dark ages”. These IMF affiliates made their views known to the IMF secretariat in Geneva. The visit was subsequently called off.”

Tour: The three IMF affiliates believe that their principles on fraternal contact between unions are clear. We strongly favour fraternal contact between workers in South Africa and workers in other countries, at all levels, provided this is guided by the interests and requirements of workers. “Visits to South Africa and visits overseas should be based on the concrete needs of workers.”

“Visits should involve not only top officials, but also plant-based worker representatives.

“The aims of these visits should be to strengthen fraternal ties between organised workers in different countries and to carry forward the struggle for workers in South Africa to win the same rights as have been won by workers in other countries.”

Several visits to and from other unions have already taken place with shop stewards and union officials from Europe visiting unions in South Africa and shop stewards and officials from our unions travelling to Europe and the USA. This contact has been valuable and will be encouraged in the future, provided it takes place in accordance with the above principles and guidelines.”

The ANC, SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid Movement have, however, opposed direct links.

SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid executive combined in defeating moves in Anti-Apartheid in support of direct union-to-union links, in the 1981 AGM. Their major argument is that such visits constitute a violation of their policy of boycottting South Africa.

Boycott

But it is — or should be — quite clear that boycott of South Africa refers to the apartheid regime and the economic forces which prop and perpetuate it, not to the black workers’ organisations which are fighting back. Indeed it is the regime which is attempting to isolate the non-racial unions.

SACTU and the Anti-Apartheid’s executive say that “black workers themselves...have consistently called for the isolation of South Africa”. But non-racial unions are an authentic voice of black workers and it is clear that many are now calling for direct links. They do not want to isolate themselves.

An official SACTU representative in the UK declared his opposition to direct links in December 1981’s AA News. He said that “once in a while the regime will resort to guilt by allowing in a person who is not going to be of much benefit to the owners in South Africa or will — willingly or unwittingly — serve the regime’s interests.” In other words the only links he sees as possible are those countermanded by the regime.

He ignores the strength of the trade unions — inside the country and out — to develop contacts of use to themselves, and assumes that the state will only allow in and out of the country individuals friendly to apartheid.

Consider a situation in which a solidarity delegation is sent over. If the state lets them in, well and good; if it refuses, it would provide good propaganda material for solidarity work and encouragement to black workers. Either way, black workers in question would receive a boost to their morale knowing that they are not isolated.

The apartheid state would like to stop all progressive links; indeed it would like to crush the whole movement. But whether it can remain on this question is a matter for them. It has not succeeded so far. Moreover, support for direct links increases pressure on the state’s ability to restrict visits. Our aim is to make life more difficult for the state machinery, not voluntarily accept their controls.

Anti-Apartheid and SACTU do not of course advocate that non-racial unions in South Africa should be isolated or...
Deprived of support. What they say is that British trade unions should channel all their support through SACTU, that SACTU has an extensive underground network in South Africa and has "perfected its methods of making contact".

They further argue that most trade unionists are "organising in semi-legal or clandestine conditions" and that the establishment of direct links can "jeopardise these trade unionists' work". In other words, rather than form direct contact with other non-racial unions in South Africa, trade unions should place all their support — moral and financial — behind SACTU.

It is not true that non-racial unions in South Africa work in 'semi-legal or clandestine conditions'. While it is true that they are semi-legal bodies, nevertheless they openly organise black workers.

They see their openness as a crucial aspect of their strength as trade unions; for it enables them to bring together the mass of workers in a particular industry or area in a way which would be impossible for an underground organisation. It also enables them to maintain a far higher level of democratic discussion among the membership than is ever possible in a tightly-knit underground group.

Whatever the advantages of underground organisation, many of the non-racial unions do not feel it is appropriate for trade unions, except as a last resort.

Many of the non-racial unions consider it adventurist to work with an organisation like SACTU which is underground and for all practical purposes illegal. This is particularly the case with respect to international links. When it is possible for non-racial unions to forge direct links with overseas unions, it clearly increases rather than diminishes the risks to mediate these links through an underground organisation.

There is danger in all non-racial trade unionism in South Africa; but SACTU's claim that the exchange of visits can 'provoke further harassment' is a risk many of the non-racial trade unions consider worth taking and have taken, consistently for the last ten years in some cases, and seems minimal compared to the risks of involvement with SACTU.

Lastly, there are enormous advantages in direct links in their own right. Rather than attempting to mediate contact through overstretched lines of communication, officials, shop stewards and ordinary workers will be able to exchange experiences directly and build support on
this basis. Such links are especially useful when speedy and effective support is
called for during industrial disputes.

Behind the ANC/AAM/CF opposition
to direct links is an attempt to maintain a
political monopoly and to marginalise the
indigenous voice of black workers — to
substitute the ANC’s perspective of diplo-
matic pressure plus guerrilla warfare for an
international solidarity of a distinctly
working class type.

So we should support direct links. But
arguments on this issue should not over-
shadow the other solidarity work that can
be done. And specific solidarity with
workers’ struggles in South Africa must
go together with, rather than replacing,
more general solidarity with the whole
liberation movement.

Demonstrations, pickets and pickets are
as important for South Africa as they were
for Vietnam. The Anti-Apartheid Move-
ment also stresses four other forms of
activity: disinvestment; getting people
and organisations to withdraw business
from Barclays Bank, whose South African
subsidiary is the biggest bank there;
stimulating sporting links; and pressuring for
government economic sanctions.

These activities are limited, and cannot
substitute for working class forms of soli-
darity. Investors who are withdrawing from
South Africa do so out of concern for their
profits, not moral pressure. If the big
capitalist governments impose sanctions,
they will do so only in a crisis and in order
to get a solution tailored to their interests.

Crucial

Nevertheless, the movement in South
Africa, including the non-racial trade
union, has supported these forms of
solidarity. And even if their immediate
effects are limited, some of them can be
effectively useful for building awareness.

Not everyone is a trade unionist working
in a company with subsidiaries in South

Africa, or handling South African trade.
Everyone has a local Barclays Bank, and
many people have local councils, colleges,
or trade unions which may bank at
Barclays, or have investments in compani-
ies heavily involved in South Africa or
Namibia.

No-one needs to subscribe to a whole
theory about bringing down apartheid by
diplomatic and consumer pressure in
order to make the moral gesture of with-
drawing an account from Barclays or sell-
ing shares in RTZ or ICI.

Any Labour Party Young Socialist
troche, Labour Party, or college Labour
Club, can organise a picket at its local
Barclays and use it to get across the facts
and the arguments about apartheid.

In that way we can build a mass solidar-
ity movement — and lay the basis for the
more decisive form of support for the
black resistance in South Africa, through
trade union boycotts of South African
trade.

A victim of the Soweto massacre. Photo: IDAF.