



COSATU, the ICFTU, *and dictatorships in Asia*

Trade unionists of Asia appeal to COSATU not to affiliate to ICFTU
before demanding its report

We write as worker leaders who have been directly engaged in the establishment of independent unionism in our countries for decades. We wish to put a particular point of view to COSATU. We wish to debate with you because our members are becoming aware of COSATU's key role in the struggle for democracy in South Africa. Asian workers are beginning to request more material on your long, hard, but successful struggle.

Asian workers are also becoming conscious of the fact that COSATU is genuinely internationalist and as such is prepared to play a leadership role in the struggle for working

people's freedom – a freedom that is *genuine*, not a middle class and ruling elite liberation. COSATU's interest in the struggles of working men and women in the newly industrializing countries in Asia inspires us in the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in.

Sadly, Asian workers have not yet achieved recognition of their basic rights as workers. Many of COSATU's leaders will remember that time in South Africa, prior to union recognition in 1979. Before 1979, your independent unions had no bargaining rights; the Apartheid regime banned many of your leaders and the employers victimized your

This paper has been endorsed by the following people in their personal capacities, after extensive workshopping of ideas:

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shop stewards. Here in Asia, we are as you were in the 1960s and 1970s. Our unions are not recognized either by the state or by the employers in many of our countries; our leaders are victimized, imprisoned, and in a number of instances killed. We live under dictatorships in various forms and we have no political or economic rights. Our wages and conditions are extremely poor, even though it is our hands and our minds that have played a role in the so called economic miracle of Asian development.

For these reasons, we would like to express a particular point of view that arises out of these difficult circumstances. We hope that this point of view will stimulate democratic debate within COSATU over the question of ICFTU affiliation. Clearly, the decision to affiliate or not to affiliate at this stage is a decision to be made by South African comrades. We only wish to point out possible consequences of such a decision for the future prospects of our struggle for democracy and freedom in Asia. We hope that you will take account of these issues in your debates in a spirit of solidarity with the workers of Asia.

The ICFTU visit to South Africa

We read with interest, the LABOUR BULLETIN comments of the ICFTU leaders during their recent visit to South Africa, (Vol 17 No 1). If we accept that they are sincere, their comments reflect an important shift in ICFTU thinking.

Enzo Friso, the ICFTU general secretary, emphasized that the ICFTU is on the side of those fighting for freedom and democracy. He stated that the ICFTU is not an imperialist organization and that the main aim of the organization was "the fight against dictatorships". He also emphasized the importance of developing independent unionism and that the ICFTU was now going to target the democratization of those countries under dictatorships. The ICFTU was going "to fight everywhere for trade union rights".

Bob White, president of the Canadian Labour Congress and chair of the ICFTU's human rights committee went so far as to argue that criticism of ICFTU's base in the

undemocratic unions in the newly industrialised societies was "legitimate" and that these undemocratic centres should be expelled.

In terms of our situation, these perspectives are refreshing. We are however concerned that these view points be translated into practical policy in Asia. Such a change would necessitate a dramatic transformation of the ICFTU's role in Asia, its affiliation base and its organisational structures.

The present role and structure of the ICFTU in Asia

The role of the ICFTU in Asia has been profoundly shaped by the dictates of the Cold War. The US government actively sought through its influence within the ICFTU to shield the Asian working classes from the spread of communism.

Trade union federations were to serve as protected zones. Thus the union federations affiliated to the ICFTU were in many instances set up by the *state* to control the working class, not to *represent* working class interests in any

way. These union federations have been labelled "yellow unions" because they became the sweethearts of the employers and the allies of the dictatorships. The multi-nationals loved them. These unions became a selling point for Asian governments as they actively tried to attract foreign investment by arguing that "their" working class was docile and hard working.

This "yellow" unionism which forms the foundation of the ICFTU in Asia, has taken different forms in different countries. In the



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Philippines, the ICFTU affiliate is the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP). The TUCP was established in 1976 by the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, soon after the first resistance by workers under the Martial Law regime. Marcos wished to pre-empt the development of militant unionism as this would have undermined his political dictatorship and the image of cheap and controlled labour he sought to promote with the multi-national corporations. The unions that the TUCP brought under their umbrella had existed since the early 1950s. They were 'sweetheart' company unions, established by the employers.



Rob Lambert, contributor

In Malaysia, militant unionism was suppressed in the late 1940s. In 1950 the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, (MTUC), was established under the watchful eye of the newly independent state. In many instances, state

bureaucrats came to exert a high degree of control over the hand picked leaders of the MTUC. The result has been four decades of servile unionism that has not stood up for the rights of Malaysian workers. The ICFTU has colluded with this type of unionism by electing P P Narayanan, the general secretary of the National Union of Plantation Workers as the ICFTU's international president. Narayanan is also president of the MTUC. A rich analysis of the Malaysian labour situation (Dass, 1991, 57) has concluded,

"Narayanan's stepping stone to achieving control of the national labour movement and rising to power within the international body was that most vulnerable and neglected sector of Malaysian society: Indian plantation workers. During the NUPW's long and sordid

history, plantation workers have remained at the very bottom of the social order in Malaysia, and even to this day their conditions remain close to slavery. The reason: their union has never - despite its long established links with the wheels of power in the so-called international labour movement - fought for even the most basic rights for them"

In Indonesia, after the bloody 1965 coup, an event in which more people lost their lives than during the entire Vietnam war, independent unions were disbanded and replaced by military styled, state unionism. SPSI, the official state union federation in Indonesia and the only one tolerated by the dictatorship, is not yet recognized by the ICFTU. However, the leadership of the ICFTU in Asia who work under the umbrella of the ICFTU's Asia Pacific Regional Organization, (APRO) are currently pushing for the affiliation of this "union" federation whose major role is monitoring and securing the interrogation of worker leaders who try to organise and represent workers.

The ICFTU's International Executive Committee is considering a request for affiliation by SPSI that is being supported by APRO. The outcome is far from certain, since the militarized structure and role of SPSI in Indonesia would make even the soul of even the lost bureaucratic union leader squirm. However, the fact that the ICFTU leadership in Asia could even contemplate affiliation of such an organization speaks volumes on the present orientation and character of the ICFTU in Asia.

Organisation of the ICFTU in Asia

APRO is largely funded by the Japanese. Many argue that there are two basic reasons why APRO is so passive in the defense of worker rights in Asia: first and foremost, the official unions that are represented in APRO are agents of worker control; secondly, Japanese corporations which play a major role in Asian economies are none too keen to see independent unionism developing. APRO is seen to be unrepresentative of the newly emerging democratic unions in Asia and is therefore not in the vanguard of the tough fight

for worker rights and democracy. To our knowledge, APRO has hardly said a word about the Export Processing Zones now proliferating throughout Asia, never mind organising and co-ordinating serious campaigns against the denial of union rights within these zones. As a consequence, the ICFTU finds itself on the wrong side of the fence in Asia and has thereby restricted its role in actively challenging dictatorships that are now promoting the severest forms of labour exploitation.

Workers engaged in a hard, often violent struggle for democracy in South Africa may well ask, "What do all of these details have to do with us? So what if the ICFTU through APRO is ineffectual in Asia. No organization is ever perfect. We have our own troubles. We can sympathize with the plight of Asian workers, but they are distant. Asia is on the other side of the globe. There is little that we can do from South Africa, so we should simply get on with our own struggle at this stage".

The significance of Asian workers' struggles for the liberation of South African workers

We all live in a borderless global economy, where the new communications technologies and transport systems have facilitated an extremely high degree of capital mobility that cuts through national boundaries and reduces the capacities of individual governments to determine their own national economic policies. Under such conditions, the absence of worker rights in certain countries and regions is undermining the hard fought for rights in the democracies. In this regard, Enzo Friso and Bob White are absolutely correct in their analysis.

The fact that the Asian region has become the centre of gravity of the global economy is no accident. The absence of worker rights in labour surplus economies, structured around Export Processing Zones, controlled by elite regimes, has attracted high levels of multi-national investment across a range of key industrial and mining sectors. Why invest in North America, Europe, South Africa,

Australia, when these investment conditions exist in Asia. The figures tell the story.

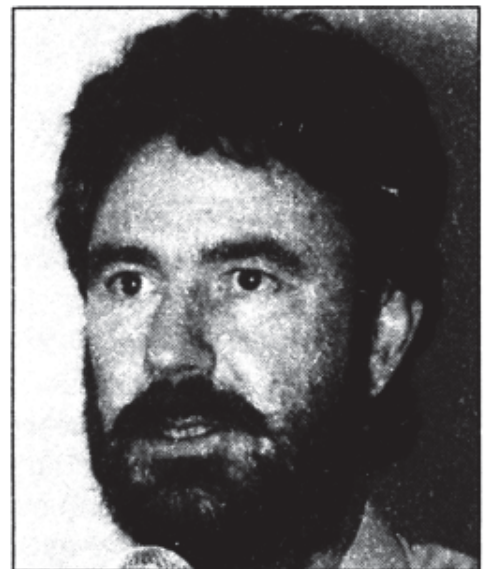
Asia is the fastest growing region in the world. Having doubled the regions share of the world's GDP to more than 25% in the past two decades, the region is now set to nearly double that share again to 45% within the next 40 years on present trends. Whilst the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has lowered its forecast of world economic growth in 1993 from 3,1% to 2,3%, the Asia Development Bank predicts average growth of more than triple that figure – 7,3% – among its 25 developing member nations.

China, which grew by 12% in 1992, is targeting 9% this year. Malaysia has a growth target of 8% for the sixth consecutive year. Vietnam is predicting 7% growth, whilst Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and

Indonesia should see gross domestic product gains of between 5% and 7%. Japanese Prime Minister, Miyazawa, has hailed Asia "the world's brightest spot for the next century".

In contrast to Asia, the democracies of the developed industrial societies are struggling with the social effects of the other dimension of Asian industrial development, namely, the relocation of production and the consequent changing terms of trade. As Friso points out, the industrialized countries have lost \$72 billion per year in exports over the past 5 years. Two million jobs have been lost.

In the United States, for example, the relocation of production by large transnational corporations into the cheap labour and tax havens of the newly industrializing societies



Rob Meecham, contributor



(From left): Chris Dlamini and Jay Naidoo of COSATU, Enzo Friso and Bob White from the ICFTU: Friso and White need the support of a strong well-defined COSATU position

Photo: William Matlala

over the past 30 years has reshaped trade by creating high levels of import dependency. Twenty-five percent of United States manufactured goods are now imported compared to only 5% two decades ago. The changing pattern of trade coupled with overseas borrowing has transformed consistent trade surpluses into trade deficits.

Manufacturing in the United States, as a percentage of GNP, has dropped from 30% in 1953 to 21% in 1985, with most of the decline occurring during the 1980s. Between 1979 and 1985, job losses in basic industries were high. In primary metals, employment fell by 457 000; in fabricated metals, 257 000; in non-electrical machinery, 341 000; and in glass products, 111 000.

A situation therefore exists whereby production is being relocated into Asia in a way that creates large scale unemployment, social dislocation and an undermining of labour standards in the developed economies, whilst workers in the newly industrialising societies of Asia are being highly exploited in terms of low wages, hours of work, the lack of

adequate health and safety conditions, and absence of trade union rights.

These changed patterns of capital flows are of great significance for South African workers as the country moves towards political transition. Already the captains of industry are warning that in the new South Africa, the manufacturing sector will have to become competitive by world standards. Thus, for example, the government's Normative Economic Model (NEM) blames high labour costs and low worker productivity for reduced international competitiveness and unemployment in South Africa yet the social and political determinants of international competitiveness are conveniently not spelt out.

Competing with Asian countries on their terms would require a steady reversal of the gains that South African workers have won over the past two decades. Wages and conditions would have to be eroded; massive tax holidays would have to be granted to companies; to these ends the country would have to be carved up into Asian styled Export Processing Zones. Ex-Bantustan leaders may

be called in for advice, seeing that they already have had experience with operationalising the concept. Freedom in South Africa would not be the dawning of a new age of opportunity. In its stead would come an era of economic slavery.

An alternative strategy

Whilst Asian workers may well be weighed down by extreme economic exploitation and political oppression, they are also beginning to organise and resist, just as South African workers did in the early 1970s. Rapid industrialisation is forging a socially significant working class which is gradually claiming its rights. New impulses towards independent unionism are being born everywhere. Even within the extreme repression of Indonesia, workers are organising. Industrial strike action has escalated dramatically since 1990.

COSATU can make a real contribution to the more rapid advancement of these struggles, given the experience of organizing under hostile conditions that has accumulated over the past two decades. For this to happen, COSATU *needs to demand a radical restructuring of the ICFTU's operations in Asia as a precondition to their affiliation.* COSATU should consider requesting the following action on the part of the ICFTU leadership:

- A plan for a complete restructuring of APRO is urgent. The Asian branch of the ICFTU needs to relocate itself within the newly emergent independent unions of Asia. These unions need to be resourced and assisted. To this end a conference of these unions should be called to reach common agreement on the kind of ICFTU regional structure that would most effectively meet the needs of the newly emergent unions.
- The established, state and employer dominated unions should be given the opportunity to reform their structures along democratic and accountable and independent lines. Such reforms should create the opportunity for new relationships between national federations to be forged. Federations that are unwilling to enter such

a reform process within a set time period, should be expelled from the ICFTU as suggested by Bob White.

- The new regional structure should adopt a high profile with international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. A social code of conduct based on ILO and UN rights should be applied to multi-national companies investing in the region. Free trade should be transformed into fair trade, that is, trade linked to worker rights. The human and worker rights abuses of authoritarian regimes should be ruthlessly exposed. Above all else, the Export Processing Zone concept should be attacked day in and day out and exposed for what it is: the denial of all rights by the state in the interests of capital.

If COSATU affiliates to the ICFTU without bargaining and negotiating the issue of the character of the ICFTU in Asia, an historic opportunity will have been lost. The pressure for an organizational transformation of the ICFTU in Asia will be dramatically reduced because the ICFTU will be able to gain enormous credibility from COSATU's affiliation, *without having to transform its Asian operations.* Voiceless Asian workers will be on their own, against great odds. Investment will continue to flow into Asia at very high rates. New jobs will be created under slave like conditions, whilst workers in North America, Europe, South African and Australia slowly slide down the slippery slope of conceding conditions, won after blood, sweat and tears had been spilt.

Bondage in a region fast moving towards being the centre of gravity of economic activity will slowly and insidiously enslave all workers. The COSATU leadership has a magnificent opportunity, through the strength, power and moral force of decades of effective organising work, to redefine unionism in Asia in the coming decades. Leaders such as Enzo Friso and Bob White need the support of a strong, defined COSATU position if they are to translate their fresh viewpoints into organisational practice in Asia. ☆