

Black Workers Under Siege



The Repression of Black Trade Unions in South Africa

Produced by the Africa Fund and District Council 37, AFSCME

Preface

by Victor Gotbaum
Executive Director,
District Council 37, AFSCME



*In South Africa,
the struggle for
trade union rights
and the struggle
for freedom are
the same fight.*

In 1980, 10,000 black Johannesburg municipal workers went out on strike for recognition of their union and a wage increase. Strikers were fired, detained overnight and deported to their "homelands," the barren areas where blacks are confined....

On February 5, 1982, Neil Aggett, a white organizer for the mostly black African Food and Canning Workers Union was found hanged to death in his jail cell. Apparently driven to suicide by the torture of the South African security forces....

In South Africa, the struggle for trade union rights and the struggle for freedom are the same fight.

I recently visited South Africa as a representative of my union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and Public Service International, a worldwide organization of public employee unions. It quickly became clear to me that the black trade unions are the forefront of this fight for freedom and democracy in South Africa. Judging from the severe repression of these unions, the apartheid government feels the same way.

What I saw in South Africa impels me to write this message to my fellow trade unionists in America. It is not enough for us to be outraged at the treatment of blacks under apartheid. They need our support. They need concrete actions from our unions to keep their unions alive and growing in the

face of brutal opposition. They deserve this support. Our labor tradition mandates it.

DC 37, AFSCME has already begun our first program of assistance. Manoko Nchwe, a South African trade unionist who was jailed in her country, is visiting our union to observe us and to receive training she can take back to her struggle.

Also, PSI, through its affiliation with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, has granted funds to the black unions for training and specific, fundamental equipment that is so essential for them to continue their struggle.

I am grateful to the Africa Fund, and its chairman Frank Montero, for providing information in this pamphlet. I urge you, please, as you read it, to think of specific actions you and your union can begin to take to help our trade union brothers and sisters struggling in one of the most repressive, immoral arenas on the face of the earth: South Africa today.

It is vitally important for all our unions to move this issue onto the front burner. Twenty-one million blacks living in slavery deserves far more attention and action than we have been affording them. This is a trade union struggle that we should no longer ignore.

The Repression of Trade Unions in South Africa

It is often difficult for Americans to understand what it is like to be a black trade unionist in South Africa. Merely belonging to a union can bring harassment from your employer or the police.

Those who dare to organize black workers often face long terms of detention without trial, banning, brutal beatings and electroshock torture at the hands of the security police.

If you go on strike you are likely to be fired immediately. If you are lucky and have permission to live in the 87% of South Africa reserved for whites you only have to try to find a job in the face of 25% black unemployment. But if the government classifies you as a "migrant" you can be transported to a barren "homeland," a reservation so poor it is impossible to eke out a living.

BLACK UNIONS THREAT TO APARTHEID

The black unions pose a deadly threat to the apartheid system which allows 4½ million whites to rule a nation of 24 million black people. That is why they have come under a sustained attack from the South African

government.

Without black workers the South African economy would swiftly collapse. Black workers mine the gold and diamonds that South Africa exports, work in the factories that supply white South Africans with a vast array of consumer goods, and plant and harvest the crops that feed the country. Today blacks make up 82% of the South African workforce.

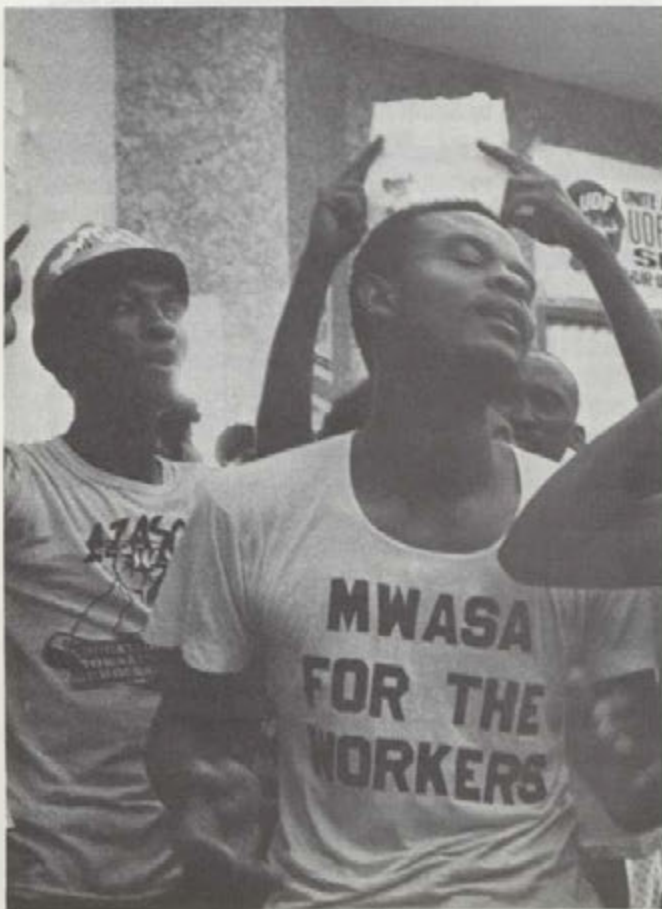
Since Africans are denied the vote or any political representation in South Africa, the black unions have emerged as virtually their only institution of organized power. The white government fears that the black unions will use this overwhelming economic power to combat the system of white minority rule.

Exact membership figures on the black unions are difficult to obtain. Estimates of their 1983 membership range from 264,000 to 350,000. Even the lower figure would represent impressive growth since 1980 when they had about 150,000 members, especially since there has been a severe recession in South Africa since 1983. Again, even using the lower figures, the independent black unions now represent something on the order of 7% of

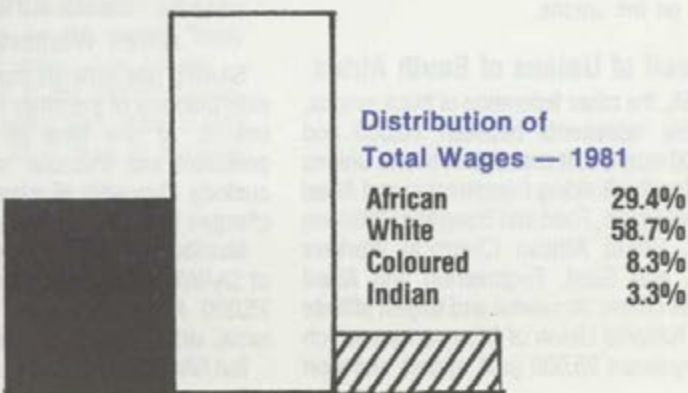
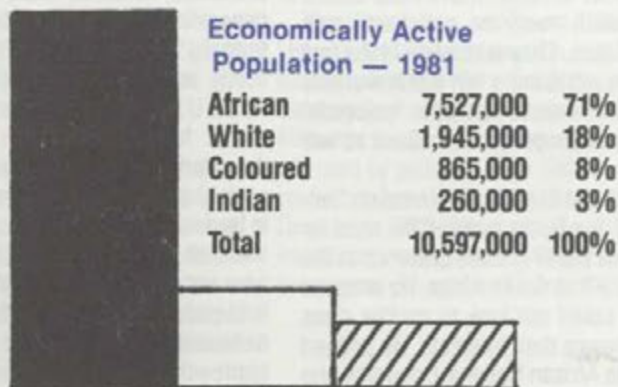
urban black workers and 20% of industrial workers.

The strength of the black unions can't be measured in terms of numbers alone. Equally important is their strength in key industries including auto, iron, steel, transport, and, most recently, mining. In 1982, 141,571 black workers were involved in 394 strikes, costing the South African economy 302,489 work days. This was the largest number of strikes in twenty years and every one of them was illegal.

To really understand the black unions and the threat they pose to the apartheid system we must get beyond statistics and look at the unions themselves. There are far too many independent black unions to describe in this brief survey. Instead, the two federations of black unions, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), and the most prominent unaffiliated black union, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), will be briefly profiled.



Income and Employment



The Black Unions

Federation of South African Trade Unions

FOSATU, with over 100,000 members, is the largest federation of black unions. It is made up of unions in the auto, textile, iron and steel, paper, food, transportation, sugar, and jewelry industries. Its largest and most important affiliates are the Metal and Allied Workers Union, the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union and the National Union of Textile Workers.

FOSATU has a very conscious industrial union strategy. It targets important industries for organization, and works to build solid shop floor organizations.

The FOSATU leadership believes strongly that only this kind of organized industrial power will make it possible to bring about the changes that are needed both on the shop floor and in society. They also argue that it is their only effective defense against government repression.

In the last year FOSATU has moved to define its political strategy around two themes—non-racialism and the need for an independent working class movement. Like most of the independent unions FOSATU completely rejects the apartheid system of racial division and believes in a labor movement and a society in which everyone can participate regardless of race. They take pride in the fact that they have attracted a few white workers and that their unions include "coloreds" (people of mixed ancestry) and Indians as well as Africans.

At FOSATU's last bi-annual convention Secretary General Joe Foster outlined the need for an independent working class presence in the movement for a free South Africa. He stressed that workers could not look to middle class leaders to advance their interests. He praised the work of the African National Congress, the principal liberation movement, but said there was also a need for worker based politics based on the unions.

Council of Unions of South Africa

CUSA, the other federation of black unions, probably represents between 90,000 and 100,000 workers. It consists of twelve unions including the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union, Food and Beverages Workers Union, South African Chemical Workers Union, and Steel, Engineering and Allied Workers Union. Its newest and largest affiliate is the National Union of Mineworkers which has organized 35,000 gold miners and won



South Africa Fabrics strikers join in labor songs as they await results of talks between management and the National Union of Textile Workers.

recognition agreements from the mining companies for the first time in South African history. The mineworkers are the fastest growing union in South Africa today.

Since CUSA has always been a loose federation of unions, it is more difficult to generalize about it than about FOSATU. Historically it has stressed the development of black leadership just as passionately as FOSATU has stressed non-racialism. The preamble to its constitution states "that the development of a non-racial, non-exploitative society depends on the development of blacks in leadership." Some CUSA unions have limited themselves to organizing African workers and have not recruited "coloreds" or Indians. CUSA leaders have been more influenced by a black nationalist approach than of the non-racial approach advocated by the African National Congress.

South African Allied Workers Union

SAAWU has suffered more intense repression than any of the other independent black unions. At one time its president, vice-president and treasurer were all in police custody. They were all released without being charged with a crime or brought to trial.

Membership figures are elusive. Estimates of SAAWU membership range from 7,500 to 75,000. Although SAAWU is militantly non-racial, virtually all of its members are Africans.

But SAAWU's significance does not really lie

in its numbers. It is closely watched because it is the most outspokenly political of the new black unions. It has regularly denounced the apartheid system and especially the strategy of stripping blacks of South African citizenship by declaring them citizens of a "homeland" created and granted a fictitious independence by South Africa.

It encourages its members to participate in community organizations and has declared its willingness to join in coalitions around community issues. It recently joined the United Democratic Front which was formed to oppose the new South African constitution. Even more ominous from the point of view of the South African government has been SAAWU's willingness to use songs, slogans and colors associated with the outlawed African National Congress.

SAAWU is often referred to with some justification as a community based union. While it does have some recognition agreements and shop floor organizations, most of its visible activity has been in the black townships where people live. Its style has been characterized by mass rallies whether to recruit members, support strikes or resist repression. It is a general union, recruiting all workers regardless of industry, rather than an industrial union, recruiting only workers in a given industry. It believes that the only protection against repression lies in a political movement which goes beyond the shop floor.

Black Workers and Apartheid — a Growing Threat

Strike Breaking

Without the ability to strike, a union is nearly powerless. But in South Africa virtually all strikes are illegal. Since 1976 there has been only one legal strike by black workers.

For a strike to be legal, a union must go through a long drawn-out conciliation procedure which typically lasts from a year to eighteen months. Black workers, whose strength is on the shop floor, and who cannot wait months to resolve urgent grievances, have bypassed this machinery and struck illegally.

Picketing for any strike, legal or illegal, is forbidden under the Internal Security Act. Employers in South Africa have the right to dismiss any striker, legal or illegal, and this is a frequent course of action. Workers who are classified by the government as "migrants" are then shipped out to the "homelands." Since almost 60% of African workers are forced to maintain a migrant status, this makes them vulnerable to victimization.

In several recent instances, the government has intervened directly to break strikes. In other cases they have seriously harassed strikers while stopping short of an all out effort to break the strike.

Strike Breaking on the Docks

The government-owned South African Transport Services (SATS), which operates the country's railroads and docks attempted to stop an organizing drive among its longshoremen by firing more than 400 workers in Port Elizabeth on September 1, 1982. The workers had engaged in a slow-down after unsuccessfully trying for eleven months to get SATS management to open negotiations with their union, the General Workers Union (GWU). The South African Transport service refused even to talk to the union.

The slow-down and the firings were preceded by months of management harassment of union workers. Workers were assaulted, intimidated, and even offered money to resign from the GWU. In July 1982, 848 workers wrote a letter to management complaining of this mistreatment by the railway police.

When the workers were fired in September, they were taken by the railway police to the barracks where they were forced to live, and told to pack their belongings and leave immediately. Without work, they faced deportation to the Transkei and Ciskei, the "homelands" to which the government had assigned them. But they refused to give up their struggle. Until

February 1983 they managed to meet every week, to seek negotiations with management, and to defy the company by refusing to accept its severance pay. Finally, facing starvation, they took their checks. The strike was over.

Johannesburg Municipal Workers

Similar techniques were used to break the strike of 10,000 Johannesburg municipal workers in July and August of 1980. The workers struck to demand union recognition and a wage increase from approximately \$43 a week to \$75.40.

The Johannesburg city administration broke the strike by firing everyone who refused to go back to work. Since the workers were classified as "migrants" losing their jobs meant they had no right to stay in Johannesburg. All 1,265 men who refused to return to work were picked up by the police and herded into a compound where they were kept overnight, 60 to a room. In the morning, defying an agreement that had been worked out with union lawyers, the police used clubs and rifle butts to force the workers onto buses sending them to the "homelands."

Harassment and Intimidation

Even when stopping short of these massive strike-breaking tactics, the South African police frequently attack strikers and attempt to harass and intimidate trade unionists. The following examples are typical:

- Four trade unionists including "Shakes" Sikhane, the General Secretary of the Food and Beverage Workers' Union, and Jeremy Baskin, an organizer for the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union were arrested in March 1984 for "convening illegal meetings." Each was arrested after meeting with striking workers.
- In March 1984 riot police fired tear gas at thousands of workers walking home from work in Pinetown in a bus boycott called by the Federation of South African Trade Unions to support striking bus drivers.
- In December 1982 at the Datsun Roslyn plant near Pretoria police fired rubber bullets and tear-gas, and used clubs to disperse

striking workers. Four workers were treated for tear-gas burns, lacerations and internal bleeding at a nearby hospital. An unknown number were treated by a local doctor.

- On May 1, 1982 riot police with whips, tear-gas and guns stopped a march in Brits sponsored by the Metal and Allied Workers Union, the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union, and the Young Christian Workers. Roman Catholic Archbishop E. Cassidy, Apostolic Delegate to southern Africa, was the guest of honor at the march.

The Minister of Police informed parliament that in 1981 police were called into strikes and industrial disputes on 191 occasions. On the government's own figures, the police intervened in more than one out of every two incidents. During 1981 and 1982 more than 1600 workers were charged with offenses arising from strikes or union actions.

Intimidation Act

In June 1982, the Intimidation Act went into effect to give the government more power to suppress strikes. This act made coercion through "threats", "jeers", or "jibes" illegal, and eliminated the need to prove joint action or common purpose. The act carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a \$19,000 fine.

The Federation of South African Trade Unions, the largest federation of black unions, has reported that the Intimidation Act is being used against more and more workers. Fifteen Richards Bay Coal Terminal workers who were attacked by police in June 1982 were charged under the Act after a strike by 180 workers in December 1982. Two members of the African Food and Canning Workers Union from Queens-town were charged in March 1983.

Ciskei: A Homeland of Terror

Repression in the Bantustans

Repression carried out directly by the South African regime can provoke embarrassing international publicity at a time when the government is anxiously seeking to build its "reform" image. It makes life more difficult for friends and supporters like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

Frequently the dirty work is delegated to the puppet governments of the bantustan "tribal homelands" created, funded and granted a fictitious "independence" by the South African government. By declaring these barren territories "independent nations" and then classifying Africans as citizens of these homelands on the basis of their ethnic ("tribal") ancestry, the government is stripping millions of black people of South African citizenship.

Ciskei

In 1983 the most violent attack on the trade unions was being carried out by the government of the Ciskei "homeland". Workers who live in the Ciskei, because they are forbidden by law to live elsewhere in South Africa, represent the vast majority of the labor force in the major South African industrial port of East London.

The Ciskei outlawed the South African Allied Workers Union in September 1983 as part of a war against the black unions that has been going on at least since 1981 when the Ciskei received its "independence" through a vote of the all-white South African parliament.

The Ciskeian authorities see black workers as their main, indeed almost their only, export commodity. They see it as their job to provide the hardest-working, most dependable, least troublesome workers available to white South African employers. Ciskei's Manpower Minister, Chief Lent Maqoma, has promised employers that they will get workers who have received "disciplinary training along military lines."

More Arrests

In July and August 1983 the South African and Ciskeian authorities launched a coordinated drive to lock up union activists. In the Ciskei virtually all SAAWU officials and leaders of the General Workers Union, Transport and Allied Workers Union and the African Food and Canning Workers Union were detained, including half the shop committee in one plant. Many of the detainees were held until early November.

Then on August 16 the South African Security Police in East London arrested six union leaders, three SAAWU members, an official of the General Workers Union, and the East London Branch Secretary and another official from the African Food and Canning Workers Union. At least four of the six are known to have been handed over to the Ciskeian Security Police. Amnesty International has expressed "legal concern" and "fear of torture" for all of these detainees, whether arrested in East London or the Ciskei.

This "fear of torture" proved well founded. As the number of people detained mounted the jails were overflowing and they had to be housed in the soccer stadium. The police and vigilantes carried out brutal beatings with whips and clubs. Women were raped. The police began opening fire on crowds of people on the street. Before the terror abated at least 90 people were killed.

This simultaneous crackdown on the black unions caused *Rand Daily Mail* columnist Steve Friedman to write "the brave new world of labor reform appears to have been abolished in East London. Not that the laws extending union rights to black workers don't apply there—it's simply that there are no unionists around there now to take advantage of them. . . This columnist knows of only one key East London trade unionist who is not in jail and won't mention his name for fear of tempting fate."

The Ciskei regime has made no secret of its intention to crush the black unions:

- The home of Bonsile Norushe, East London Branch Secretary of the African Food and Canning Workers Union, was raided four times in four days by the Ciskei Security Police while he was away on union business. Norushe wisely decided to leave the Ciskei

but was detained in August by the South African Security Police, who turned him over to the Ciskei Security Police.

- Major General Charles Sebe, then the head of the Ciskei Security Police, told the wives of striking Wilson-Rowntree workers that he had detained their husbands on the basis of a list provided by the company management.
- The Ciskeian police arrested 205 black trade unionists from SAAWU, the African Food and Canning Workers Union and the General Workers Union as they were returning from a meeting in East London on September 5, 1981. They were held under Proclamation R252, which provides for three months detention without trial.

Ironically the repression seems to have backfired. SAAWU has reported an unprecedented growth in membership. One East London company recently fired SAAWU workers and replaced them with workers recruited in the Ciskei. Twenty two of the thirty one newly recruited workers turned out to be SAAWU members and the rest quickly joined.

Other bantustans may soon be tempted to follow the Ciskei's example. Already another "homeland" government, Bophuthatswana, has introduced legislation to ban South African unions from operating in their territory. This would effectively outlaw the black unions in Bophuthatswana.

Arrests, Detention, and Torture

Under South African security laws, opponents of government policy can be arrested and detained indefinitely without any charges being laid against them.

Between April 1981 and April 1983, at least 400 trade unionists and workers were detained, including 30 union organizers and officials. But the numbers alone don't tell the story. Details of what has happened to specific people at the hands of the South African police throw more light on the repression faced by black unions.

Neil Aggett

On February 5, 1982 Neil Aggett, a white organizer for the predominantly black African Food and Canning Workers Union, was found hanged to death in his cell in security police headquarters in Johannesburg after 70 days in detention.

He was driven to suicide by the security police through brutal interrogation methods that included electro-shock, beatings, sleep deprivation and 62 hours of non-stop questioning. At the end of this Aggett was a broken man, described by fellow prisoners as looking like a "zombie".

On January 18 Aggett complained to a visiting magistrate that he had been assaulted by his interrogators on January 4 and that his back and left ribs had been injured. On February 4, the day before he died, Aggett signed an affidavit complaining of additional beatings, sleep deprivation, and being blindfolded, handcuffed behind his back, and given electro-shocks through the handcuffs. His testicles were squeezed and other prisoners reported that he couldn't walk straight.

Towards the end of January, Aggett was

taken daily to the interrogation room and just prior to his death was there from Friday morning until Sunday. Aret van Heerden who occupied the cell opposite Aggett's described a brief encounter after that: "He made a gesture with his hands, as though snapping a twig, and I heard him whisper, 'I've broken.'"

Thozamile Gqweta

Thozamile Gqweta, the President of the South African Allied Workers Union has been jailed eight times in the past three years but has never been brought to trial. In September 1983 he went into hiding when many SAAWU officials were again detained. His worst experience in detention came at the hands of the security police from December 1981 until February 1982. He was made to strip naked and stand on a trunk, so that he could be handcuffed to the bars on a window. The trunk was removed and he was left dangling. Then he was swung like a pendulum and beaten. This went on virtually every day for three months.

Finally he suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be admitted to the psychiatric unit of a Johannesburg hospital. His brother Robert who was allowed to visit him in the hospital was shocked by his appearance, and said he was "unrecognizable".

The attacks did not stop there. Gqweta's mother and uncle were burned to death on November 1, 1981. They were trapped in a house whose doors had been wired shut from the outside. His fiancée, Dilisia Roxiso, was the only person killed when police fired into a crowd of 3,000 trade unionists returning from the funeral of Gqweta's mother and uncle.

Oscar Mpetha

Oscar Mpetha, the 74 year-old National Organizer of the African Food and Canning Workers Union, is one of the few black trade unionists who has actually been brought to trial. He was convicted and sentenced to 5 years in prison under the Terrorism Act of inciting a crowd of young people to anti-white violence on what *The New York Times* called "testimony that has been notable for its inconsistencies."

The state contended that Mpetha whipped a crowd of young people to attack whites and that two white motorists were killed in the riot that followed. The prosecution case was based on the testimony of black youths held in detention until they testified. One of the witnesses, who was 15 at the time of the disturbances, testified that he had told the police whatever they wanted to hear so they would stop questioning him.

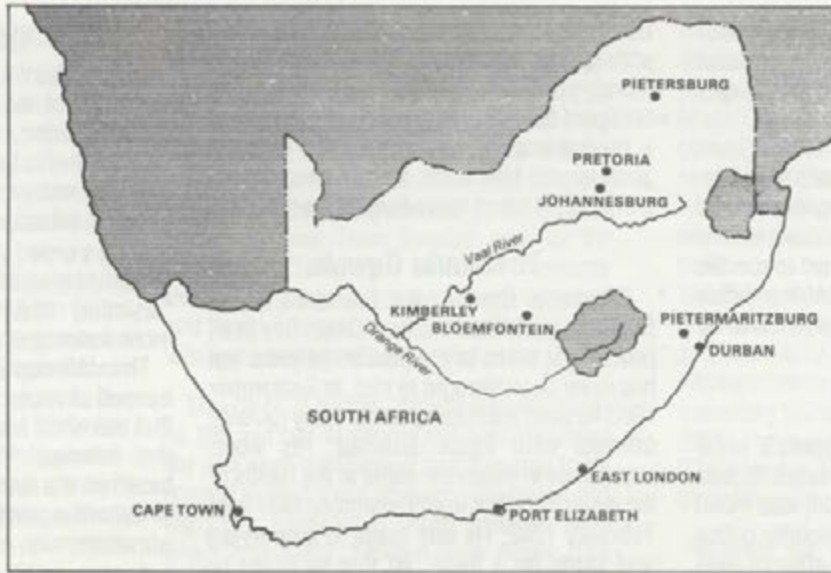
Mpetha was held without bail throughout the three year trial. Despite his advanced age, and the fact that he suffers from diabetes, which later forced the amputation of his left leg, Mpetha was forced to sit through portions of the trial shackled with leg irons.

Aggett, Gqweta, Roxiso, Mpetha are only a few of the trade unionists constantly imprisoned, tortured, or even killed in South Africa. In August and September 1983 the South African police detained leaders of the South African Mineworkers Union, Natal Leather and Allied Workers Union, and the General and Allied Workers Union. These cases clearly show the enormous courage required of those who dare to organize black workers in apartheid South Africa.

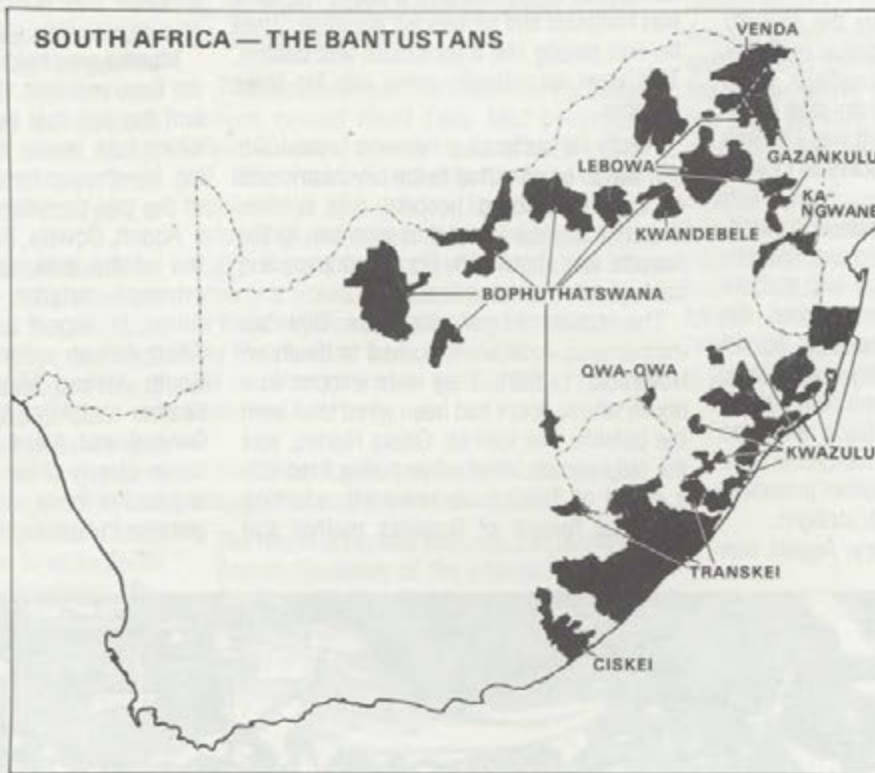


10,000 mourners of Neil Aggett in an illegal procession through the white suburbs of Johannesburg on Feb. 13, 1982

SOUTH AFRICA — MAIN TOWNS



SOUTH AFRICA — THE BANTUSTANS



Sandy Boyer, *Writer*

Peter Davis, *Editor*

Lynn Goodwin, *Design*

**The Africa Fund, Frank Montero, *Chairman*, 198 Broadway, NY, NY 10038
DC 37, Victor Gotbaum, *Executive Director*, 125 Barclay St., NY, NY 10007**