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Solidarity Forever

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Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Delegates from labor unions in twenty African nations held a conference here in Dakar last month that resulted in the creation of a pan-African union organization, the African Trade Union Confederation. It is the second such organization to be born within a year; the first, the All-African Trade Union Federation, was formed last May in Casablanca. In the Senegalese press the Dakar conference was hailed as a great success for the nation; in Ghana, which sponsored and largely financed the Casablanca federation, the Dakar meeting was denounced as a "neocolonialist plot".

Like most conferences, this one ended in a flood of self-congratulation, capped, improbably enough, with the singing of the American union song "Solidarity Forever" (led by a Liberian delegate). The refrain of the song, "For the union makes us strong", provides an ironic theme for an examination of the present situation of African unions, primarily here in Senegal - an ironic theme because political independence seems to have brought the unions not strength but weakness, not wider but narrower horizons.

West Africa, with its agricultural economy and a high proportion of migrant labor, is hardly the place you would look for a strong trade union movement. Senegal is the most industrialized of the ex-French colonies, and it has only 110,000 year-around wage earners in a population of over 3,000,000. Yet unions mushroomed in the last decade of colonial rule, and were able to stage major strikes. (The statistics on union membership from different sources vary wildly: most are based on union claims, and there is no accepted definition of union membership.) The unions grew at the same time as the nationalist movement, and under the same leadership: that of the city-dwelling educated elite. Union demands for job opportunities for Africans and for equality of pay with European employees were closely related to nationalist demands for political equality and then independence. In both cases, the opponent was the European Presence, and in that evening of empire the European Presence was in full retreat. And, in the French colonies, the unions benefitted from special economic circumstances. (This point is brought out in Elliot Berg's essay in "Labor and Economic Development".) With industries producing for export to a protected French market, and with government employees paid by France, there was comparatively little direct causal relation between wages and prices, so that strikes could win

increases in real wages. Since a challenge to the French was a patriotic gesture, "we would call a strike for anything or nothing", the Senegalese unionist Alassane Sow recalls.

Independence changed all that. The French are no longer the state, and now the sword of patriotism can be turned against the unions. The salaries of government employees are paid by the African state; higher wages in industry make African exports less competitive or less profitable to the nation. Governments attempting the rapid expansion of their economies must, inexorably, raise the capital they need by holding down real wages. With politics and unionism already intermingled, and with a general shortage of experienced leadership, many union leaders are now holding political office and carrying out government policies. (The prime example is Sekou Touré of Guinea.) Leaders as dissimilar as Senghor of Senegal and Touré himself have stated the unions' responsibilities, as they see them, in strikingly similar terms. According to Senghor, the union leaders must "aid the political leaders in carrying out their program"; according to Touré, the union leader must represent, not the working class in the state, but the state in the working class. Both men argue that Africa does not have social classes in the European sense - a useful if dubious theory. Senghor contrasts class inequality in Europe with, in Africa, "inequality created, after the (European) conquest, by political domination."

In both Senegal and Guinea, the unions have been defeated in clashes with the governments. The Senegalese government broke a strike of its own employees in late 1959 (when the nation was self-governing though not fully independent) on the grounds that it could not afford a raise; some of the strikers who were fired are still out of work. In November, 1961, the Guinea teachers' union opposed the government's policy on pay and working conditions; the union's leaders were sentenced to terms up to ten years and are now threatened with execution. Both governments saw in what happened attempts to overthrow the state in the interests of foreign powers. (Touré implicated both the Russians and the French.) A fragile new government seems bound to consider a strike as a threat to its existence.

Bowing perhaps to the inevitable, the Senegalese unionists now say the strike is "a weapon to be laid aside". What they demand in return, they say, is to be consulted by the government about decisions affecting labor - a "permanent dialogue" is the current catchphrase. Union representatives sit on the state commissions that deal with industry and social welfare. When asked for evidence that the "permanent dialogue" is more than a one-way conversation with themselves on the listening end, they point to the 10 percent increase last July in the minimum wage (bringing it to 44 francs, or 18 cents, an hour). The union leaders claim they suc-

cessfully demanded the increase after the deputies in the National Assembly, who get \$400 a month for a part-time job, had voted themselves a raise. Outside the union hall the opinion one hears is that the wage increase would probably have been granted without the union protest, since the deputies' raise was widely resented in the ruling elite.

What will the union leaders do - and what can they do - if the government turns them down on a major issue? "Strike," they say, but whether they would is open to question. So is the degree of support they would get from their membership. The Union Generale des Travaillleurs Senegalais, an alliance of all except the Roman Catholic-sponsored unions, claims 95,000 "members" among the 110,000 wage-earners. The Union says, rather vaguely, that "maybe half" of the claimed members pay dues; outside the Union the usual estimate of dues-payers is around 5,000. The explanation the Union gives of the low proportion of dues-payers is that the workers cannot afford the 600 francs (\$2.45), but there is more to it than that: the Sunday afternoon fights are packed with working-class types at 400 francs a seat. There is, in any case, no outward sign of pressure from below on the leadership. And the leaders' allegiance is clearly to the government and the ruling political party, the Union Progressiste Senegalaise, to which most of them belong. The union leaders were born into the educated elite, not the working class, and most of them are career government employes who are allowed (following the French custom) to spend full time at the union while drawing a government salary. So the unions seem to be little more than an arm of the state, a continuation of politics by other means. But who will lead the discontented in a future in which felt needs seem certain to increase much faster than the standard of living?

Against this background, there was an air of irrelevance about the Dakar conference of union leaders. For this was primarily a political meeting. No common union ideology binds together either the Dakar unions or their rivals in Casablanca; the unions simply follow their governments, which are divided over international and "cold war" issues. The only overt issue between the two union groups is that of international affiliation. The Casablanca group forbids its members to join any non-African international, a provision aimed at the Western-led International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. This rule was rejected by the Dakar unions, many of which, as Abdoulaye Ba of Senegal pointed out, "cannot afford the luxury of complete financial autonomy". The issue, in any case, is not important enough to account for the division between the two union federations.

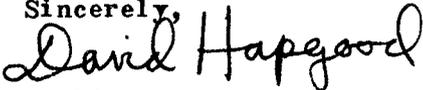
There was, to be sure, some talk of union questions. The charter of the new organization proclaims that it is "independent of all governments, all political parties", and that it will not interfere

in the internal affairs of any nation, except in the case of "flagrant violation of trade union rights". One of these rights, as stated in the charter, is the right to strike - and it will be interesting to see whether the international does anything about this when the issue arises. Speakers rang the changes on the idea of union independence, but their credentials at times were suspect: among them were the Liberian delegate (who is the son of President Tubman) and a Senegalese delegate (whose speech was written, according to a local journalist, by a minister in the government). Rather incongruously, the Tunisians and the Senegalese tried to insert in the charter a provision aimed at forcing all unions within each nation to merge. This was blocked by a group of Catholic unions that are in the minority in their nations.

All this is not intended to condemn the unionists on the grounds of irrelevance and inconsistency, for what political meeting could pass that test? The point is that the main issue - the role of labor and labor unions in independent Africa - was not examined, either in the conference itself or in corridor conversation (at least, not in any that I heard). The principles stated in the charter would seem to apply to Europe rather than to Africa; and certainly the quarrels between Catholic and non-Catholic unions are European in origin. In the frequent evocations of the elusive ideal of African unity, there seemed to be a nostalgia for the simpler issues of the past. Listen to this delegate:

"How easy it seemed to achieve African unity then, when almost the whole continent was under colonial rule!... We felt we were already united in our common suffering and aspirations... Then, suddenly, independence drew near... Do you remember, dear friends, the comradeship of those days?... Then independence came for many of us... Rare are such moments of supreme joy. Then, little by little, but more and more certainly, came cruel disappointment... In so many cases, general principles became rigid ideologies, and whoever did not accept these ideologies was denounced, first as a fool, then as acting in bad faith, and finally as a traitor..."

Appropriately, the speaker, A.R. Kithima, was from the ex-Belgian Congo.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood