

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 37
African Trade Union

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P.O. Box 464,
Ndola, Northern Rhodesia
February 11, 1955

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Take two Africans, one five feet four inches tall and chubby, the other five feet ten inches tall and thin. Dress the short, chubby one in a light blue suit two sizes too large for him and the tall, thin one in a dark blue pin-striped suit missing buttons and coming apart at the seams. Put a pair of two-toned, perforated tan shoes on the short fellow and top off his smooth, round face with a bowler hat. Give the tall fellow a snap-brimmed pork-pie hat and a penchant for chain smoking. Name the short one Matthew Deluxe Nkolomo and the tall one Lawrence O. Katilungu. When you're finished, you'll find you have two of the most powerful men in the Central African Federation; the general secretary and president respectively of the Northern Rhodesian African Mineworkers' Trade Union.

Several times, in newsletters from South Africa, I speculated on the effectiveness of a strike by organized African laborers. There is no need to speculate here in Northern Rhodesia. For the past six weeks Katilungu and Nkolomo have been leading a strike of the African Mineworkers' Union at five of the big six copper mines. Production at these mines has been able to continue on a skeleton basis, but Sir Roy Welensky, former Northern Rhodesian Minister of Labor,¹ has estimated that the strike is costing the Federation about \$131,600 a day in taxes payable to the Federal and Territorial governments. This is a lot of money, not to mention the \$2,155,000 the mining companies are losing in average weekly profits. Copper is the financial backbone of the Federation. With that backbone dislocated, the economic outlook of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland is bleak.

The power to cripple the economy of the Federation is a potent weapon. To a student of Africa it is important to know (a) How was that weapon forged? (b) Who are the men wielding the weapon? (c) How is the weapon being wielded?

The African trade unions are the brain-children of that bogey man of Northern Rhodesian European settlers, the Colonial Office in London. And, what's even worse, the liberal Colonial Office as it existed under the British Labor Government in 1947. To the horror and chagrin of the settlers and the powers-that-were in the mining companies, the Colonial Office sent, in 1947, a red-headed Scottish trade unionist named W. M. Comrie to Northern Rhodesia. His job: assist union-minded Africans to organize.

I talked to Comrie in his Kitwe office. He is still red-headed, still speaks with a thick Scottish burr. He looks suave and self-possessed. He wears well-tailored clothes and a neat moustache which sits well on his bland, unworried face. In short, he looks like anything but a trade unionist--which is only logical since he retired from union activity a few years ago to become owner-manager of a brick works and director of the Rhodesia African Assurance and Provident Corporation, Ltd., an insurance company cum building and loan society.

1. Now Federal Minister of Transport, Communications and Posts and heir-apparent to Sir Godfrey Huggins as Prime Minister of the Central African Federation.

I asked him about his years as an African trade union organizer. Was it hard, I asked, to get the unions under way?

"The Africans," he answered, "were surprisingly anxious to have trade unions. My job was therefore made simple--I merely held meetings with men like Katilungu, who was then a miner at the Nkana Mine here at Kitwe, and explained the principles of trade unionism. I suggested ways and means of organizing, answered questions through my staff interpreter, Nkolomo, and suggested financial arrangements. At first, things went slowly, on an individual mine basis. But in the relatively short period of two years the individual unions had grown strong on the mines and, in 1949, amalgamated--or federated, if you prefer--into the African Mineworkers' Union with about 19,000 members.¹

"There was a howl from the companies, naturally. They claimed that the unions had had too easy a time of it and should be forced to fight their way up as the unions did in England. They said their boss boys' committees and tribal representatives were just as effective and much, much easier to handle. But the Government seemed pleased at the rapid advancement and I kept on with my work. I only wish the other unions had been as easy to get started."

Why, I said, were the miners easier to organize?

"It's hard to say. For one thing, it's easier to organize a large body of men all doing the same type of work because it's not hard for them to see their potential collective strength. A small group of men--say the African shop assistants--have the feeling that if they ever decided to strike they could be replaced in half an hour. Another thing, the African miners had the European miners to copy. And you could always stir up a meeting by reminding the Africans of the shootings during the strikes of 1935 and 1940. Whatever the reason, the miners got stuck in right from the start."

From these beginnings the history of the union is normal--up to a point. In 1950, the companies agreed to deduct the Union's dues of six pence (6 ϕ) from the miners' wages. Each year the Union made demands for wage increases and wage increases were granted, sometimes with short strikes, sometimes without. There never was a particularly bitter strike since the companies never seemed to stand firm in turning down a wage increase. The moderate demands were probably the reason for this--the union would ask for a 36-cent-a-shift increase² and would settle for 22 cents. The paid membership of the union increased to 25,000 by 1953--and the union claimed that, all together, there were 39,000 Union members counting those temporarily inactive.³

As the Union grew in strength and stature, the need for Comrie's guiding hand grew less until, in 1951, he resigned his post with the Government and began his current career. He has not cut himself off from the Union completely, however. At the last audit, the \pounds 10,000 (\$28,000) in the Union's treasury just happened to be invested in Comrie's insurance and building and loan company. And it is not coincidental that the head offices of the Union are in a building on Comrie's property with a door communicating between Comrie's office and that of Katilungu.

1. Out of a total labor force of 37,475.

2. The miners were getting, in 1950, approximately \$10.00 a month in wages.

3. Out of a total African labor force of 46,587. European miners in 1953 numbered 6,784, making the ratio 6.78:1.

When Comrie stepped out, it left three men: Nkolomo, Katilungu and Robinson Puta, the vice president of the Union. It is generally accepted that Katilungu, the president, is a moderate. He, like most African trade union leaders, is a politician, but instead of the staunchly nationalistic African National Congress, he airs his political views in the African Representative Council, the Government-approved body which elects the African members of the Federation Parliament and the Northern Rhodesian Legislative Council. He is a middle-aged man who talks seriously and calmly about his problems and the problems of his Union.

Nkolomo and Puta, on the other hand, are firebrands. Comrie even went so far as to describe 26-year-old Nkolomo as "turned Communist" since a recent trip to England from which he returned with his very unCommunist bowler hat and a tightly rolled umbrella. He wears his bowler at a jaunty angle, puffs out his vest like a bantam cock and allows no one, not even Katilungu, to interrupt or contradict when he is delivering his opinions on the bloodthirstiness of the mining companies. He is a member of the African National Congress of which Puta, who I was unable to meet, is vice president.

The strong link between Puta and Nkolomo and the equality-advocating African Congress may explain the change that has come over the African Mineworkers' Union since 1953. It certainly explains the rivalry and jealousy that exists between the team of Nkolomo and Puta and Union president Katilungu. There has never been any love lost between the African National Congress and the African Representative Council.

The change I refer to is a change in objectives and tactics. It began in mid-1953 when the leaders of the Union decided to raise the monthly dues from sixpence to two shillings and sixpence (35¢). At this the mining companies, represented by the Chamber of Mines, balked. Apparently they had visions of a strong Union made unbearably potent by a fivefold increase in income. One thing was sure--they weren't going to help the Unions by collecting this two and six from the African miners' pay checks. They informed the Union that if the proposed increase was carried out, the mines would stop collecting dues. The Union held fast to its increase, the companies held fast to their threat, and the collection of dues became the responsibility of the Union. No figures are available, but it is generally assumed that many Union members, not anxious to pay the increased dues, took this opportunity to stop paying dues altogether, causing Union membership to drop.

Between October, 1953, and mid-1954 a change took place in the leadership of the African Mineworkers' Union. It is impossible for an outsider to say how or when it happened, but sometime during that period control of the Union moved from Katilungu, the moderate, to Nkolomo, the hothead, just returned from England and a left-wing indoctrination. This switch did not become apparent until the Union made its annual demand for an increase in wages to the Chamber of Mines. The demand came as something of a shock. Instead of the usual two shillings eight pence, the Union was asking for an increase of 10 shillings eight pence per shift paid (a) to Union members only and (b) on a weekly instead of a monthly basis. The Chamber of Mines couldn't believe its ears.

It was obvious that this demand was not just a normal annual request for an increase in wages. The sum asked for would be enough to raise the lowest-paid laborer in the mines to a total wage of £240 (\$672) a year--enough to put him, if he cared to become a British subject, on the common voters' roll. The Union said the demand was made in order to raise the poorest African miner to somewhere

to within shouting distance of the European standard of living. In other words, it was an anti-color bar demand rather than a demand for a normal wage increase. The demand that the increase be given to Union members only is obviously aimed at increasing Union membership, although it is patently ridiculous for an employer to consider paying two wage rates for the same job. Weekly pay would eventually mean a complete reorganization of the wage payment scheme of the entire Federation-- as things stand now, everyone, European and African, is paid by the month. The entire proposal was an Nkolomo-African National Congress demand rather than a Katilungu-African Mineworkers' Union suggestion for negotiation.

The demand went through normal channels--first, each branch of the Union presented it to the African personnel manager at each mine. The personnel manager referred it to the general manager. The general managers of all the mines then met with the Union's leaders and turned it down. At this point the demand officially became a labor dispute and went to compulsory conciliation. When conciliation failed, the next step should have been negotiation with a Government-appointed arbitrator empowered to hand down a decision.

The Chamber of Mines, however, refused to go to arbitration as long as the demands for pay on a weekly basis and the increase only to Union members remained on the agenda. The result was a stalemate and, inevitably, a strike. The strike, which is still going on, has been remarkable for the peaceful atmosphere in which it has been conducted and the inflexibility on both sides. It has lasted longer than any previous dispute.

The conclusion is easily drawn that the mining companies are out to smash or seriously weaken the power of the Union. For one thing, it has been pointed out to me time and again, by the Northern Rhodesian Commissioner of Labor (C. E. Cousins), by Sir Roy Welensky, by the Kitwe District Labor Commissioner (D. Hunt), by Comrie and by Katilungu, that the companies could have gone safely to arbitration. It is certain that any arbitrator would have thrown out the demands for a weekly wage and payment of the increase to Union members only and would have given an award only on the question of the wage increase. By law, the Union would be forced to accept the decision.

Instead, the companies refused to negotiate, obviously eager to bring the situation to a head and encourage a showdown. They went even farther. In mid-January, during the third week of the strike, the companies announced that every striker who did not return to work on or before January 28 would be fired. The companies were within their legal rights in doing this--although the strike had come about legally, the fact remained that the strikers had broken their contracts (based on a term of 30 shifts) and were liable to be discharged.

January 28 has come and gone and the strikers have been fired, although they are still living in the mine housing and have refused to draw the pay coming to them. Presumably the companies plan to hire new labor in place of the discharged strikers and, as the strikers get hungry, rehire them at the wage rates paid to beginners. They have told the Kitwe Labor Commissioner that they expect the Union members who were promised 10 shillings eight pence to turn on their leaders when they find they have lost pension benefits, seniority, wage increases and their jobs. They also plan to reduce their Native labor force, rehiring only a limited number of strikers and utilizing them better than has been done in the past.

There are stumbling blocks in the way of this plan. The strikers have been informed by their leaders that they are not fired until they draw their final pay and, since they are still occupying the mine housing, the mining companies cannot house any new labor they employ. The strikers are not getting hungry; the combination of their normally low standard of living, the ripening of vegetable gardens, the stockpiling of food before the strike, the natural tendency of one African to feed his neighbor, the financial resources of the Union and aid from overseas is a strong bulwark against the kind of hunger that could drive them back to work.

I got the feeling, when I talked to Nkolomo and Katilungu, that the mining companies' stubbornness had come as a surprise. Apparently the fact that the Chamber of Mines, which represents the companies in negotiations, had given in so easily in the past had conditioned Nkolomo and Katilungu to believe that all they had to do was knock, and it would be opened unto them; ask, and they would receive.

I wondered whether Nkolomo and Katilungu realized the seriousness of their position. This question was soon answered, although when I talked to the two of them outside the District headquarters (Boma) at Kitwe, Nkolomo persisted in treating all my questions with insolence, strutting about and adjusting his bowler to the obvious admiration of the Africans standing about. When he left, however, to go into court to answer a charge of reckless driving and failing to stop at a stop sign, Katilungu took over the conversation. In very serious tones he said he realized that the mining companies were out to break the Union--and that he was just as determined to see that the Union remained solidly in support of the strike.

He outlined his tactics as follows: The Union does not admit that the companies had the legal right to fire the strikers; therefore, the strikers are perfectly justified in remaining in the mine housing preventing the hiring of new labor. The companies must soon admit that the production figures they claim daily (as high as 58 per cent of normal production) are not true figures--the Union has watched the dumping of slag and has calculated that copper production is about 5 per cent of normal. Strikers have written to their families in rural Northern Rhodesia and Tanganyika, the source of mine labor, telling them to discourage anyone who is thinking of going to the mines. Since the strikers, with their low standard of living, can hold out for a long time, the Government and the companies must soon seek a way of ending the strike if the loss of tax income and profits is to end. In effect, Katilungu is counting on the companies' desire for profits being stronger than their desire to break the Union--while the companies are counting on the strikers' hunger being greater than their desire to support the Union.

I asked Katilungu whether, if the strike failed, the members of the Union would lose faith in trade unionism. In answer, he told a little story: "A hunter takes his shotgun into the bush to look for game. All day he looks, but he finds nothing. There is not even a squirrel or a dagga (small buck) for him to shoot and when the sun goes down he must return to his hut with nothing to eat. What should that man do? Should he take his shotgun and smash it against a stone because it produced nothing that day? Or should he take his shotgun home, oil it, clean it, load it, in hope that perhaps tomorrow or the next day he will find game?" Katilungu smiled. "All over the Copperbelt there are Union officers who tell that story and other stories like it to the men who are striking. They are not so uncivilized that they do not understand the Union is like a shotgun in their hands--that it is foolish to abandon the Union because one time it is not successful."

The result of the strike will no doubt be a compromise, although there is no

such end in sight as yet. The Union will probably get a small increase although the other demands cannot help but be dropped. Nkolomo should realize (though after meeting him I doubt that he will) that in spite of the aims of the African National Congress and the advice of his liberal British friends demands such as a 10 shilling eight pence increase for Union members only are better left alone when dealing with practical labor-management issues.

The companies will be able to reorganize and shrink their labor force along more efficient lines and will have taught the Union that, when the occasion calls for it, they can stand firm. Both sides should have learned to respect the other a bit more--especially in regard to tenacity. It has been a shock, I gathered from a conversation I had with Keith Acutt, Rhodesian managing director of the Anglo-American Corporation, for the mining companies to learn that the African Mineworkers' Union is a tightly organized group with amazingly European ways of thinking along trade union lines.

It would come as more of a shock in South Africa where there are several laws (Industrial Conciliation Act, Native Labor (Settlement of Disputes) Act, Riotous Assemblies Act, Suppression of Communism Act) which state, in several ways, that African trade unions are not to be organized, recognized or considered at all. When I mentioned this apparent repression to the Afrikaner Nationalist theorists at the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) at Stellenbosch, they said, with complete conviction, that Natives in Central and South Africa are not ready for trade unionism. They went on to say that trade unions, which cut across tribal lines, would not be welcomed or supported by Natives. That the principles of collective bargaining would be foreign to Natives so recently down from the trees and would therefore be unassimilable. That the leaders of Native trade unions must, by nature, be irresponsible despots. And that I showed myself to be unusually ignorant of "Native affairs" to even make such a suggestion.

With such an attitude held so firmly south of the Limpopo, it is remarkable that African trade unions in Northern Rhodesia ever came into existence at all, even with Government encouragement. It leads one to believe that Native trade unions in South Africa would not prove such failures after all--that perhaps the only thing that stands in their way are South African statute books.

The situation in Northern Rhodesia seems to be healthy. Except for Nkolomo, the Northern Rhodesian African Mineworkers' Trade Union appears to be a reasonable organization, ably led and a credit to the Federation. Its very existence speaks more for partnership than 20 or 30 glibly delivered speeches from Sir Godfrey Huggins.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin