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## **“Works Committees and the Struggle for Industrial Citizenship in South Africa, 1973-1979”**

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### **A “Spontaneous” Upheaval: The Durban Strikes**

By 1970, half a million African workers labored in South Africa’s burgeoning manufacturing sector, which by then contributed more than a quarter of the country’s GDP, by some estimates more than mining and agriculture combined. As a labor system based on low wages, large inputs of unskilled work, and migratory labor, apartheid had proved well-suited to mining and agriculture. With the growth of secondary industry

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during the 1960s, requiring a more skilled, settled, productive, satisfied, and consuming labor force, the cheap labor system appeared to bump up against some limits at last.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing drove home this truth to South African manufacturers more than the mass strikes of African factory workers that spread through Natal province and beyond during the first three months of 1973, forcing a serious re-evaluation of apartheid industrial relations for the first time in two decades. From January 9th, the date of the first walkout by 1,500 Zulu workers at the Coronation Brick factory, until the end of March, there were 160 strikes, involving over 60,000 African (and Indian) workers. These strikes broke out across multiple sectors in the Durban area's diverse industrial infrastructure, concentrated at first in clusters on the outskirts of the city--22 in iron, steel, and metal shops, 20 in textiles, 7 in clothing, 6 in cement. Most of these walkouts were of short duration, more than half of them lasting for only two days or less. The strikes came in concentrated waves, sporadic large ones involving thousands of workers interspersed with many smaller ones, in part because they occurred in dense industrial districts like Pinetown, New Germany, or Hammarisdale in which job actions could "spread by imitation" as workers in one factory observed others marching down the street or massing outside of factory gates. By the end of March the strikes tapered off, but did not entirely dissipate. By the time 1973 came to an end, nearly 100,000 African workers had engaged in industrial actions—more than twice the number that had struck over the entire past decade combined.<sup>3</sup>

These strikes, apparently spontaneous and leaderless, were at the time poorly understood. "The beginnings of most of the strikes are shrouded in mystery," concluded the most sympathetic contemporaneous study of the upheaval, *The Durban Strikes, 1973* "What is clear is that there was no organised body such as a trade union which called for a strike to occur at a particular time over particular demands." In most instances, workers simply downed tools, or massed at the factory gates before work, and demanded to meet *en masse* with management to discuss their grievances—low wages, in particular--refusing

<sup>2</sup> *Management Responsibility and African Employment in SA: Report of a Panel Investigation*, Ravan, 1973, p. 17; Feinstein, p. 144; Lipton, pp. 138-82, 380.

<sup>3</sup> IIE, pp. 9-38, 98-99(quote); SAIRR, "A View of the 1973 Strikes." RR151/73, Appendix A for a list of strikes and dates; *A Survey of Race Relations, 1973*, 284-86; MacShae, *Power*, p. 20



to put forth any recognized leaders, lest they be subject to dismissal and arrest.<sup>4</sup> The most thorough reckoning of the causes of the strikes, *The Durban Strikes* was a methodical investigative report prepared by the left-leaning Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) in 1974, and reprinted several times over the next few years.<sup>5</sup> “Designed and initiated” by radical University of Natal philosopher, Rick Turner, the IIE report was officially penned by Foszia Fisher (Turner’s wife) and Gerhard Maré of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). Turner himself, who had a profound influence on a generation of radical students and labor-oriented intellectuals in Durban during the 1970s, and befriended Steve Biko as well, was banned in February 1973, at the height of the strike wave. Many of the social scientists and activists associated with the IIE report (and subsequently with another IIE labour project, the invaluable *South African Labour Bulletin*), including Fisher and Maré, sociologist Eddie Webster, Karel Tip, Lawrence Schlemmer, Halton Cheadle, Dudley Horner, David Davis, and David Hemson, among others--developed their labor politics in this milieu.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Durban Strikes*,

<sup>5</sup> Oddly enough, for a government inclined to appoint commissions of inquiry into virtually any kind of disturbance or issue, there was no ever an official inquiry conducted by the state into the strike wave.

<sup>6</sup> *The Durban Strikes*, 3<sup>rd</sup> printing (1977), acknowledgements. For more on Turner and the “Durban Moment” he helped foster, see Teresa Barnes, Gail M Gerhart, Thomas G Karis, Antony J Levine and Nimrod Mkele, *From Protest to Challenge: Political Profiles, 1964-1990*, volume 7. Indiana University Press and University of South Africa Press (forthcoming), <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/turner-r.htm>>, accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008; Eddie Webster, “The Impact of Intellectuals on the Labour Movement,” *Transformation* 18(1992):88-91; A. Nash, “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa,” *CSSASME*, 19(1999); T. Fluxman and P. Vale, “Re-Reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa,” *International Relations* 18(2):173-89; Grace Davie, “Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973,” *JSAS* 33(June 2007): 401-420, pp. 404-06; R. Turner, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (Ravan, 1980), especially Tony Morphet’s valuable introduction. For a brief description of this milieu, and its long-term impact on South African labor studies, see Eddie Webster, “South African Labour Studies in a Global Perspective, 1973-2003,” *LCS* 37(2004): 258-82. Turner’s main theoretical statement of his politics can be found in *Eye of the Needle*, first published in 1972, but it is a fair bet that many of the views expressed in *The Durban Strikes* had his stamp on them. The inclusion in the bibliography of Sartre’s *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, if nothing else, was a sure tip-off, since Turner had written a thesis on Sartre as a student in Paris during the 1960s. In the third edition of *The Durban Strikes* (1977), Gerhard Maré quite cleverly acknowledged the influence of Turner, Hemson, and Cheadle, all of whom by then were banned (see *Dissent: The NUSAS Newsletter*, March-April 1974), by naming them as original contributors only to lament that they “can no longer be associated with this publication.” See also Turner’s article, published under Maré’s name, Gerry Maré, “The East London Strikes,” *SALB* 1(August 1974):26-32. Webster as well credits Turner with initiating *The Durban Strikes*,





Drawing heavily on interviews with workers and employers, *The Durban Strikes* serves as both an excellent documentary record of the events themselves and as an example of the thinking of the above-ground left at the time and the single best exposition of the political thought of Turner. Yet, despite its many strengths and inherent interest as a document, naturally enough *The Durban Strikes* lacks historical perspective. The Soweto uprising, the legal recognition of African trade unions by the state, the formation of new trade union federations of black workers the collapse of apartheid—all these events were still down the road when the study of the strikes was produced. Remarkably, to this day *The Durban Strikes* remains the only in-depth study of South Africa's 1973 labor upheavals, even though the Durban strikes are now widely acknowledged as an absolutely central part of the narrative of the liberation of South Africa from apartheid—indeed, in many ways they can be seen as the initial spark that lit the fuse.

Certainly the upheaval in 1973 should be posited as the starting point for the reawakening of the black working class in South Africa, and as such can be seen as leading to the eventual recognition of black trade union rights by the state and employers less than a decade later in the Wiehahn “reforms”, the formation of FOSATU in 1979 and of COSATU in 1985, the central place of the trade union movement in the final throes of the liberation struggle after that, and in the eventual governing “Triple Alliance” with the ANC and the SACP in a democratic South Africa. Nevertheless, the relationship between the initial, tentative reforms implemented by employers and the state in direct response to the strikes in 1973 and the eventual unshackling of the union movement still remain somewhat opaque.

In large part this is because most accounts of the minor concessions made to black workers by employers and the state in the form of a revised Labour Relations Act in 1973 fall into two opposing camps. The “liberal” school, prone to imagining that far-sighted and open-minded businessmen (and multinationals) pressed the apartheid state to reform itself internally, insists that employers seeking industrial stability led the way to the recognition of black trade union rights and a full-fledged collective bargaining regime.

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“the first sociological study of the new type of industrial worker..., setting a new research agenda for labour studies in South Africa,” “South African Labour Studies in a Global Perspective,” 260. For an interesting profile of David Hemson at the time see “New Style Union Man,” *Financial Mail*, March 23, 1973, p. 1075.



Their critics and antagonists, however, tend to dismiss the changes in industrial relations that followed the strikes as cosmetic at best, or as repression by accommodation at worst. It is certainly the case [as Part I of this paper, not reproduced here, argues at length] that in order to postpone the necessity of reckoning with an independently organized black working class as long as possible (if they accepted its inevitability at all), in the wake of the 1973 strikes both the apartheid state and industrial employers sought to shore up the ersatz system of plant-specific “works committees” that had represented the one allowance made to the idea of African workers’ industrial organization in South African labor law. The rapid expansion of this committee system in the mid-1970s —akin, I would say, to the company unionism vigorously promoted by employers in the U.S. during the first years of the New Deal, prior to the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935—was embraced by managers and the apartheid state alike as an obstacle, even an alternative to, genuinely independent black trade unionism.

As observers at the time pointed out, however, the few existing works committees in 1973 (less than two dozen in Durban) had done nothing to enhance “communication” or impede the strikes, as “these unofficial committees were tightly controlled by management, and in most cases were not allowed to discuss the subject of wages. During the strikes the works’ committees proved to be entirely ineffective as channels of communication and as negotiating agents. When the workers had come out on strike the elected representatives faded away.” Even some employers seemed to agree. C.F. Heilmann, managing director of Metal Box Co., told the National Development and Management Foundation in August 1973, “even the most effective of Works Committees does not provide the answer to the need for real communication between employers and Black labour,” as the recent strikes had demonstrated. The committees “provided a means of talking with relatively small groups, whose leaders were impotent in the face of the much greater organization and its leaders” who had instigated the strike movement. “Industrial employers and management were talking to the wrong people,” he acknowledged ruefully.<sup>7</sup> But this was an unusual

<sup>7</sup> L. Douwes Dekker, D. Hemson, J.S. Kane-Berman, J. Lever, and L. Schlemmer, “Case Studies in African Labour Action in South Africa and Namibia (South West Africa),” in *The Development of An African*



view; as the SAIRR discovered when they surveyed employers in the wake of the strikes, “they seem to believe that they will be able to re-establish their customary total control of the work force by a few relatively minor concessions.”<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, much of the subsequent literature on the works and liaison committees established after 1973 reflects the essentially dismissive attitude held by many labour activists during the 1970s, who insisted (with some reason) that “works committees can only facilitate communication; they cannot give the workers any real power in the factory ...Employers want these committees because they believe that they can retain dominance over them, but to the extent that they can retain their dominance the committees play no useful role,” as the IIE study maintained at the time.<sup>9</sup>

I certainly have no intention of denying that the expansion of these committees in the wake of the strikes represented an *attempt* to defer African trade unionism. Nor would I discount their very real limitations or their inadequate role as an alternative to genuine trade unions, based as they were on “a naïve assumption of community of interest” in the workplace.<sup>10</sup> That said, it may be worth looking more closely at the debate around the emergence of the works and liaison committees after 1973, and the potential role they may

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*Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action*, ed. Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen (Toronto, 1975), 207-38, p. 24; NDMF, *Searchlight on the Urban Bantu Worker*, p. 17. For the failure of works committees see also Albert Wessels, Chairman of Veka Clothing, who told the *Financial Mail* “when the committee was really put to the test [during a strike in Veka plant in Charlestown], it was found to be completely out of touch with the workers”; *FM*, April 27, 1973, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Maré, “The Strikes in february 1973—Insights From a Research Project Just Completed,” in Dudley Horner, ed., “Labour Organisation and the African: Proceedings of a Workshop held by the Natal Reion of the SAIRR,” January 1975, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> *The Durban Strikes*, pp. 166-67; for a later dismissal of the works committees see Theodor Hanf, Heribert Weiland, and Gerda Vierdag, *South Africa: The Prospects of Peaceful Change* (Bloomington, 1981), 160-61.

<sup>10</sup> *The Durban Strikes*, p. 157. This was meant to be a general statement about the theory of industrial relations, not a specific critique of South African habits. The IIE steadfastly supported a “conflict” model of labor-management relations, and rejected what they saw as a “human relations” approach imported from the United States. For an examination of this assumption in the IIE report see Johan Maree, ““Seeing Strikes in Perspective,” *South African Labour Bulletin* 2(May-June 1976):91-109, pp. 105-06. See also L. Douwes Dekker, “Are Works Committees Trade Unions?” p. 10, and John Kane-Berman, in Dudley Horner, ed., “Labour Organisation and the African: Proceedings of a Workshop held by the Natal Region of the S.A. Institute of Race Relations,” March 7, 1974 (Johannesburg, 1975), pp. 43-44, for the “conflict of interest” model. For a superb analysis of the “human relations” model as imported into South African labor relations, see D. Hemson, “Trade Unionism and Resistance in South Africa,” paper prepared for the International department of the (British) Labour Party, Nov. 1977, Ruth First papers, 1/15/1/13, reel 34, ICS.





have played in stimulating African trade unionism, building shop-floor power among ordinary workers, and introducing the idea of negotiation and collective bargaining to workers at the plant level. As Johan Maree pointed out in his review of *The Durban Strikes*, “a workers’ movement only has strength if it has support at the grass-roots level,” and in the absence of recognized unions “such works committees can be important stepping stones in building up an African trade union.” In fact, the preface to the second edition of the IIE study admitted that given the persistent obstacles to independent trade unions and shop floor structures, “many workers clearly feel that they have more to gain from maintaining their own informal organizational structures and procedures than from taking the risk of formal trade union organization,” even though the authors themselves continued to reject works committees as a tactical possibility.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I explore the alternate possibility that black workers themselves actually found in these committees the possibility of building the new society within the shell of the old. Egged on by the government to increase black wages and eager themselves after 1973 to establish carefully controlled lines of “communication” with African workers, industrialists unwittingly opened up a Pandora’s box that eventually led to the flourishing of the black trade union movement and the proletarianization of the anti-apartheid struggle. Meanwhile, internal debates in the black trade union movement and among their allies about the merits of participating in the reformist committee structure foreshadowed future divisions between advocates of independent shop-floor power and those who regarded trade unions as political weapons in the nationalist struggle against apartheid in the wake of the Wiehahn reforms of 1980. In what follows, I examine the dynamic struggle over the nature and significance of the works committee system during the 1970s, and explore the possibilities and limits of such organizing tools in a small space of legality under conditions of intense repression.

## The Reformist Response to the Strikes

<sup>11</sup> Maree, “Strikes in Perspective,” pp. 107-08; IIE, preface.



In mid-February 1973, with no end to the strikes in sight, Labour Minister Marais Viljoen announced that he would begin drafting the new Bantu Labour Relations Regulations Amendment bill that would expand and strengthen the provisions for factory-based works committees. Although frankly designed to avoid legitimating African trade unions, the bill as proposed would at least empower the Department of Labour to establish works committees in a plant at the request of workers, *without consultation with the employer*. Secondly, in large factories, workers would be able to establish more than one works committee, and again at the behest of the workers, a plant-wide “coordinating works committee” could be established. Finally, in the absence of a works committee, as a last resort to establish and improve workplace “communication”, employers themselves could establish a “liaison committee”, which would now secure statutory recognition from the Department of Labour. (These were intended to replace the informal, “non-statutory” works committees that had been created in some plants prior to 1973). Of course, even with alleged legal protection against victimization, this remained a very far cry from the creation of shop-floor independence for the black working class. Nevertheless, as proposed, the bill offered African workers far more initiative than the state or employers had ever granted them before.<sup>12</sup>

As they consulted with Parliament and Minister Viljoen about the impending labour relations bill, however, manufacturers did their best to strip even from the works committees the possibility of providing black workers with an independent vehicle to express and channel their grievances. Their decisive influence on the final bill casts a good deal of doubt on the liberal shibboleth that employers consistently pressed for black trade union rights under apartheid. Like manufacturers elsewhere, South African employers proved reluctant to hand workers the means with which to build independent trade union structures that would engage in collective bargaining and challenge managerial control over the workplace.

<sup>12</sup> FM, Eeb. 23, 1973, p. 663; SAIRR, *Survey of race Relations*, 1973, pp. 276-81.





The powerful influence of these anti-union views became clear with the passage of the final “Bantu Labour Relations Regulations Amendment Bill” in mid-June 1973, with Viljoen continuing to reassure his Afrikaner nationalist constituency that this “is not the first step on the road to recognized African trade unions.” Indeed, largely at the behest of employers, the final bill did much to weaken even the potential independence of the expanded works committees. The initial draft bill presented to parliament emphasized the formation of works committees, elected entirely by workers, with liaison committees—a joint worker-management committee—as a last resort. But by the time the bill finally reached the floor, this relationship had been reversed, so that the prior existence (or establishment) of a liaison committee by employers precluded the establishment of a works committee in a factory. “There has been a decided shift in emphasis in the employer’s favour between the earlier [draft] and the later Bill,” remarked the South African Institute of Race Relations in their year end survey. In contrast to the works committees, consisting entirely of members elected from the shop floor, fully half the members of a liaison committee could be appointed by management, and the employer reserved the right to appoint the committee’s chairman.(286-87) Most significantly, now the controversial provision that had allowed the Department of Labour to hold an election for a works committee over the objections of an employer had been stripped from the bill; instead workers had to entreat their employer to help them elect and establish a works committee in their plant. “The objections to that from employers, however, were so strong that I felt on those ground I should withdraw it,” Viljoen confessed to Parliament, even while he assured legislators that “my department will continue...to get employers [and] Bantu workers to establish these works committees.”<sup>13</sup> As the SAIRR noted without irony in its analysis of the difference between the draft and final bills, “some observers believe that the liaison committee...gives the employer virtually complete control over the decision-making process on wages and working conditions.”

<sup>13</sup> *FM*, June 15, 1973, p. 999; *RR*, 1973, pp. 280-81, 286-87; *The Durban Strikes*, pp. 163, 181; Ryno Verster, see “Liaison Committees in the South African Industry: their Present Functioning and Constitution,” Department of Industrial Psychology, Univ. of OFS, December 1974, p. 86; Douwes-Dekker, “Are Works Committees Trade Unions,” p. 9; Hansard, June 11, 1973, col. 8776.



In his groundbreaking 1985 book on black metalworkers and the independent trade union movement, labour sociologist Eddie Webster, one of the original members of the IIE, argued that the works and liaison committee system established in the 1973 Act served to “pre-empt the organization of black metal workers,” and that employers “attempted to use these committees to reassert control over a refractory work force.” There is little doubt that the liaison committees in particular were *designed* to blunt the “self-organisation of the workers” after 1973, and workers had good reason to distrust them as potential tools of management. As the workers from MAWU put it in 1977, they were “basically undemocratic, open to all types of pressures from management, and unable to negotiate meaningfully on most issues.” In Webster’s view, it was the pressure instigated from outside the factories in the 1976 Soweto uprising that eventually impelled “capital and the state to search for new forms of social control in the workplace,” presumably through the Wiehahn reforms that recognized black trade unions in 1979-80. But were the liaison committees simply a dead-end for workers, who bided their time until Wiehahn made industry-wide unionization more likely? Or rather, as Johan Maree suggested, did the unions, when stymied during the 1970s, “revise their strategy to one of *using* liaison and works committees when it was considered to be tactically advantageous.”(emphasis added)<sup>14</sup> It appears that in some cases at least, the committees helped facilitate this self-organization. Indeed, the experience of “boring from within” these committees had a profound influence on the emergent unions’ shop-floor culture, strong shop steward system, and “workerist” orientation that eventually took shape as the independent Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) by the end of the decade.

One catches occasional glimpses of this alternative possibility in the secondary literature, but few analysts have followed it up, in part because denunciation of the committee system as ineffectual and compromised, made politically expedient during the 1970s by the unavoidable necessity of demanding full trade union rights, has by now become an unexamined assumption of liberation scholarship. David Lewis suggests, for example, that despite their manifest limitations, works and liaison committees served as a workshop for workers who “sought to transform them into structures other than those envisaged by the law.” By schooling ordinary shop floor workers in the everyday matters of factory elections, consultation, and accountability, these structures helped pave the way

<sup>14</sup> Webster, *cast in a racial Mould*, pp. 129, 133, 136, 148-49; Maree, “The Emergence,” p. 209.



for the democratic unions that would play such an important part in the years to come.<sup>15</sup> As Sonia Bendix remarks as an aside in her comprehensive work, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, “the irony is that the very structure intended to destroy unionism could equally promote it.”(Juta, 2007, p. 74).

Gail Seidman, in her fine comparative study of the rise of new unions in Brazil and South Africa, offers the reminder that unions as a vehicle for workers’ demands were hardly a foregone conclusion before the 1980s. Given the repression of both shop-floor organization and black trade unionism more broadly during the 1960s, she reminds us, “it was hardly inevitable that [the] labor movement would become a central part of the political scene” in either country. In South Africa, Seidman sees the 1973-1979 period following the Durban strikes as “a kind of prehistory, in which [labor] activists gradually created the basis for organization but made few concrete gains”(176). But within this prehistory, I would argue, the important role of the works and liaison committees has been largely ignored, in large part because they have been dismissed as co-optative institutions. As Seidman says, activists built on “networks, organizations, training programs, and a labor press”(176), many of which grew from the 1973 strikes, carefully treading the line between legal and illegal activity in order to avoid arrest, repression, banning, or worse. But in fact the committees were also part of this dense network of new labor institutions, and indeed offered the most shelter from the iron fist of the state since they were so carefully wrapped in a velvet glove. The enormous and persistent constraints on unions—political repression, the continued absence of legal power to compel recognition, the inability of workers to pay dues and their wariness of unions—did not apply to the liaison and works committees. As Seidman notes, “when employers refused to recognize independent unions, union members sometime ran for election as delegates to employer-controlled works or liaison committees.”(178) Even in the absence of concrete gains or genuine negotiation, Seidman points out, the committee structure “provided a forum in which union members could raise issues affecting workers, from wages to transport services to occasional discussions of state policies affecting the workplace.”(178) She

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *Protest to Challenge*, p. 209; see also Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 58





concludes, “even though unionists considered the committee system inadequate, many of them used it to express workers’ demands.”

Similarly, Karl van Holdt suggests in *Transition from Below*, that despite its ultimate powerlessness the liaison committee established for black workers at Highveld Steel “cast a shadow image, like the negative of a photograph, of what real rights and powers, and real representation, might look like.” In other words, it created the collective *form* of unionization—elections, meetings, grievance procedures, report-backs, discussions with management, an active steward structure—but stripped of any effective *content* when it came to collective bargaining, legal recognition, or multi-plant organization.<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I attempt to develop that “shadow image” into a more sharply defined picture of the role played by works and liaison committees after 1973.

Part I of this paper, summarized above, examined the immediate consequences of the Durban strikes.<sup>17</sup> There, I traced the ensuing debate about the place of South Africa’s black working class in the political economy of apartheid, considering the emerging views of black trade unionists and their allies, businessmen and managers, white trade unionists, and the Afrikaner-led government. Much of the discussion of the time turned on what role—if any at all—“responsible” (i.e., non political) African trade unions could play in a modern, industrial, capitalist South Africa. Ultimately, I concluded that despite the fact that industrial employers gave lip service to the idea of trade union rights for Africans in 1973, in fact they colluded with the National Party to extend the system of works committees and, primarily, “liaison committees” as a potentially even more pliable alternative. The liberal position that employers embraced trade union rights for Africans appears to be a convenient post-1980 fiction; most of the evidence suggests that while they hoped to create industrial stability by securing in-plant lines of communication, employers intended

<sup>16</sup> Karl von Holdt, *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 2003), p. 54; von Holdt’s account of the coming of NUMSA to Highveld steel suggests that the plant’s liaison committee created in the 1970s served as the nucleus for the trade union built in the 1980s (pp. 53-55, 61-67)

<sup>17</sup> Presented at presented at the South African and Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Center for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, 18 August 2009.



to retain firm control over any worker organization that would take place under a reformed industrial relations system.

From the perspective of the workers and activists who saw independent trade unions as a crucial vehicle for the emancipation of the black working class, there was wide agreement that works and liaison committees fell far short of genuine trade union rights. Nevertheless, some activists felt that black workers could and should use them to begin building shop-floor power. In the rest of this paper, I present some empirical evidence, based on internal trade union documents, indicating that despite their reservations, shop-floor activists proved able to infiltrate the post-1973 works and liaison committees and eventually develop them into embryonic organizations. Indeed, there is a good case to be made that even workers who accurately regarded the committees as far too beholden to employers still found in them a “shadow” of shop-floor democracy. Finally, I suggest how disagreements over participation in this reformist committee structure during the 1970s presaged conflicts that emerged between “workerist” and “populist” factions of South Africa’s black trade union movement in the post-1979 era. As is well known, this is a dispute that continues to reverberate in postcolonial South Africa, as COSATU must maintain a delicate balance between meeting the shop-floor demands of its working-class constituency and securing its political influence within the governing tripartite alliance it has made with the ANC and the Communist party as part of the “National Democratic Revolution.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> I thank Eddie Webster for bringing this point to my attention.



## Communication or Negotiation?

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After 1973, with the new legislation in place, the country's managerial class began to seek in earnest solutions to the turmoil erupting on their shop-floors. In mid-November 1974, the National Development and Management Foundation (NDMF) convened a conference on the works and liaison committees authorized by the prior year's revamped Bantu Labour Act, and "published a comprehensive guide to official thinking and company experience" on the committee system.<sup>19</sup> Meeting a year later to discuss "labour relations and the black worker," the NDMF acknowledged—boasted, really—that "it is now generally accepted that companies which do not tackle with determination the establishment of Works or Liaison Committees...can expect serious labour difficulties." When implemented, the NDMF insisted, not only would a functioning committee system improve communication between African workers and management, but improvement in worker productivity would ensue.<sup>20</sup>

In practice, however, employers almost always established liaison committees, with their "anti-polarisation nature...with benefits such as better guidance by management" in lieu of works committees. For example, the Director of the Murray & Stewart building firm in the Western Cape admitted that, when discussing the establishment of a committee with workers, management expressed the "opinion" to its workers that a liaison committee would be preferable—though he continued to insist that this was a "choice" made by workers themselves! As L. Sikhakhane of the Sweet Food & Allied Workers pointed out in response, employers customarily said to workers "take the liaison committee, it will help you, its good for you"(22), just as Murray & Stewart had done. But when it was explained to them, the union organizer claimed, workers want

<sup>19</sup> I have been unable to locate this document.

<sup>20</sup> NDMF, *Labour Relations and the Black Worker*, proceedings of a conference held Nov. 25-26, 1975 (Joburg: NDMF, 1975), 1





works committees “which they feel they can be a part of and in which they can express their views much better in their own languages, as freely as they can.”<sup>21</sup>

It should come as little surprise that despite their protestations about wanting to see black workers organized, when given the chance most South African employers fell back into the comfortable habits of paternalism offered by the Liaison Committee structure. “The fact that both parties are represented on a Liaison Committee, with its accompanying advantage, has convinced participants [i.e., employers] of the preferability of this method,” industrial psychologist Ryno Verster reported in *People in Profits* two years after the passage of the new act. Because blacks allegedly had been reticent to create works committees, according to Verster, by June 1975, employers had established 1,797 liaison committees and only 271 works committees in South Africa’s workplaces.<sup>22</sup> (see Fig. 1) If black workers had been reluctant to join or create such committees before, now that their employers seemed to encourage it they did so in large numbers. Of course, if what had once been done at risk of victimization now might actually curry favor with an employer, this should come as no surprise. A major study of the committee system, done by Verster at the Department of Industrial Psychology at the University of OFS, found that in the 18 months after the new legislation in 90% of the cases management had initiated the formation of the committee.<sup>23</sup> As sociologist Eddie Webster put it in his representation to the Wiehahn Commission three years later, the Verster data “seems to indicate that management perceives its interests to be best served by a system of control through consultation.”<sup>24</sup>

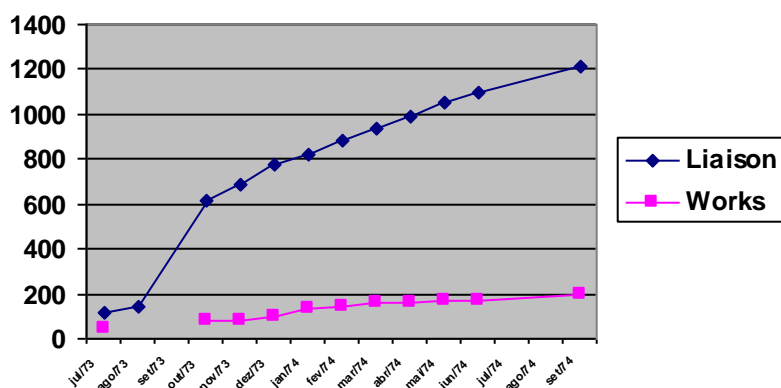
Fig. 1: Growth of Works and Liaison Committees, 1973-74

<sup>21</sup> Verster, see “Liaison Committees in the South African Industry: their Present Functioning and Constitution,” p. 71 ;(p. 22 of *African Workers: negotiation or Conflict*, Oct. 1974, p. 12).

<sup>22</sup> Verster, see “Liaison Committees in the South African Industry: their Present Functioning and Constitution,” p. 71; Ryno Verster, “Liaison and Works Committees—Are they Really Working,” *People and Profits* 3(August 1975): 4-9, pp. 4-5. These committees “represented” over 575,000 black workers by June 1975, according to *People and Profits*.

<sup>23</sup> Verster, “Liaison Committees in the South African Industry: their Present Functioning and Constitution,” p. 20. The study covered 326 companies that had established 437 liaison committees (p. 16), and 41 works committees. For a summary of the report’s findings see Verster, “Liaison and Works Committees—Are They Working?,” *People and Profits* 3(August 1975):4-9.

<sup>24</sup> K364, Memorandum from eddie Webster, Nov. 1977, National Archives, Pretoria, p. 13.



Source: derived from data in “Liaison and Works Committees—Are They Working?,” *People and Profits* 3(August 1975):4-9, p. 7.

Verster’s study, based on questionnaires given to employers, offers a revealing glimpse of the implementation and structure of the liaison committee system, indicating its profound limitations yet also suggesting how it might be open to penetration by activist workers. The powerful impact of the 1973 strikes in stimulating employers’ concern seems evident, as nearly a third of the established liaison committees were in Natal province.(2) In general, members of both works and liaison committees came from the ranks of older employees with longer service, more education, and some experience in semi-skilled work in the production departments.(97-98) On 80% of the liaison committees management, not workers, chose the committee chair (28); nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases black workers themselves nominated and elected the committee’s members, and “in most [80%] of the organizations the liaison committee is largely a workers’ committee.”(77) Committees typically met once a month (44) during working hours, and remarkably the most frequent issues raised were wages and working conditions; more often than not these were expressed as “complaints” lodged with management by the committee, and Verster even worried that “these committees are still largely used as grievance procedures” rather than “an information exchange device,” as intended by management. (65, 84) Two-thirds



of employers who met with works committees claimed they actually engaged in negotiations over wages.(106)<sup>25</sup>

Not surprisingly, over half the companies Verster surveyed did not think black trade unions deserved recognition.(66) Most were “worried about the misuse of trade unions for other purposes and therefore require sufficient control before the idea is acceptable,” and many remained skeptical of “the Black employee’s development.”(66, 81) Indeed, employers justified their heavy presence on liaison committees by insisting that it “improves two-way communication” and “makes evolutionary training of blacks in negotiation possible.”

At best, Ryno Verster’s survey of employers concluded, “Black trade unions will be acceptable only if Blacks have received more training and experience in negotiation.”(86) Liaison committees might afford “the experience they will need once they are given admission to trade unions,” Verster claimed. Although we wince at the paternalism embodied in this view, and demur at the implication that Africans should be “given admission” to unions rather than building them themselves, Verster was accurate enough in suggesting that these committees might serve as a training ground for black union members. In the view of the more *verligte* [“enlightened”] English-speaking employers, of course, management and its surrogates—the NDMF and the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM)(37-40)—would in the long run be able to steer and shape this process, and therefore usher in a black trade union movement friendly with, if not entirely subordinate to, white management. But there was, in fact, no guarantee this would be the outcome—and indeed it wasn’t. To this extent, managers themselves proved to be the gravediggers of apartheid’s industrial relations regime, and the committee system served as the initial sharp-edged shovel that broke the ground.

Of course, for black workers and their allies in newly established independent “service” and “aid” organizations like the IIE, the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau, and the Urban Training Project (UTP), this was the central question: could, in

<sup>25</sup> Of course, as the IIE pointed out in one of its “Workers’ Handbooks”, this was a legal requirement: *The Workers’ Organisation*, June 1975, p. 80.





fact, the burgeoning committee system serve as a means to build genuine, independent black trade unions from the shop-floor up that would lead to collective bargaining? Verster's focus on the liaison committees was not only due to their overwhelming numbers compared to the alternative works committees. As he ruefully remarked in an appendix to his study, since management had no representation on the works committees a survey sent to employers rather than workers made it difficult to glean information from the works committees (only 34 of 125 responded, a far lower rate than employers with liaison committees). Indeed, Verster admitted that some "works committees members have viewed the questionnaire and its purpose with suspicion."<sup>(91)</sup> When given the opportunity, workers much preferred the semi-autonomous works committees to the management-led Liaison committees. As L.C. G. Douwes-Dekker, one of the most articulate liberals of the "industrial relations" school that accepted the premise that "the interests of capital and labour are inherently in conflict," pointed out, the large number of liaison committees "is no guarantee of their acceptance among workers but is due to the imposition of this by the employer."<sup>26</sup>

As one of the founders of the moderate Urban Training Project (UTP) in the industrial areas surrounding Johannesburg, Douwes-Dekker hoped to bridge the gap between employers and black workers by educating the latter in the basic techniques of "responsible" trade unionism, and the former in the benefits of collective bargaining, and managed labor conflict.<sup>27</sup> Although cautiously welcoming government efforts to revise the industrial relations regime for Africans after 1973, he remained skeptical about the ability of even the expanded works committee system to reign in endemic shop-floor conflict, especially as large numbers of strikes persisted into 1974.<sup>28</sup> In June 1973, only two weeks after the passage of the new legislation, Douwes-Dekker spoke to the Benoni Rotary Club

<sup>26</sup> "Are Works Committees Trade Unions," p. 2; "Labour Organisation and the African," workshop, jan. 1975, p.36.

<sup>27</sup> On the UTP, see Lewis, pp. 200-201; Jabulani and Sithole, "Revival of the Labour Movement," pp. 198-201; Bonner, "Focus on Fosatu," pp. 5-6. Despite his evident moderation, Douwes-Dekker was eventually banned for his trouble; see Douwes-Dekker papers, box 2, folder 2, Wits.

<sup>28</sup> The SAIRR recorded 57,656 workers out on strike in 1974, a very large number despite the appreciable decline from the previous year. *Survey*, 1974, pp. 211-12.



on the significance—and limitations—of the works and liaison committees foreseen by the Act. Noting that management would prefer the latter, and workers the former, he accurately predicted conflict over the form committees would take. More importantly, Douwes- Dekker reminded his audience—presumably businessmen—that in contrast to trade unions, works committees did not allow for membership. Thus they ultimately lacked accountability, independence, or legitimacy amongst workers. “With membership,” he pointed out, “come subscriptions, the responsibility of electing, and the report back procedure from delegates to members.” This representative structure—what we might call industrial citizenship—“implies control over the leadership by the members, and the corollary that the members must adhere to decisions taken by their delegates.”<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this sort of industrial citizenship was exactly what the Nationalists and many employers claimed African workers were not “ripe” for, and its expansion was exactly what they dreaded, because its extension to the political sphere appeared to them inevitable. At the same time, as Douwes-Dekker pointed out, from the employers’ perspective regularized trade unions were the only guarantor of shop-floor stability and industrial peace.<sup>30</sup> “The most effective control over workers,” he reminded the businessmen in his audience, “is by their own elected leaders operating independently.” Douwes-Dekker acknowledged that “some critics label the works committees system as a technique of management control.” But if elected representatives maintained close contact

<sup>29</sup> L.C.G. Douwes Dekker, “Are Works Committees Trade Unions?,” SAIRR, 1973, 5

<sup>30</sup> This was a view shared both by the IIE (pp. 159-62) and by Helen Suzman; see Hansard, June 11, 1973, col. 8762. The IIE’s point of view was this: “We believe that the stress on the problem of communication is the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of employer-employee relationships... The stress on the problem of communication quite ignores the dimension of power.” (156-57). From this critique—certainly a fair one—sprang the IIE’s adamant opposition to works councils as a substitute for trade unions. Based on the “naïve assumption of an essential community of interest” in the workplace, the committees served to mystify the fundamental dynamic of power on the shop floor. The “human relations” approach to shop-floor relations denied the notion that workers might have a set of concrete interests of their own, counterpoised to that of their employers, which needed to be mediated and institutionalized in collective bargaining. Without means of expressing their own interests, the IIE maintained, workers will rely on what have been subsequently called “weapons of the weak”, such as sabotage, and the masking of real grievances in favor of what JCS has called “hidden transcripts.” (161) While obviously not relying on those terms, the IIE report on the strikes made a powerful theoretical case for the operation of this dynamic in South Africa’s factories. This, in fact, was their strongest critique of the works committees as vehicles of grievances, as they would never serve to transmit what workers were *really* thinking.



with shop floor workers, this need not be the case, he suggested. (16) Despite its inherent limitations then, Douwes-Dekker believed that the works committee system “must be explored and made effective,” though without serving as a substitute for black trade unions.(7) As the UTP representations to parliament during consideration of the new act had put it, “a works committee can in fact only function satisfactorily when all workers are involved in effective industry-wide trade unions.”(9)

Speaking at a South African Institute of Race Relations(SAIRR) conference held in Durban in 1974, Douwes-Dekker insisted that, contrary to the implications of Verster’s study, when “workers are aware of the choice in the Act regarding the two committees, they vote for a works committee.” Only the works committees, confined solely to independently elected worker delegates from the shop floor, had a “chance of being accepted by the workers” he maintained. “The system of liaison committees,” Douwes-Dekker concluded, “is a denial of the principle of inherent conflict of interests” that underlay modern industrial relations. Insisting that management would have to learn to share, if not relinquish, authority and control in the workplace, he urged employers to let African workers take the initiative and form independent works committees. Judging from specific instances where workers had a choice, they clearly preferred to establish their own independent committees, without management interference or representatives. At a referendum held at Raleigh Cycles on the East Rand, after two women workers were fired for requesting a works committee, black workers voted 720-40 in favor of a works committee over a liaison committee; at Western Biscuits, the vote was 240-40; and at Van Leer Packaging, the vote in favor of a works committee was unanimous. In Douwes-Dekker’s view, the paternalistic “human relations approach” embodied in the liaison committees, geared toward communication at the exclusion of negotiation, “carries within it its own destruction,” as it could not possibly satisfy worker demands, aspirations, or needs. The obligation for employers, in Douwes-Dekker’s view, was to “do things with the workers and not for them.”<sup>31</sup> ,

<sup>31</sup> “Are Works Committees Trade Unions,” pp. 10, 17-18; “Labour Organisation and the African,” workshop, Jan. 1975, pp.36-39.





When the UTP helped establish works committees in a chain of supermarkets, Douwes-Dekker noted at another SAIRR symposium, "the experience suggests that these structures were accepted by the workers because the explanation regarding their purpose and election of representatives was carried out by an organiser of a union and they could become members of a union"<sup>32</sup> Workers, he observed, joined the works committee because they "look for an organization independent from management." At the same time, Douwes-Dekker reminded nervous employers that ultimately independent trade unions and collective bargaining would actually facilitate compromise, as worker representatives could prevail on the rank and file to "accept an increase which is less than they expected." (16) As he noted, even the most independent works committee, lacking enforceable collective bargaining power, "will not command the respect of the workers to be in a position to 'sell' the compromise position to them." (16)

### **The Strike of the "Faceless Ones": Boring from Within?**

One of the more arresting contributions to the 1973 Parliamentary debate over the proposed amendments to the labour relations act came from opposition United Party MP, William Sutton. As chairman of a Commission that sought to root out white student radicals from South Africa's universities, Sutton had acquired a detailed knowledge of their activities on behalf of black workers, often at the instigation of Richard Turner. As a result, unlike his counterparts in the rest of the loyal opposition Sutton regarded works committees as even more troubling than the prospect of regulated African trade unions, which he believed could be more readily inoculated against agitators. In his view, nothing less than the Bolshevik Revolution had "broke out as a result of a works committee. The works committee...is precisely the same organization which was known in Russia as a Soviet." Sutton went on to compare the Durban strikes to the events in Petrograd in 1905

<sup>32</sup> LDD, "The Process of Collective bargaining—from Confrontation to Cpmromise," in *African Workers: negotiation or Conflict*, Proceedngs of a seminar organized by the SAIRR (Wetsern Cape Region), Oct. 1974, p. 12.



and 1917. “What we saw in Durban were strikes taking place without organization. This was the strike of the faceless ones. These were people without organization. One of the prime difficulties which the employers had in negotiating with strikers was that there was no organization.” (Within the next few years, the UP did come to support African trade unions in principal, suggesting that more than a few found Sutton’s argument, if not his analogy, persuasive).<sup>33</sup>

In his fevered imagination Sutton may have been on to something: was it possible that the factory-based works committees that grew out of the Durban strikes, if in fact elected and controlled by workers, could form the basis of a new kind of militant African trade unionism in South Africa? Labor activists and their supporters proved divided over this question, but it remains a rich possibility for exploration if we are to come to grips fully with the impact of the “Durban Moment” on the overall trajectory of South Africa’s working-class movement in the two decades prior to liberation. As we have seen, the IIE’s comprehensive account of the strikes unequivocally declared that works committees “cannot give the workers any real power in the factory,” and rejected them as a sham substitute for unions; liaison committees, with up to half of their membership representing management, they concluded, were “considerably more useless.” In the handbook they prepared for workers, the IIE warned that “many employers try to use the Works Committee system to stop the workers having trade unions,” but they did concede that “a Works Committee...which could work with the Trade Union would be a proper Factory Committee.” In that case, “members of the Works Committee must act in some ways like shop stewards.” As Johann Maree suggested in his trenchant critique of *The Durban Strikes*, published in the *SALB* in 1976, “the one advantage that a works committee affords African workers *in the absence of basic trade union rights* is that management must recognize and negotiate with the works committee, something which management does

<sup>33</sup> Hansard, June 11, 1973, cols. 8769-8772; Marais Viljoen replied that “communism penetrates trade unions much more easily than any other institution.” (col. 8775). Within the next few years, the UP did come to support African trade unions in principal, suggesting that more than a few found Sutton’s argument, if not his analogy, persuasive; see IIE, p. 167.



not have to do with shop stewards committees” generated by unions with absolutely no state-sanctioned legitimacy or power (emphasis added).<sup>34</sup>

During a symposium called by the *Financial Mail* eighteen months after the strikes, and published in July 1974 (“Black workers: Consultation or Confrontation”), those speaking on behalf of black workers—trade unionists, Barney Dladla of the KwaZulu homeland government, and Harold Nxasana of the IIE—continued to insist that only genuinely independent trade unions with the power to bargain would do. Yet, for their part, the employers still clung to the fiction that the committee system, as a “slower path of consultation” at the factory, rather than industry-wide, level would provide “the opportunity of learning and achieving results.” Such gradualist paternalism was long past its sell-by date, however, and was met with controlled but distinct anger. As Norman Middleton, Secretary of MAWU put it, “the opinion of the workers in this country is that what is good for the goose is good for the gander; trade unions are acceptable for the other groups, and must be acceptable for Africans.” The industrial relations manager of Toyota says, “there is nothing to stop [workers] from electing unionists on to that liaison committee and proving whether this committee system is genuine or a farce.”(232). Jane Hlongwane of the Engineering and Allied Workers retorted that “we do tell workers to get onto these committees to see if they are worthwhile,” but she complained that employers do not trust African workers, and “will do everything in their power to create committees on in the factory rather than deal with an independent African body.”<sup>35</sup>

Nxasana, who had once been a worker at the infamously exploitative Frame textile mill complex (an epicenter of the strike wave), and subsequently worked closely with the IIE’s efforts to revivify the Natal trade unions, had also insisted at the 1974 SAIRR Natal workshop that “workers rejected the whole concept of works committees and liaison committees,” primarily because they appeared to have been introduced by the employers. One worker had asked him pointedly “Is it feasible for a man with whom we are quarrelling to give you a gun in order that you might shoot him?” In addition, as a

<sup>34</sup> *The Durban Strikes*, p. 167; IIE, *The Workers’ Organisation*, June 1975, pp. 83-84; Maree, “Seeing Strikes in Perspective,” p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> *FM*, July 19, 1974, pp. 230-42.





structure organized only within a single factory, Nxasana pointed out, the committees were “totally incapable of organizing workers on an industrial level.” Nxasana did admit that “there were some workers who felt that works committees could be used as a stepping stone towards forming a trade union.” But most of them, he insisted, regarded the committee system as yet another weapon in management’s union-prevention arsenal. As one of the few workers who spoke up from the floor at the SAIRR workshop reminded the audience, when workers availed themselves of the committee system management still “calls in the police and the dogs.” As he put it, “we would rather suffer struggling for trade union recognition.....These institutions are just imposed upon us,” he complained. Another worker, through an interpreter, told those assembled in no uncertain terms that the committees “have proved to be a total failure.” Voicing the need for trade unions, he vowed that “African workers have decided to bury these dummy institutions.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet even Nxasana (who in 1975-77 was detained for 500 days under the Terrorism Act, and tortured)<sup>37</sup> was hardly naïve when it came to recognizing the many obstacles faced by black trade unions in this period. In a paper he prepared before his detention on “The Problems Facing Open Trade Unions” he bluntly laid the blame at the feet of employers, who refused to recognize black trade unions “even when they say that they are in favour of unions.” Clearly, they meant they favored unions in general, or in the factories of competitors, but not in their shop; Nxasana pointed to the use of black personnel officers, mandated liaison committees to dampen union organization, the victimization of trade unionists and even active members of works committees, and constant threats of police harassment. Finally, although Nxasana insisted that “both migrants and non-migrants are just as interested in the unions,” he admitted that South Africa’s fragmented labor market made organization difficult. Contract workers were especially vulnerable to victimization. In Natal alone, in 1975 more than a dozen trade unionists were detained.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Horner, ed., “Labour Organisation and the African,” pp. 47-48, 57-58.

<sup>37</sup> TRC, vol. 2, p. 205; <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/thisday/banned-list.htm>, accessed July 23, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> H. Nxasana, “The Problems Facing Open Trade Unions,” c. 1975, Ruth First papers, 2/16/26, reel 61, ICS, London; on state repression, see Jabulani nand Sithole, “Revival of the Labour Movement,” pp. 228-29.





Because of this continued opposition to unions on the part of employers, even the activists grouped around the IIE and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC) came to recognize that the committee structure often proved to be the only way to reach workers on the shop floor. In November 1975, William Vose, an exceptionally sympathetic British labour attaché, reported back to London that Black union organizers faced continuing harassment from the security police, and could not gain access to factories, and thus had to organize instead in the townships. Inside the factories, he observed, “the unions are increasingly trying to get their members elected to Works and Liaison Committees and a good deal of success is being achieved in this.” Once on the committee, workers would stall discussions with management until they could consult with union leaders outside the plant.<sup>39</sup>

This approach echoed tactics developed by the white students grouped in what before the strikes had been the NUSAS wages commission, who in contrast to activists like Nxasana, had always urged black workers to use the committee structure to begin building the shop-floor foundations for trade unions, factory by factory. In the April 1973 edition of *Abasabenzi*, the workers’ paper produced by NUSAS in Cape Town, the students reminded workers that “trade unions cannot be formed without basic organization at a factory level” and urged them to create works committees to foster this process. (*Abasabenzi*, April 1973). A later issue of the paper (No. 8), reminded workers that if they registered a grassroots “factory committee” with the department of Labour as an official Works Committee, they were protected by law from victimization. In September 1973, the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau, established by radical students from UCT, admitted that ideally black workers should try to establish and join multi-plant trade unions. Given the many obstacles to this, however, they advised African workers to form themselves into factory-based works committees first. Unlike trade unions, the students pointed out, these committees secured legal recognition and thus employers were obligated to speak with them. These committees, they insisted, would serve as the future

<sup>39</sup> Vose to Hurst, Nov. 7, 1975; Vose to Hurst, Oct. 9, 1975, , PRO.



basis for industry-wide trade unions. “Make your Works Committee work for you,” *Isisebenzi* (April 1973), urged workers, “if you haven’t got one, form one.”<sup>40</sup> The WPWAB’s Worker Education Project used simulated works committee negotiations in order to instruct workers on how to use the committee, and caution them about what obstacles they might face in doing so. “Management may try to dismiss members of the works committee,” they warned. But “it is illegal for management to dismiss a member of a works committee for carrying out his duties as a member—i.e. for representing the wishes and aspirations of the workers.” Under the heading, “THINGS TO REMEMBER”, the Workers Education Project advised workers to “see the law as a tool—and use it.” Regarding the liaison committees as “an employers’ committee,” and the alternative works committees as “a workers’ committee,” they emphasized the democratic possibilities in the latter. “Always consult the workers. Always report back to the workers,” they advised.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the “official” count of Works Committees remained low, but by September 1974 the WPWAB claimed to have helped establish 34 committees in the Cape Town area alone. For all intents and purposes, when it came to grievances about health and safety or workers compensation claims, members of these committees operated as shop stewards.<sup>42</sup>

Despite sharp accusations in the 1980s that the “errors of workerism” could be traced to just this sort of auxiliary activism by the (white) “academic Marxists” who entered trade union work in 1973-74, Black workers often came on their own to the possibilities of using the committee structures to build shop-floor power.<sup>43</sup> In fact, there is evidence that both works and liaison committee structures could serve as the opening wedge for unions on the shop-floor during the 1970s, as shop stewards penetrated these

<sup>40</sup> WPWAB, “Handbook on Works Committees,” sep. 26, 1973, CKC microfilm.

<sup>41</sup> WPWAB, Workers Education Project, CKC, , NUSAS.

<sup>42</sup> “The Annual report of the WPWAB,” Sep. 1, 1974, GWU/WPGWU papers, , CRL.

<sup>43</sup> “The Errors of Workerism,” first published in *Isizwe—The Nation*, the journal of the UDF in November 1986, and reprinted in *SALB* 12(March-April 1987):51-63. The critique of workerism remained highly suspicious of the “dummy liaison committees” imposed by owners, and it denounced the sins of “economism” and “syndicalism.”



structures. Historians may not have given this enough attention, in part because it was often invisible. For example, in the GE plant in Port Elizabeth, the British attaché reported in October of 1974, managers had “made considerable progress in developing machinery for the representation of black workers.” But on closer examination, it turned out that that black union shop stewards were working through the liaison committee, and “many of the officials are in fact also members of the (Black) United Automobile Rubber and Allied Workers.”<sup>44</sup> In some instances, the struggle for committee recognition led on to union organization. At Raleigh Cycles, where Douwes-Dekker had reported such an overwhelming vote in favor of a works committee, the company agreed to establish the committee and re-instate the workers it had fired for insisting on one. “From that year (1973),” FOSATU later reported, “the workers at Raleigh started joining the Engineering and Allied Workers’ Union,” which by 1981 had 3000 members in over 15 plants. By then over 500 workers at the Raleigh plant belonged to the EAWU, which “had an active Shop Steward Committee, most of them sitting on the works committee,” since the company still refused to recognize the union.<sup>45</sup>

The Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), which by the early 1980s had become the largest FOSATU affiliate, proved particularly adept at manipulating the committee structure to its own advantage, even in those plants with liaison committees. At Rely metal works on the East Rand in 1979, “the fight was between the bosses’ liaison committee and our workers’ committee elected from ourselves in the foundry,” one worker reported. Guided by a MAWU organizer, “the battle was won by us,” eventually leading to successful strikes and union recognition.<sup>46</sup> During a union drive at Glacier Bearings in Pinetown in 1978, MAWU resisted subordination to a new “Industrial Relations Committee” promoted by the company as an alternative to union recognition. In this case, when management demanded that liaison committee members attend the IRC,

<sup>44</sup> CC Clemens to WGE Beckmann, Oct. 29, 1974, , PRO.

<sup>45</sup> “The Worker Struggle at Raleigh Cycles (Springs),” January 1981, folder 49, EAWU, CRL; “FOSATU Congress Report,” April 1982, CRL.

<sup>46</sup> Mandlenkosi Makhobo, *Ilanga Lizophumela Abasabenzi (The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers)*, Ravan Worker Series (Braamfontein, 1984), pp.24-26;





MAWU was able to block the move because “union shop stewards dominate this committee.” When pressured, the liaison committee members “re-iterated their objections to the IRC and [their] stand with the union....The shop stewards assured [management] that they were in regular consultation with African workers and were reflecting their views.” When a mass meeting was called, “workers overwhelmingly rejected participation in the IRC [and] called on management to recognize the union.”<sup>47</sup> At the ALUSAF aluminum smelter in Richards Bay, rocked by a strike in 1973, workers subsequently established an active works committee. By 1980, FOSATU could boast that MAWU had established a branch of 350 workers there, an “important breakthrough.”<sup>48</sup>

Another powerful FOSATU affiliate that built some of its shop-floor strength through the committees was the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). At the Henkel plant in Durban in early 1979, CWIU shop stewards worked in tandem with the liaison committee (on which many of them sat) to push for union recognition, meaning “acceptance by the company of union shop stewards and officials as full representatives of the workers.” As with Glacial Bearings, Henkel attempted to stall by establishing a “factory council”, but shop stewards and liaison committee members refused to serve on it. In May 1979, management decided to disband the liaison committee “to free itself from pressures exerted on it by Shop Stewards on the Liaison Committee.” Despite at one time stating its willingness to recognize the CWIU at Henkel, it took a boycott in 1982 to finally force the company to the bargaining table. By then, CWIU had elected its first President—Abbey Cwele, Chair of Henkel’s shop steward committee, and a one-time member of the liaison committee in the plant.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, when the Transport and General Workers Union finally emerged into the open at the Turnall pipe manufacturing plant in Jacobs, seven of the ten members of the Union Steering Committee proved to be former members of the liaison committee. That committee had struggled for years, without much

<sup>47</sup> “Report 4: Glacier Bearings and the Metal and Allied Workers Union,” Nov. 17, 1978, CRL, pp. 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> IIE, *The Durban Strikes*, pp. 119-20; Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance*, p. 299n155; *FOSATU Worker News* 8(November 1980):1.

<sup>49</sup> CWIU, “Prograss Report on Campaign for recognition at henkel S.A.,” Dec. 8, 1978-April 4, 1979; and “report No. 5,” April 4-May 23, 1979, both in K-G Collection, FOSATU, reports; FOSATU Annual Report for 1982, , p. 15; *Fosatu Worker News*, November 1980, p. 2.





success, to combat poor safety practices at the plant (where asbestos was used). Shadrack Sithole, a member of the Liaison Committee then elected to the Union Steering Committee passed the LC meeting minutes into the hands of union organizer Halton Cheadle, who planned to use this evidence of long unmet grievances to win safety concessions at the plant.<sup>50</sup>

The records of the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), established in the Frame mills in September 1973 following the strikes, make it possible to trace this interaction of the efforts to build independent unions and the imposition of the committee structure by government and employers. Gardener Gladile, an electrician working at Frametex in the Durban industrial suburb of New Germany, was a charter member of the NUTW at Frame, joining on Sep. 1, 1973.<sup>51</sup> At the beginning of 1976, we find Gladile serving as elected chair of a “Liaison Works Committee” at Frametex with 16 other workers, though the committee was officially chaired by Frame managers. (Interestingly enough, the workers described the factory committee at Frame as a “Works Committee” chaired by Gladile; managers clearly regarded it as a “Liaison Committee” chaired by Alec Frame). At the January 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting, Gladile reported dissatisfaction with “the way the Frametex Liaison Works Committee was functioning.” Elaborating, Gladile said “he felt it should be a Works Committee with a black Chairman and in this way the wishes of the workers could be attended to properly.” By the next meeting, Gladile seems to have lost his overtime work. By May, with the election of a new committee, Gladile had disappeared from the minutes.

In fact, Frame had fired him, an issue raised by workers at the first liaison committee meeting of 1977. Frame managers told the liaison committee that Gladile had been let go “because the company was not satisfied with the way he was conducting himself during working hours,” a charge emphatically rejected by the workers. In a signed complaint sent to the Department of Labour in early 1977, twelve members of the committee noted that “we are very unhappy at Frametex with the way people are being

<sup>50</sup> Fosatu papers, TGWU, Turnall.

<sup>51</sup> Union card, Gardener T. Gladile, Fosatu papers, NUTW, Wits.



dismissed...the workers say they cannot do any thing when they are dismissed for no reason,” and pointed to Gladile’s unjustified retrenchment as a prime example. The committee “dismissed all reasons given by the factory as not true.” “This has been going on too long,” the committee members remarked, and “the workers are saying this committee is done and it is rubbish because it cannot do anything for them.” The letter concluded by expressing the hope that the Department of Labour would resolve this problem.<sup>52</sup>

Yet Gladile’s thwarted efforts to use the liaison committee in a more confrontational fashion were no isolated incident. Judging from the minutes of general meetings, the NUTW persisted in its attempts to penetrate the newly established committee system in most of the plants in the Frame Group and other textile factories in the Durban area. If managers believed these committees could be used to stymie independent unionism, organizers sought to build shop-floor structures within them, even without the security of union recognition. At the Regina carpets mill, organizers reported in 1976 that “as a result of the work of the [union] shopstewards on the Liaison Committee, Management has promised in writing to inform the Committee before they retrench workers, and to re-employ retrenched workers when new vacancies come up in the factory”; in other words, the skeleton of a seniority system. This was possible because at the carpet mill more than half the workers belonged to the NUTW, and “they only want union shopstewards on their Liaison Committee.” At Frametex, the plant where Gladile had worked, two members of the Liaison Committee offered to resign “because it was felt they were not good representatives of their departments.” Apparently, workers in those departments had already elected alternatives, over managerial objection. The report concluded that “it should be very obvious to Management that workers are keen for these two people to be replaced by the representatives they have elected.” Workers’ resistance to managerial domination of the committee system increased, as they came to insist that they elect committee members “who they know will represent their interests.” This was

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Frametex LWC, 22 january 1976, Fosatu papers,; 15 march 1976; letter from LC to department of Labour, n.d., but after feb. 22, 1977.



presented as evidence that “union organization inside Frametex has been progressing,” and that a strong shopsteward organization had been established.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, two years later, it was reported at a general NUTW meeting that at Frametex, despite intransigent management, “workers have managed to progress by electing all strong shop steward[sic] to the [Liaison] Committee” and that “we then plan how we will change the Liaison Committee line and implement [the] union line” at Frametex. By May 1979, organized workers at the plant managed to successfully strike for a wage increase.<sup>54</sup>

Employers were well aware of the vulnerability of the committee structure to infiltration by union activists, and took actions to block this development when they could, and not only by sacking outspoken committee members like Gardener Gladile. By 1977, with the advent of the Wiehahn hearings into the state of South African industrial relations, employer organizations began to express second thoughts about works and liaison committees. In their submission to the Wiehahn Commission the Transvaal Chamber of Industries complained that “Works Committees, particularly in their legally protected form, in an establishment, are in effect entrenched groups even more powerful than Trade Unions and that they could be very dangerous indeed from the employers point of view.” Writing to the Minister of Labour, the TCI’s deputy director J. Van Maartens objected to recent legislation further expanding the committee system, claiming that ...”The original weakness of the [1973] Act has not been cured in terms of which in practice, the workers in a factory can deliberately kill off a liaison committee so as to give a works committee all the negotiating powers” and that “there is no provision to ensure that a works committee...must in practice be the employee caucus of a liaison committee existing in that establishment.” Worse, the “negotiating powers” secured by these committees, unrecognized by the state as they were, potentially meant that “works committees will in effect be uncontrolled and protected Black trade unions or cells within an establishment,” Maartens feared. This suggests that the Wiehahn Commissions conclusion that the state should accept—and control—registered African unions after 1979

<sup>53</sup> Report to the Frametex General meeting, Oct. 14, 1976, Fosatu papers, Frame group, Misc..

<sup>54</sup> Report, 8 October, 1978; and n.d.





may have reflected employers' anxiety that black workers could use the works committee system to enhance their shop-floor power. By the end of the decade both employers and the state came to prefer a regulated, nationalized, and controlled collective bargaining system legitimated at the trade union and industrial council level. This potentially would dilute the growing shop-floor power built by shopstewards, local activists, and committee members during the years after the Durban strikes.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion: From Committees to "Workerism"

In his provocative vision of the democratic socialism and "participatory democracy" that might result from the South African revolution, Rick Turner had hoped for the development of "a set of institutions that will give all individuals power over their own lives." In the workplace, Turner (and his acolytes) imagined this would take the form of shop-floor councils that would democratically make decisions about production. Indeed, in his primary exposition of his ideas, *The Eye of the Needle*, first published in 1972, Turner stated "participatory democracy is based on workers' control."<sup>56</sup> As Tony Morphet notes in his introduction to the 1980 edition of *Eye*, in Turner's view "the union [was] the tactical means whereby workers can begin to establish a base for action in the industrial system—workers' control of production is the end towards which the means of the union are employed."(xxvi)

In practice, if the 1973 strikes and the ensuing shop-floor activity did not usher in Turner's utopian vision, they still helped write the epitaph for the peculiar system of racialized industrial relations that grew from and helped perpetuate apartheid. By 1979,

<sup>55</sup> Transvaal Chamber of Industries, Submissions to the CELL, Nov. 24, 1977: p. 15; J. Van R. Maartens [Deputy director, TCI] to SP Botha [Min of Labour], May 5, 1977

<sup>56</sup> Rick. Turner, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (Ravan, 1980).



with the reforms promoted by the Wiehahn Commission, the state finally acceded to the demands voiced both by workers and a few employers that the African working class be incorporated into the normative structures of collective bargaining that had helped tame every industrialized nation's working classes in the course of the twentieth century. But we should refuse the temptation to conclude that this vindicates the views advanced by the liberal school of South African history and sociology, which insists that the growth of manufacturing, a need for a domestic market, and the desire to modernize the work habits and consumption patterns of the African working class made South African capitalism incompatible with apartheid. To agree that apartheid as a particular historical social formation limited the economic capacity of the manufacturing economy, is not to concede to the fashionable view that capitalism as a social form dissolves racial domination in the workplace, or enhances the liberation of human potential. To the contrary, it took the working-class struggle of the 1980s, precipitated by the Wiehahn reforms and the creation of a new union movement, to begin to achieve the former goal, if not the latter.

That new union movement found one of its first official manifestations in April 1979, when the CWIU, MAWU, and EAWU joined with textile (NUTW), transport, auto, and several other unions to launch FOSATU. From the beginning, FOSATU defined itself by shop-floor organization, "worker control," and a democratic, worker-led structure. In the very first issue of FOSATU's newspaper, *Isisibenzi*, FOSATU organizers emphasized the "shopfloor organization of workers around a shopfloor union committee in each factory," insisting that shop stewards would "be involved in negotiating all changes, grievances, and dismissals" in a particular workplace. "We see our prime organisational objective to be the organization of an active, well informed membership on the shop floor...[and] to build active representational structures, through the Shop Steward Committees, on the Shop Floor," FOSATU announced a year later. "Workers, not union officials, control and lead their organization," was FOSATU's operative motto at its foundation.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Isisibenzi*, July 1979; "What is Fosatu Trying to Achieve with Its Particular Structure," K-G, IV/80/50; "Factory Research," n.d.[probably 1979], K-G, IV/81; "FOSATU—Its Policies and Objectives," August 1980, K-G, IV/80/50.



After 1985, the leading South African labor federation, COSATU, continued to champion these values even while chiding its predecessor for its alleged rejection of “community” politics. “Fosatu's organising style was characterised by deliberate, painstakingly slow, plant-by-plant building of shopfloor structures,” proclaimed a post-liberation article in COSATU's *The Shopsteward* upon that organization's tenth anniversary (1995). “It was an approach which emphasised small gains and the survival of the organisation,” although this supposedly came at the expense of full political engagement. COSATU claimed to have leavened this tradition with “a movement, as opposed to a cadre base” nurtured by an alternative tradition found in the NUM and CUSA. Nevertheless, even here, COSATU granted that “at the heart of both manufacturing and mining was the principle of worker control, anchored in the shopstewards' committees.”<sup>58</sup>

If anything in the South African labor movement approached Turner's utopian vision of participatory workplace democracy, however, it was the democratic shop floor impulse that informed FOSATU and its constituent unions. Forged in the years between the Durban strikes and the Wiehahn reforms, this impulse underwrote the so-called “workerist” politics of large sectors of the independent black trade union movement during the 1980s, and was then carried forward into COSATU. Today, it persists in efforts within South Africa's trade union movement to resist full subordination to the neoliberal policies of the ANC and the SACP, the erstwhile defenders of the “Populist” strain of liberation labor politics.

As Gay Seidman notes, FOSATU's “workerist” tendencies in the early 1980s were reinforced by its shop-floor orientation and its emphasis on shop-stewards as a leadership cadre.(186) Despite this acute observation, her work does not fully explain the *origins* of this approach. Workerism did not merely spring from a rejection of the discredited SACTU tactics that had left trade union leadership exposed to political repression and neglected shop-floor organization during the 1950s and 1960s, or even the cautious efforts

<sup>58</sup> *The Shopsteward*, 4(6), Dec. 1995, “How Cosatu Was Organized”





of FOSATU to keep its distance from the United Democratic Front in the early 1980s.<sup>59</sup> This approach also had its roots in organic shop-floor culture that grew from somewhere. “As shop-floor organization won legal channels for expression, many unionists expressed workers’ demands in terms of factory-based interests, avoiding appeals to racial solidarity,” Seidman maintains.(193) But her assumption remains that these “legal channels” existed only *after* the Wiehahn reforms of 1979, which in many ways were in fact designed to dissipate the shop-floor structures developed during the struggles of the 1970s. Thus, as I have tried to emphasize instead, the works and liaison committees between 1973 and 1979 were facilitative, rather than a detour or a roadblock on the path to independent trade unions, shop-floor power, and industrial citizenship for black workers.

Much of the 1970s debate over the merits and limits of the committee system as a vehicle to build shop-floor structures that might blossom into trade unions foreshadowed the related divisions that emerged in the labor movement over the question of registration after 1979, when black trade unions were finally offered incorporation into state-sanctioned processes of labor negotiation. Bob Fine, Francine de Clercq, and Duncan Innes argued in the *SALB* that African unions would be foolish to forgo the chance to register with the state under Wiehahn, and should use government concessions for all they were worth, a position endorsed by FOSATU after some internal debate. In fact, the best precedent for the success of this particular tactic was the prior use by some unions “of the machinery of the works committees with the view to consolidating the unions’ position on the factory floor.” These committees, Fine et. al. argued, served as the seed of democratic shop steward structures, rank and file elections, discussions before meeting with management, and report backs—in short, the origins of strong shop-floor control, which in turn blossomed in the new unions of FOSATU in the early 1980s.<sup>60</sup> Ironically then, the

<sup>59</sup> See Bob Fine, “The Workers’ Struggle in South Africa,” *ROAPE* 24(May-August 1982):95-99; Isizwe, “Errors of Workerism”; Martin Plaut, “The Political Significance of COSATU,” *Transformation* 2(1986): 62-72; K von Holdt, “The Political Significance of COSATU: A response to Plaut,” *Transformation* 5(1987): 94-103.

<sup>60</sup> Fine, DeClerq and Innes, “Trade Unions and the state: the Question of legality,” *South African Labour Bulletin* 7 (1981):39 – 68, reprinted in Maree, ed., *The Independent Trade Unions*, p. 203. For a summary



works committees did serve as a “learning process” for African trade unionists, though the experience did not necessarily school them in the sort of “responsible” trade unionism that “liberal” employers and the United Party had hoped for.

Even though FOSATU cautiously decided to seek the legitimization of registration provided by the Wiehahn reforms, the organization did so with a determination not to dilute the shop-floor power its affiliates had done so much to build since 1973. Wiehahn sought to create a two-tier structure—union-based bargaining permitted at the Industrial Council level, but in-plant negotiation—or rather, “consultation”—operating through “works councils”, based on the “discredited” liaison committees. This, in fact, seemed to be the strategy engaged in by Henkel, by Glacier Bearings, and by Turnall in their efforts to forestall independent unions even after Wiehahn. The intention was to prevent shop-stewards from conducting direct factory-based negotiations with employers, based as it was on the dense shop-floor networks they had established.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the legislation that grew out of the Wiehahn Commission deliberately sought to shift union influence away from the shop-floor precisely because the shop-steward system had learned how to effectively use the factory committee system to its advantage. Yet, even after registration,

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of the registration debate, see Martin Plaut, “Debates in a Shark Tank: The Politics of South Africa’s Non-Racial Trade Unions,” *African Affairs* 91(July 1992): 389-403, pp. 389-91.

<sup>61</sup> Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, chap. 11, esp. pp. 238-42; Mark Mitchell and Dave Russell, “Black Unions and Political Change in South Africa,” in *Can South Africa Survive?: One Minute to Midnight*, ed. John Brewer ( ), pp. 231-54, p. 235. The Wiehahn Report itself recommended retention of a plant-based committee system, now called “works councils” or “works committees”, perhaps as insurance against the persistence of shop-floor strength (*The Complete Wiehahn Report*, pp. 70-75, 46-61), a recommendation that the SALB at the time predicted would be “likely to constitute further inroads on freedom of association and provide further mechanisms of control” to employers. The unsigned SALB article complained that the new works councils would “remove from the unions many of their traditional shop floor functions,” as they suspected the government intended. “Critique of the Wiehahn Commission and the 1979 Amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act,” *SALB* 5(August 1979): 53-75, pp. 67-68. In the event, the new legislation of 1979 and 1981 (Acts 94 and 57, respectively) did indeed establish these “works councils.” Previously existing liaison committees were understood to be functioning “works councils.”(Halton Cheadle, “Industrial Law,” in *Annual Survey of South African Law, 1981* (Joburg: Juta, 1982), 402-23, pp. 411-12). On these legal changes see also William B. Gould, “Black Unions in South Africa; Labor Law Reform and Apartheid,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 17(1981): 99-?, pp. 111-12, 141.



FOSATU unions continued to eschew participation in the industry-wide Industrial Councils, in favor of factory-based negotiations that would play to their shop-floor muscle. “The strength of FOSATU unions lies on the factory floor and in plant based negotiations,” the organization’s 1982 Congress reminded members, “yet Industrial Councils are designed to prevent plant based negotiations taking place.”<sup>62</sup>

The debates over works committees, registration, and workers control continued to inform the workerist/populist splits of the 1980s--and the issues they raised remain deeply embedded in tensions within COSATU today, between those who continue to subordinate the trade union movement to the goals of its Alliance partners (and thus the postcolonial state), the ANC and the SACP, and those who see the interests of the working class as fundamentally distinct from the goals of the “National Democratic Revolution.”<sup>63</sup> The ANC appears to have heroicized and assimilated the history of the Durban Strikes and their aftermath into the populist/nationalist project in an effort to elide the class divisions that have beset post-apartheid South Africa. In an address to COSATU in Sep. 2006, Jacob Zuma said:

We can also never forget the role of trade unions in reviving our struggle during the 1972-73 Durban strikes. The strikes had a major impact in the revival of internal mass resistance to apartheid in the 1970's. These strikes were led by amongst others, cadres who carried the political influence, of the revolutionary trade union federation, SACTU. This indicates the correctness of the approach of political revolutionary trade union movements, as distinguished from those union movements that concern themselves only with factory floor issues.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> “FOSATU Congress Report,” April 1982, K-G, IV/80/51; Eddie Webster notes that “Wiehahn’s strategy of incorporating the emerging unions into Industrial Councils was seen as an attempt to pre-empt...emerging shop floor structures,” and factory-level bargaining. (“New Force on the Shop Floor,” *South African review* 2(1984):79-89, p. 83). See also Robert A. Jones, “The Emergence of Shop Floor Trade Union Power in South Africa,” *Managerial and Decision Economics* 6 (Sep., 1985): 160-166

<sup>63</sup> Plaut, “Debates in a Shark Tank,” offers an excellent good summation of these connections.

<sup>64</sup> [Address delivered by the Deputy President of the African National Congress, Cde Jacob Zuma, at the 9th COSATU Congress, Gallagher Estate, Midrand, 18 September 2006 (<http://www.cosatu.org.za/cong2006/congress06/speeches/jz20060918.htm>), accessed March 8, 2007.





Thus in the interest of consolidating a nationalist interpretation of the history of the ANC-labor alliance, Zuma effectively has written out of history the “workerist” perspective that did so much to construct South African trade unionism after 1973. As Martin Plaut predicted in a 1984 article defending the workerist position,

This clearly has implications that go beyond the liberation struggle itself, since in a liberated South Africa the same question arises, although in a very different form. Is the trade union movement to be allowed the kind of real, if limited, freedom of action and organisation that the labour movement in Western Europe has won for itself, including the right to challenge decisions taken by the legitimate government of the day? Or are workers’ interests to be vested in a people’s government with unions playing a subsidiary role, acting as intermediaries between the state and the working class?<sup>65</sup>

This view was perhaps best expressed by Joe Foster, in his critical 1982 address to FOSATU, “The Workers’ Struggle.” There he warned against the tendency of the national liberation movement to subordinate the interests of South Africa’s growing, proletarianized working class:

It is essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters.<sup>66</sup>

A fuller explanation of this process can be located in the reformist dynamic generated by the 1973 strikes and the subsequent internal struggle to shape the post-1980 reinvigoration of the South African trade union movement. From what I have sketched above I think we have a good sense of the position taken by manufacturing capital, which sought to placate workers, boost wages (slightly), and enhance ‘communication’ as a form

<sup>65</sup> Changing Perspectives on South African Trade Unions Author(s): Martin Plaut Source: Review of African Political Economy, No. 30, Conflict in the Horn of Africa, (Sep., 1984), pp. 116-123

<sup>66</sup> ‘The Workers’ Struggle’: A South African Text Revisited. By Martin Plaut. Review of African Political Economy No.96:129 (2003).



of control, while blocking the path to independent trade unionism and collective bargaining. To this end, the works and especially liaison committees appeared to serve their purpose, but only temporarily. The “state”—or more to the point, the NP—remained adamantly opposed to trade union recognition, but also sought to create mechanisms by which employers would have to raise wages without the NP bearing the political responsibility for doing so. Here too the committees stood as an excellent compromise, but one that could not hold.

But what about African workers? Although Mahmood Mamdani regards the Durban Strikes as the precursor to South Africa’s alleged divisions between “insiders” and “outsiders” based on ethnicity and cosmopolitanism, in fact we still do not know enough about whom the strikers were, what communities they came from, or the degree to which they were “migrants” or an urbanized proletariat. Whatever their status, to be sure much of the evidence suggests their profound dissatisfaction with the works and liaison committees. Yet a close examination of the workings of these committees suggests that workers often elected to them people who they believed could represent their collective interests against management; that union organizers both inside and outside the factory built nascent shop steward structures within these committees; and that the works and liaison committees, in fact, inadvertently serve as training grounds for industrial unionism, initiating workers into the practice of deliberation, negotiation, solidarity, and workplace democracy. Shop-floor activists proved able to infiltrate the committees and eventually develop them into embryonic organizations; some of the leadership strata created in the mid-1970s clearly operated under the protective legitimacy of the works and liaison committees, only to emerge as militants in the subsequent decade. Meanwhile, workers who accurately regarded the committees as far too beholden to employers still found in them a “shadow” of shop-floor democracy. In light of the dedicated workers who served on these committees, and their intimate connection to the unions that developed, before



and after Wiehahn, and to FOSATU itself, we should resist the characterization of these structures as nothing more than a sham.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> As CIO organizers in the steel mills, packinghouses, and auto factories of the U.S. learned in the 1930s, members of company unions established in 1933-34 often provided the backbone of the new industrial unions of that era once they secured the protective legitimacy offered by the Wagner Act in 1935. This was especially true of black workers, who previously had seen in company unions, despite their grave flaws, a viable alternative to the exclusionist or at best paternalistic racism of the American Federation of Labor.



## Notes