

From Durban to Wiehahn: Black Workers, Employers, and the State in South Africa during the 1970s

Paper proposal for 'The Durban Moment: Revisiting politics, labour, youth, and resistance in the 1970s'

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Abstract:

This paper examines the complex reformist process that led to the recognition of black trade unions under apartheid. Through a close reading of trade union documents, the business press, and the records of the Wiehahn Commission the paper explores the contending interests of white unions eager to protect their turf; employers hoping to tame a restive black working class; the state, which sought to split the emergent black trade unions from the liberation movement; and, not least, black workers seeking to expand the shop-floor power they had seized in the aftermath of the Durban strikes and with their new organizations. It concludes that despite the desperate efforts of employers and the state to tame the new black unions and to curb their shop-floor power, the powerful syndicalist current of the 1970s carried over into the anti-apartheid trade union movement of the 1980s. As a result, black workers became central to the birth of democracy in South Africa.