

FOSATU

BEGINNINGS

THE FIGHT FOR the workers



FOSATU WAS LAUNCHED ON 14 AND 15 APRIL 1979 AT HAMMANSKRAAL. MBU DLAMINI REMEMBERS IT WELL. "IT WAS ORGANISED, I MUST SAY. THERE WERE QUITE A NUMBER OF WORKERS FROM ALL OVER. IT WAS QUITE A BIG CONFERENCE. THE SPIRIT ... THERE WAS UNITY AMONG PEOPLE. THERE WAS ENERGY IN THE PEOPLE, A FEELING OF ONENESS, THEY BELONGED TO ONE ORGANISATION." FOSATU Archives, AH2680/A40

FOSATU was formed over 30 years ago, in April 1979. It was a trade union federation that was unique, unlike anything that had existed before. Created in a particular time in South Africa's tumultuous political and social history, it focused on the workers' struggle in which the worker was the central actor. Workers' democracy and control were the core tenets upon which FOSATU was founded.

In the six years that it was active, from 1979 to 1985, when it merged with other unions to form COSATU, FOSATU organised over 120,000 workers in 11 affiliated unions, becoming the largest non-racial, independent trade union federation of its time.

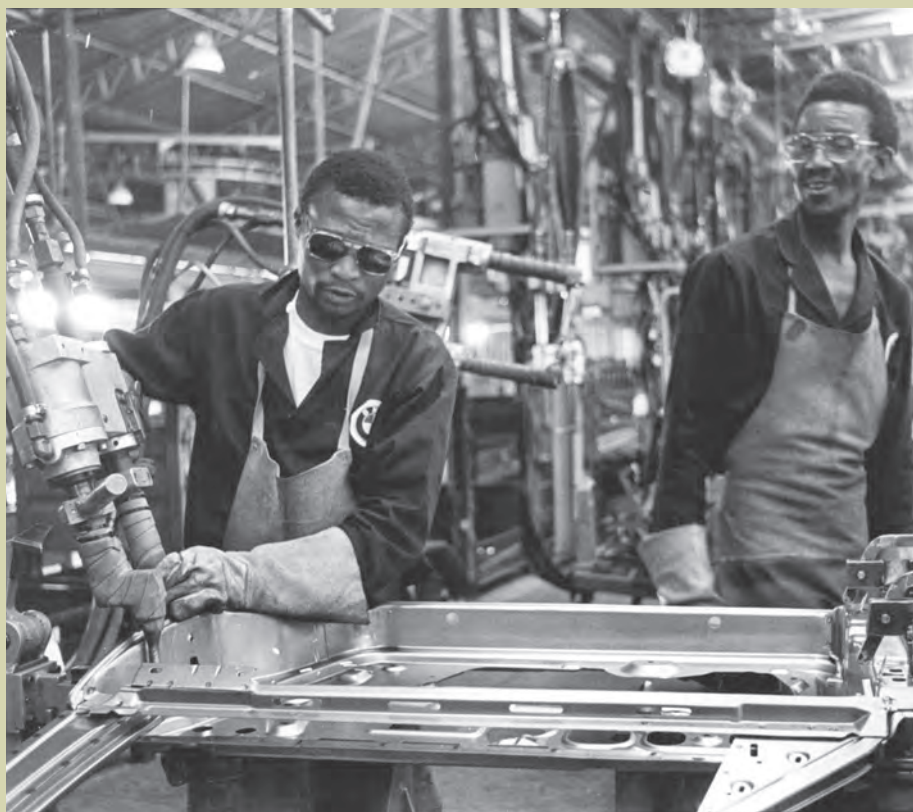


THE EXISTENCE OF A UNITED AND TIGHT FEDERATION LIKE FOSATU GAVE THE AFRICAN WORKING CLASS THE CONFIDENCE TO CHALLENGE THE EXTREME PREJUDICE AND VICTIMISATION THEY FACED ON THE FACTORY FLOOR. FOSATU Archives, AH2680/B.110

“I am brave with FOSATU!”

THE TURMOIL of the 1970s





BMW WORKERS AT ROSSLYN PLANT, PRETORIA. MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY REQUIRED A SMALL BUT STABLE STRATUM OF AFRICAN WORKERS WHO WERE ABLE TO CARRY OUT SEMI-SKILLED LABOUR. THIS CONFLICTED WITH THE IDEOLOGY OF THE NATIONAL PARTY, WHICH PREFERRED AN UNSKILLED AND MIGRANT LABOUR FORCE. Taffy Adler Papers, AH 2065/1163

It was in the context of deepening economic and political crisis in the 1970s that FOSATU was to come into being.

The South African economy had emerged from the boom of the 1960s into a decade of economic crisis and uncertainty. Fuelled by the massive rise in world oil prices in 1973, the economy suffered bitterly as a result of the reduction in export markets and decreased foreign investment.

For African workers, the sharp rise in the cost of living with no corresponding wage increases meant that the 1970s was a period of hardship and struggle. The struggle for economic survival drove growing numbers of militant workers to join unions in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, workers' bargaining power increased considerably, due to the manufacturing boom of the sixties.

A significant factor in the rise of trade unions in the seventies was the shift in the terrain of production during the previous decade. The unprecedented boom in manufacturing in the 1960s had led to the development and rapid expansion of an industrial working class, based in factories. These changes in the labour process led to a demand for semi-skilled operators that could not be met by the existing white labour force. As a result, African workers were even more indispensable to industry, and their bargaining position improved substantially.

While the growth of semi-skilled workers was significant during this period, African women and male migrant workers were struggling with economic survival, and they swelled the number of workers joining unions in the 1970s and 1980s.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

THE CHANGING TERRAIN OF PRODUCTION TODAY

When looking at the legacy of FOSATU, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of industrial production has changed dramatically in the 21st century.

In the 1970s industrial production was essentially to support a booming domestic mining industry. Little was exported. When workers organised and made wage demands, employers could entertain these demands because the increased costs of production could be passed on to domestic consumers. By the year 2000, the world economy had become integrated and the South African economy was as much a part of this process as any other. By 2000 employers had an option when faced with rising wage demands. They could move production to another country where wage costs, for various reasons, are substantially lower. Thus for employers, the response to a wage demand has become a cold-blooded decision – distilled into the costs of foreign production plus transport plus quality control versus increased labour costs within South Africa.

In this context, the ability of national trade unions to increase workers' wages is limited today, compared with the 1970s and 1980s.

The global trend of economic liberalisation has also posed serious problems for the trade union movement today. The shift from state to private ownership in large sectors of the economy, labour

market flexibility, the casualisation of labour and outsourcing have all led to job insecurity as well as massive job losses.

HAVE THESE GLOBAL CHANGES AFFECTED COSATU'S CURRENT EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS AND OTHER UNIONS ORGANISING THE SERVICE SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY?

ARE THERE OTHER FACTORS WHICH REDUCE THE STRENGTH OF INDUSTRIAL BARGAINING NOW, COMPARED WITH THE HEYDAY OF FOSATU?



A WOMAN WORKER PUTS FINAL TOUCHES TO CAR PAINT
Photo by Lesley Lawson, Taffy Adler Papers, AH 2065/J161

THE ROAD TO fosatu

New trade unions emerge

**“Ufil’ umuntu, ufil usadikiza – a person is dead,
but their spirit lives on.”**

In 1973 a series of spontaneous strikes broke out in Durban. These strikes took everyone by surprise – management, workers and an immature and disorganised labour movement. The Durban strikes represented a key moment in the black workers’ movement, inspiring a new confidence in workers, and generating an unprecedented growth in membership in the emerging trade unions.

As new unions sprang up from various quarters, and union membership increased dramatically, it was difficult to sustain this growth and worker militancy without some form of coordination and organisation.

It was in this context that a group of university-based Marxist academics in several centres throughout the country began to debate a way forward. In Natal, the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) and the General Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) were formed. Workers linked to the GFWBF began to set up unions such as the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) and the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW). In Johannesburg, the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), founded by NUSAS, linked Wages Commission students and academics and former SACTU black trade unionists. In the Cape, UCT-based academics created the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau (WPWAB). All these bodies aimed both to educate and to organise workers.

Following the explosion of strikes in Natal, however, employer reprisals and police repression mounted. Many workers who found themselves vulnerable to dismissal or worse in this new climate left the fledgling unions. A new strategy was hammered out in response. Firstly, the unions retreated into a smaller number of factories in which department-based shop stewards played the leading role. Secondly, in October 1973, the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC) was formed to create a tight, unified and defensive structure.

The formation of TUACC marked an important step in the development of workers' democracy and workers' control. It provided a forum where workers from different trade unions could share ideas and compare tactics, and it helped them to develop common policies.

TUACC was crucial in creating a vision of a tight trade union federation which focused on the development of strong shop floor structures. Shop stewards as the key organisers on factory floors was the brainchild of TUACC. The council recognised the vulnerability of the emerging trade union movement. Without tight organisation, the unions would be unable to sustain any growth in membership. One of the key decisions of the TUACC was also to insist that only 'open' trade unions could become members. It defined 'open' trade unions as those that accepted all workers, '... regardless of race, religion or sex', challenging the widespread practice of organising black and white workers into separate 'parallel' trade unions. The TUACC unions stressed the need for democratic, non-racial trade unions, and insisted that workers at all levels control any new federation.

It was out of this thinking that FOSATU was to emerge in 1979.

With material conditions pointing towards a trade union federation, "talks about talks" began to be instituted at many levels within the unions. It took a breakaway to provide the catalyst. The National Union of Motor and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA) prompted these unity talks. It was a registered coloured trade union that had broken away from the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). It challenged the prevailing labour laws by organising African workers in a parallel trade union, the United Automobile Workers (UAW). NUMARWOSA was a well-organised union that exploited the legal system and the industrial councils to the workers' benefit. FOSATU was able to draw on these experiences.



THE PUTCO STRIKE, 1980 Photo by Paul Weinberg, South African Institute of Race Relations Records, AD 1788/11B.4

Very few of the Cape unions participated in the talks about unity and thus continued to exist as independent trade unions outside of FOSATU.

A number of CCOBTU (Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions) unions, which emerged out of the Urban Training Project (UTP) and included some parallel unions from TUCSA, affiliated themselves to the new federation.

At its launch, FOSATU claimed a membership of 45,000, with three registered unions and nine unregistered unions.

Independent Cape Unions

The independent Cape unions arose from two very divergent political currents: the General Workers' Union (GWU) developed from academics and students at the University of Cape Town. Initially they formed workers' advisory bureaux to exploit the legal opportunities to redress unfair treatment of workers. Out of these advisory bureaux, a trade union centred on stevedores in the Cape Town docks arose. Although the GWU set out to expand membership, they never really moved beyond their stevedorean base. At first they were politically independent, but later tilted strongly towards the ANC.

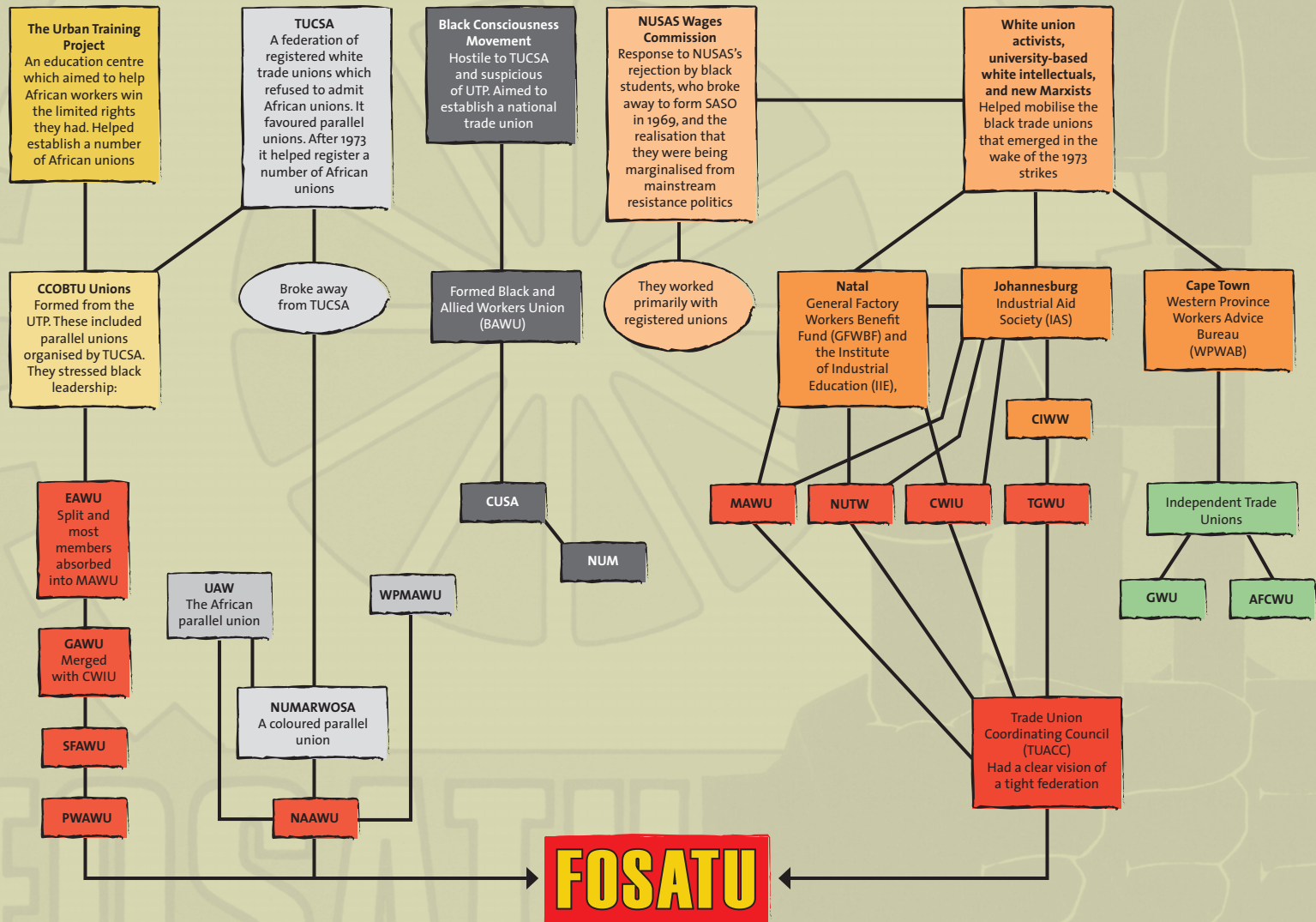
The second current, the Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU), was formed by the Communist Party in the early 1940s and had a strong base in the fruit and vegetable canning industry in the Western Cape. Although severely weakened by the banning of the ANC and the repression of SACTU in the 1960s, the FCWU continued to operate as a largely apolitical union until the late 1970s, when a more radical leadership emerged. Despite both FOSATU and the FCWU adopting similar tactics on the shop floor, the two groups did not unite until the founding of COSATU. The issue of registration proved to be a major bar to unity.

The Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA)

CUSA had its origins in the UTP and the CCOBTU unions which did not affiliate with FOSATU. It was launched in September 1980 with nine affiliates and a membership of 30,000. The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) remained independent. Unlike FOSATU, CUSA was a loosely organised coordinating body and initially did not promote militant industrial action. It recognised the need to consolidate democratic decision-making structures and to develop effective leadership.

CUSA is seen as a Black Consciousness union as it championed a policy of black leadership. This had its antecedents in the Urban Training Project which committed itself to the formation of black-run unions. Its most militant affiliate was the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which was launched in 1982.

In the 1970s various tendencies emerged within the labour movement in an attempt to harness the anger of black workers into organised trade unions.



Wiehahn and New Labour Legislation

New labour legislation also contributed to the need to develop a united front.

As part of P.W. Botha's dual strategy of repression and reform, the Riekert and the Wiehahn Commissions were appointed in 1979 to investigate the influx of Africans into the urban areas and the restrictive labour laws respectively.

The Riekert Commission divided the African workforce into urban 'insiders' whose permanence in the urban areas was recognised, and homeland 'outsiders'.

The Wiehahn Commission recommended that 'insider' Africans be brought into the industrial relations system through the recognition of African trade unions. However, the Commission insisted that the registration of unions would be on a racial basis, in a direct attempt to divide the workforce. Mine-workers would be negatively affected by the Commission as it recommended that job reservation be scrapped, except within the mining industry. And migrant workers, the majority of whom were mine-workers, would also be excluded from trade union membership.

The Wiehahn recommendations were not the cure-all that the labour movement might have hoped for. In fact, they aimed rather to stifle and divide the expanding black labour movement, which was rising up outside of state control.

It was these conditions that ultimately led to the formation of FOSATU. The majority of African trade unions viewed the Wiehahn report and the ensuing legislation with deep suspicion bred from 30 years of discrimination. The union movement argued that a coordinated and national strategy was needed to deal with this attack head-on.

It is thus possible to see the idea of FOSATU as both an organic response, growing out of the need by the union movement for an organised federation; and as a response to a hostile state, seeking to restrict the life-force of the unions.

MAKING CONNECTIONS LABOUR LAWS TODAY

In the late 1980s, not only was COSATU central in the organised struggle against the state, it also fought against an amendment of the Labour Relations Act which sought to restrict unions' right to strike, and called for new legislation that would provide full workers' rights. During the transition to democracy and later as a part of the ruling Tripartite Alliance, COSATU was able to wield enormous influence in the area of policy formulation, pushing through legislation that was favourable in terms of workers' rights. The Labour Relations Act (LRA) of 1995 was one such piece of labour-friendly legislation.

However, as the new labour legislation works more favourably for workers, employers have sought to offset these gains with alternative labour practices. These include the use of casual labour, which do not fall within the ambit of the LRA, outsourcing, as well as the use of labour brokers.

HOW DO UNIONS TODAY PROTECT THEIR WORKERS FROM SUCH PRACTICES AS THE CASUALISATION AND INFORMALISATION OF LABOUR?



WORKERS MEET DURING THE FIRESTONE STRIKE, AUGUST 1983
Photo by Paul Weinberg, Taffy Adler Papers, AH2065/J128

Labour Correspondent
CAPE TOWN. — South
Africa's new Rightwing
trade unionists yesterday
blamed Natal's strikes on

strike—union

cially an Afrikaner, can object
to leaders who canvass among
synthetic docile workers to

An American, Mr. Sterling
Tucker, director of the Nation-
al Urban League, outlined how

African
The

"When the boss liked you, he gave you an increase. But when he did not like you, no matter how hard you worked he did not give you an increase"

Jabu Ndlovu

Most Africans don't get R110 - 1975

Rand Daily Mail

"I have opened the closed gates. It's a victory comrades! We will overcome these employers. Let us be together and fight the evil employers. Amandla!"

Alfred Temba Qabula



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