

# Unions and the motor industry

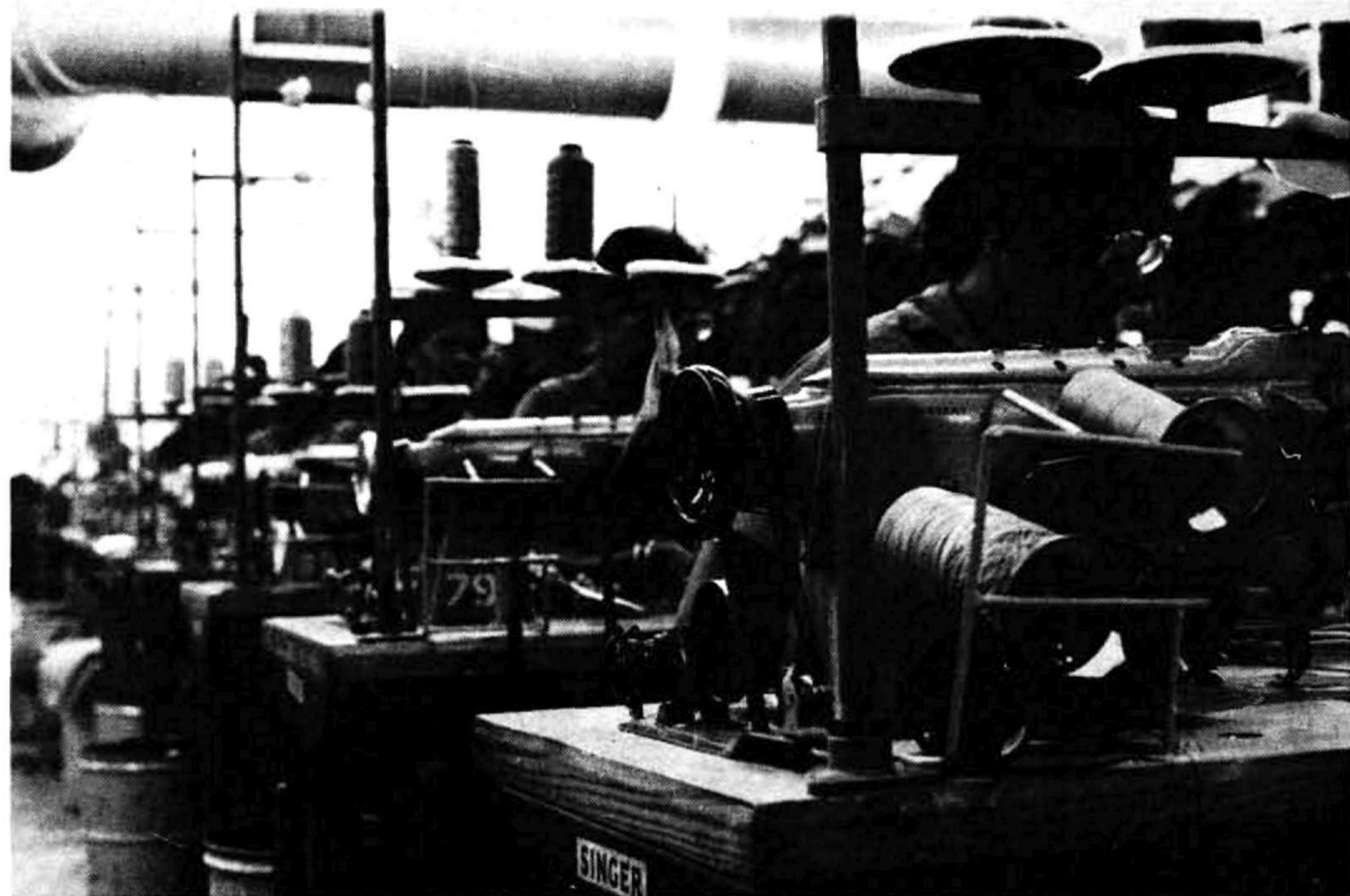
Continued from page 14

provide the windscreens they need. Also, the largest retailing operation in the car industry, McCarthy, is owned ultimately by Anglo American.

## Unionisation

The motor assembly industry is the most highly unionised in the country. The National Automobile and Allied Workers Union has organised about half of the industry and negotiates in all the assembly plants except Nissan. NAAWU has over the past 10 years improved wages and working conditions to the point where they are the best in the country. NAAWU's organising campaigns have included a number of firsts including the first, and probably still the only, union to have organised the majority of workers of all races in one industry into a union. In 1980 it was the first union to break the R2 per hour minimum wage level and in 1984 it passed the R3 an hour minimum wage. In 1982 NAAWU was the first union to organise an industry-wide strike (the Ford/GM/Volkswagen strike). And it was the first union to organise a nation-wide company strike (the 1983 Autoplastics strike).

The components industry is not so well organised. Part of the problem here is that the in-



Long rows of women workers sew the car trimmings

dustry is very widespread — there are a large number of factories, many of which employ small workforces. However, the improved relationship between unions affiliated to International Metalworkers Federation (NAAWU, the Metal and Allied Workers Union and the Motor Industry Combined Workers Union) promises better union organisation. Hopefully, in the near future, wages and working conditions for the component industry will reach the levels won by NAAWU in the motor assembly plants.

The same co-operation is evident in the Tyre and Rubber industry where NAAWU and

MAWU between them have organised close to 70 percent of the industry and together with another FOSATU affiliate, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, have turned their attention to the industrial rubber sector. NAAWU's first negotiations at the Eastern Province Tyre and Rubber Industrial Council, where it replaced the whites-only Iron and Steel Workers Union as the major negotiating union, achieved a minimum wage of R2,15.

## The Future

At the present time the future is hard to predict. Undoubtedly, motor vehicles will continue to

be built in South Africa. In fact, it is likely that more and more vehicles roll off the local assembly lines. However, these will be produced by fewer manufacturers. And we can expect that some of the current motor companies will either withdraw, go bankrupt, or merge. As a result many workers will lose their jobs — a serious problem which the closure of the Ford Neave plant in Port Elizabeth has revealed. On top of this, the reversal of government policy protecting the local motor industry will expose the motor companies to competition from the mass producers of America, Europe and especially Japan.

This will put even more pressures on the employment situation. The final ingredient in this unemployment pie is the increasing mechanisation and robotisation of the motor plants.

The motor companies are encouraging the increasing control of the industry by just a few manufacturers, both at a local level and internationally. The South African government is not interested in preventing this. So, the only ones who can are the unions. But, in order to overcome these problems confronting motor workers will require unity, strength and far-sighted leadership.

# The struggle for trade unions

## What is a trade union?

When workers come together and decide to form an organisation to help them at their work, this organisation is called a trade union. But, as we will see it is not always easy to form trade unions, and workers have had a very long struggle to do so.

## How did trade unions start?

This is a long story, and we will only look at the most important points. The first trade unions were started in England and Europe about 200 years ago. They were started by workers who had to work very long hours in dark, dirty, dangerous and noisy conditions in the factories, workshops and mines. They were paid very low wages for the work they did. The people who worked were poor and powerless, while the bosses for whom they worked were rich and powerful.

But why did workers have to work like this? Couldn't they have done something else — something nicer?

Well the problem for workers then, and for workers today, is that they had no real choice. They had to work, and they had to work for the people who owned the factories.

It had not always been like that in Europe. Great changes had slowly taken place.

## Traders become capitalists

For more than 1 000 years, the people of what we now call Europe, had traded with other countries mainly in the Middle East and Far East. These traders were often called merchants, and they traded in gold, silver, beautiful cloth, spices to stop food going rotten, salt, iron and many other things. Many of these goods came from Africa and Asia, and were carried by land and sea to Europe.

About 600 years ago some of the kings and queens in Europe grew stronger and decided to try and deal directly with the far-away places producing these things, rather than rely on traders. So, they sent explorers such as Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus and Bartholomew Diaz to search for the areas where these goods could be found. The explorers wanted to get to India and China by sea, and they also wanted to get to the gold mines that they knew lay south of the great deserts of Africa.

The explorers who tried to sail around Africa succeeded. Others like Christopher Columbus, sailed west and came to

This space in each edition will be set aside specially for students. For the next few issues of FOSATU Worker News, we will be carrying a simple history of trade unions. It will be looking at how and why trade unions were formed, who they represent and how they operate. In future, together with features on interesting topics, we hope to carry poems, letters, drawings and comments sent in by student readers. So if you have something to say or send, write to The Editor, P O Box 18109, Dalbridge 4014.



Explorer, Christopher Columbus, 'discovers' South America while trying to find a new route to India

America. Eventually they sailed around America and reached India and China because, as you know, the world is round like a ball.

These voyages led to greater trade between Europe and these far-away lands, and had huge effects on the whole world. The traders were becoming more powerful because they began to hoard their wealth. They were beginning to change into what are called capitalists.

Certain powerful and determined people saw that if they could take over the control of this trade, then they could become very wealthy. But, to control the trade, they would have to control the way in which these goods were transported. So these people grouped together to form companies which bought the ships. In fact, when they grouped together they found that they could build bigger and more powerful ships, and also that they had the support of the kings and religious leaders. Of course, trade was very profitable, and it was regarded as something which was virtuous and important. How did trade make these people wealthy?

Next issue we look at how these early capitalists became wealthy through profits and how their greed for profit drove them to war.