REVIEW: Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-55; The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council

Jon Lewis

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Jon Lewis' newly-published study represents a landmark in the development of an historical understanding of the South African trade union movement. Even when his approach suggests controversy, it will likely be a reference point for debate and discussion over a long time. Much has been written about the unions of the inter-war years and after, but in general from a fragmented perspective that is more concerned with political history and the state than with the direct situation of workers themselves. Thus Edward Roux and the Simons have treated workers' struggles as one aspect of a generalised African political struggle. They, as well as other contributors to the literature such as Bill Andrews, Bettie du Toit or Solly Sachs, were powerfully motivated by their own situation as active participants, which presents both advantages and disadvantages to the reader. A more recent group of scholars have been interested in the trade union past in more rigorous analyses, notably Rob Davies, Dan O' Meara and David Yudelman. They have focussed their attention on the theme of "incorporation" in examining the relations between white workers and the state or the Nationalist Party; it is the state and national politics, not workers, which is their real object of study.

Lewis, however, centres his account around two foci, the politics of the trade union movement itself (with a subtle and sensitive awareness of its fault-lines and tensions) and the history of social relations within industry; the labour process in the context of South African industrialisation. For once, the book's title is actually a more accurate indication of the contents than the strictly academically-oriented sub-title. Although there is an able organisational study here, the rise and fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council (TLC) is really a peg on

which Lewis can hang some important ideas. On the strength of its twenty year record of survival, he defends the existence of a core of non-racial, class-conscious militant trade unionism persevering, not merely despite the hostile South African environment, but indeed actually attuned to that environment. Within the TLC, Lewis argues, one could find racism along with other manifestations of sectional interest but there also was space for those trying to organise the whole national workforce; it sheltered an effective and significant Left. As such the heritage of the organisation has bifurcated. It led historically both into the paternalistic, conservative and essentially protective TUCSA system and into the politically-charged, radically anti-racist SACTU position.

Lewis considers three distinct phases within the history of South African labour. The early trade unions, virtually all-white on the Rand but not on the coast, contained a strongly conservative logic, concerned as they were to protect the relatively high wages of their members. These unions (eg. the Amalgamated Engineering Union) were craft unions, and the skills members possessed were quite genuine and difficult for a long time to reproduce in South African conditions. Potential labour competition at first came from the ranks of unskilled whites or, more menacingly, from the capacity of capital to restructure the industrial process in a form that would deskill workers. Undercutting was not simply a question of cheap black labour. As a result, craft unions tended to be pragmatic in their choice of weapons. They were as apt to include as to exclude outsiders, whether black or white. Directly involved in the production process and only to a limited extent supervisors, they came systematically into direct conflict with bosses and developed a consistently militant consciousness of class.

The industrial boom of World War I and its immediate aftermath created the potential for a second type of union responding to the needs of "semi-skilled" operatives. This new work-force was far less well-paid than craftsmen and was extremely heterogeneous. It included members of all South African racial groups, women and minors as well as adult males. Pay-scales did not reveal the sharp differentiation according to race that characterised wages on farms or mines. In brief, these new industries lacked a cohesive

racial hierachy. As a result, a new "industrial unionism" gained ground in various trades in which non-racial practices were often current. Solly Sachs and his garment workers form the best-known example and Lewis gives a good account of them; but he has also explored the history of early unionism among furniture workers, leather workers and other trades. He thereby de-emphasises the determinant role of Sachs and other strong personalities given elsewhere and instead tries to demonstrate that social and economic forces themselves threw up a more open and potentially more radical kind of unionism. He relates the hitherto obscure history of strikes and labour struggles of these workers as well as the potential that existed, and was occassionally activated, for co-operation across the colour line.

The TLC, formed in 1930, and its predecessor the TUC (1924), represented an amalgam of the two forces discussed above, symbolised by the crucial participation of both engineers and garment workers. Defensist craft workers and militant new industrial union members were able to forge a common front, while the first African industrial trade unionists could call on the "explicitly non-racial" TLC for practical support in various ways.

All this came under growing attack in the 1940s, culminating in the dissolution of the TLC in 1954 and the fragmentation of the South African trade union movement. For numerous authors, the villain of the peace has been the Afrikaner nationalist politician, keen to destroy the hold of the union movement on Afrikaners and to break the significance of class-based organisation in South Africa. Lewis feels that this is a very inadequate assessment and points to the limited real success of "christian national" unionism before 1948. He prefers to emphasise instead the dramatic shifts in the labour process that came to fruition during World War II. Capital brought whites away from the point of production. Given white political strength as well as the need to create an enlarged army of supervisors to patrol the new frontiers of "scientific management" (an ideology that Lewis dissects brilliantly), the white labour force gets pulled into supervisory functions that essentially intensify a commitment to racial hierarchy in industry. This third phase witnessed the white craft unions turned into "pseudo-craft" unions, where class interest revolved crudely around the colour bar.

In consequence, white workers increasingly rejected the TLC heritage just, ironically, as the federation leadership fell increasingly into progressive hands. A series of breakaways led to the formation of SATUC, TUCSA's predecessor, in 1954 and SACTU in 1955. Other former TLC unions moved even further to the right than SATUC, becoming emphatically racist. This was the end of a "wider, non-racial trade unionism in South Africa" for a generation.

Like most revisionists of recent years, Lewis is concerned to escape from racial prejudice as a determinant explanation in the shaping of South African society. He concludes by re-iterating that "trade union divisions in South Africa have not resulted from immutable racial antipathies. Rather the roots of sectionalism are to be found in the division of labour and the general way work is organised and it is this which has placed strict limits on trade union strategy and organisation."

This emphasis does much to illuminate our understanding of the history of the South African working class. It can, however, be raised as a criticism that Lewis has gone too far to the opposite end of the spectrum from the conventional wisdom. An important racist element existed within the practice both of the craft workers and of the white semi-skilled. A recent thesis on Solly Sachs and the garment workers by Leslie Witz makes this point incisively. As Lewis recognises, Sachs was continually being forced to compromise with the racist outlook of most of his white women workers. They were prepared to accept the leftist Sachs for his excellent union work and most were also prepared to incorporate Coloured and African women into the organisation (albeit in a parallel branch/union) because it was practical. Apart from a small if impressive core of militants, however, they rejected Sachs' general political and social outlook. Loyal union members were often loyal Nationalist Party voters at one and the same time. There is, moreover, a contrast to be drawn between the extraordinarily political radicalism, violence and class hostility towards the state manifested in white worker struggles up to the Rand Revolt in 1922 and the sometimes tough but still bounded militancy, more economistic than syndicalist, of the new industrial unions thereafter.

Lewis' own analysis makes it clear that white worker atti-

tudes became more racist in the 1940s even in trades where the labour process was not changing and previous workplace conditions prevailed. The only trade unions able to remain on a radical course after 1948 were those that had more or less shed their white membership. Food and canning workers were perhaps the best-known example; they became SACTU stalwarts. He himself points to the problem in briefly addressing our need to study more the "political and ideological traditions within the working class movement." Such traditions can help to explain forms of resistance and militancy but also acquiescence and exclusion of "competitive" ethnic or racial groups. Research centred around the Johannesburg History Workshop and influenced by international social historical research, which has enormously advanced in the past twenty years, has begun to enrich our knowledge of the history of ordinary South African workers; this research needs to be integrated with economic and organisational studies such as this book in new kinds of syntheses. What perhaps needs emphasis finally is that racism always exists in living and sympathetic relation to the material and work conditions of men and women; it can never be understood effectively as a disembodied force, however great its ideological weight, yet these connections should not lead us to underestimate its force.

Black union traditions, as distinct from those within the TLC, remain far shadowier in this study. Lewis points to the greatest single "unknown" in South African labour history, the story of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions that achieved such a large membership during World War II only to melt like the snow after the coming of the peace. If we knew more about CNETU, our sense of the political and organisational parameters of working-class history might well alter.

Lewis' interest in labour process change and management ideology makes this book an important contribution to South African economic history. Lewis places fundamental stress on the war years as his crucible for change. Perhaps more attention could have been given to the first six boom years before war broke out in 1939; while one wonders whether the move towards machinofacture, even in engineering, was not more gradual, with older forms of production holding strong often until the 1960s.

An interesting aspect of the study by implication is that Lewis gives such fair due to the rise of secondary industry and its particular social characteristics. So much of our stereotyped view of South African labour history is based on the gold mines but most South Africans, whatever their colour, did not work on the mines at all. A mine-based determinism presents severe problems in understanding other sectors of the economy, notably secondary industry. The white underground miner notoriously did not possess remarkable skill levels despite his high pay, and his work involved a heavy emphasis on supervising "unskilled" black workers; he was early on attracted to extreme forms of racism as his best practical defense in struggles against the mineowners. Only with massive deskilling in the wake of the development of mass production did white workers in secondary industry also become "pseudo-craft" unionists, as Lewis terms them, reliant on colour bars. In challenging this stereotype and others, Lewis has opened for all of us the possibility of a far richer and sharper understanding of the history and prospects of industrial unionism in South Africa.

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