

BUILDERS OF THE NATION

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REBIRTH OF THE DEMOCRATIC LABOUR MOVEMENT


Today's labour movement has its roots in the emergence of the workers' movement in 1973, at the height of the apartheid era. In that year, over 100 000 workers went on strike in Natal. This led to a wave of workplace protest and strikes throughout the country.



The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) consolidated the unions into a massive national federation.



A Fosatu education workshop, early 1980s.



Strikers in Natal take to the streets, 1973.



The new trade unions grew rapidly during the 1980s, forming the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu). These unions concentrated on building shop steward structures, winning legal recognition after many struggles. The key feature of these unions was direct accountability of their leaders to their members, based on mandates and regular report-backs. Other unions also formed federations, like the National African Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) and the Azanian Congress of Trade Unions (AZACTU).

In 1985, Fosatu unions joined with a number of other trade unions which combined struggles in the workplace with resistance to the apartheid state. The new federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was able to mobilise millions of workers in rolling mass action and play a crucial role in the transition to democracy.