



This is the last part of a series written especially for students which looked at why trade unions were formed by workers. Workers found out that only by joining together could they fight against the capitalists desire to suck more and more profit from them. In this section we look at the different forms of trade unions and why the principle of workers control is so important to the independent unions in South Africa. In future issues of FOSATU Workers News we will be looking at the history of education. Students, if you have any poems, letters, or drawings you want to be included in this space, write to The Editor, P O Box 18109, Dalbridge 4014.

Only workers can directly challenge the capitalists

Workers around the world understood that if they joined together in groups and demanded better conditions and more pay, the owners of the factories would have to listen to them. They realised that taken together their role in the production of goods was more important than the role of their bosses. Workers realised that if they joined together and acted together they could cut back the capitalists' profit.

One way in which workers have tried to do this in the past is through trade unions. South Africa has had a long history of trade unionism. But not all trade unions are the same. For example, in the early days of gold mining workers organised themselves around their skills. The role of these craft unions was not to protect all workers, but only those which had a particular kind of job. So all the carpenters may have formed a union which would fight the capitalists for higher wages for carpenters only. These craft unions divided the workers because they protected the more skilled workers from those without any skills.

Another type of trade unions which have existed in South Africa are general unions. They were organised under very poor working conditions. These unions arose with the factory system, and tried to organise all workers, skilled or unskilled across all industries. This was the case with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) formed in 1919. These general unions because of their broadness were easily dominated by a few individuals.

More recently, however, a new kind of trade unionism has arisen. These unions are often called industrial unions. Unlike the general unions, different unions were formed by workers for the various industries. For example, all the workers employed in factories which make motor cars and trucks organised themselves into a motor union.

Unity gives workers the power to fight for better conditions

Industrial unionism is important because it allows workers to elect their leaders in the factory. These worker leaders are called shop stewards. The shop steward's job is to represent the workers and negotiate for the workers with the bosses. The shop steward cannot just do what he or she wants. If the shop steward doesn't listen to the workers and carry out their instructions, the workers will remove him or her and elect somebody else. In this way, shop stewards are accountable to the workers that have elected them.

Most industrial unions



In the 19th Century, workers in the cotton mills (above) used to work for up to 15 hours a day

encourage the participation of their members in the day to day running of the union. This is to make sure that the leaders of the union don't simply take decisions on their own. They must be controlled by the members. This is why democracy is so important to these trade unions. The role of the shop steward is very important in the union's democracy.

Why have the workers organised themselves in this way in the factory? One of the biggest reasons is that they know just how powerful the capitalist bosses are. Workers know that by acting on their own or in small groups they have very little power. Bosses can easily fire small numbers of workers if they try and fight for better working conditions. This is why democracy is so important in a workers' organisation. It means that as many people as possible are involved in discussing which issues should be taken up, and how they should be acted upon. In this way the trade unions in the

factory ensure majority support for any decision taken.

It is very important to understand how workers have organised themselves against the bosses in the factories. This is because in a capitalist society power is held by the capitalist class and the government. For workers to resist this power and to have any say in the way in which things are produced and the way in which the society is governed, they must themselves act as a class.

The power of the workers comes from the fact that it is workers who operate the machines. The workers dig for gold, make the shoes, drive the buses, work in the iron foundries and build the roads. They produce the goods from which the capitalists make the profits. Because of this, the workers are the only people in society who can directly challenge the position of the bosses. The capitalist bosses need the workers. Without them there would be no food to eat, clothes to wear or houses to live in. In

other words, besides the capitalist class, the working class is the only group of people who have any economic power in a capitalist society.

The workers' struggle against exploitation by the capitalists has been a long one. Many gains have been made however. Throughout the world workers have struggled to try and shorten the number of hours that they work every day. In England for example, in the early days of capitalism and the factory system, women and children worked in the factories for up to 16 hours a day. There were great struggles by workers to reduce this time. In the 1840's the government passed a law which said that workers could only work for 10 hours a day. It was only in the 1900's that the working day was reduced to eight hours. In many countries workers still work for over eight hours a day. In South Africa workers put forward a demand on May Day this year for a forty

hour week (an eight hour day). In Germany workers had a massive campaign in 1984 for a 35 hour week.

Democratic unions prepare workers for their role in a future society

The shortening of the working week has not been the only area where workers have made great strides. The right to form democratic trade unions, the right to decent working conditions, and the right to better wages were all gains made by workers. Capitalists did not provide these rights out of the kindness of their hearts — they had to be fought for by workers. Battles around retrenchment, the unfair dismissal of workers, sexual harassment and maternity rights are still being fought by trade unions.

However, trade unions haven't only been concerned with the conditions of their membership on the shop floor of the factory. For example in 1984, FOSATU sent representatives from door to door in the townships to encourage people not to vote under the new constitution. And in many areas in South Africa, shop steward councils have been active in discussing and acting upon issues which affect workers in the community.

The gains made by workers' trade unions have been many. But more impressive than these gains has been the formation of an organisation directed and controlled by the workers themselves. Workers are gaining experience in decision-making in their trade unions. They are able to have some control over their own lives. Such an organisation opposes the strict authority of the capitalist bosses and trains workers for the role which they will play in a future society. In South Africa trade unions have become schools for worker democracy.

We can learn from the workers' struggle in the factory. Workers have shown that this is where real power lies. They have also shown that to use that power they have to organise in a particular way. It is this worker democracy that the workers have built themselves, from which the youth and workers of tomorrow must learn.