

REVIEW: POWER! Black Workers, their Unions and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa

D MacShane, M Plaut, D Ward

(Spokesman UK 1984, 4-95 pounds sterling; distributed in SA by Ravan, R14.95)

The aim of the authors was "to explain to people outside South Africa the immense growth in trade unions organising black workers in that country" - and this is certainly the best book to attempt such a task so far (see also SALB 9.7)

There are inevitably a few complaints - but by and large the material is very reliable - much of it drawn from the SALB (as the authors acknowledge). It should however be pointed out that CCAWUSA is not non-racial (p107) and that the CUSA affiliate, Transport and Allied Workers Union, as well as FOSATU's Transport and General Workers Union, represents PUTCO workers (p109).

The last point is indeed symptomatic. This account favours FOSATU - described as the "best organised" grouping (p38) - with much less attention paid to CUSA despite the latter's greater claimed membership (p35: 148,000 compared with 106,000). The section dealing with the chemical industry is dominated by FOSATU's Chemical Workers Industrial Union, with CUSA's South African Chemical Workers Union - actually larger than CWIU - receiving hardly a mention. CUSA's relative absence from the text is a weakness - an absence which in the past has been matched in the pages of the SALB, it might be added.

Even as Power! was being printed some of its contents were overtaken by events. CUSA's newspaper Izwilethu has been substantially upgraded (p73). NUM now claims 110,000 members (p102) and has led a disciplined and partially successful strike against the Chamber of Mines (p17-18: the authors had argued that such a strike was impossible given the present balance of forces. See SALB 10.2). Also mention of

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the new Black Alliance of black consciousness unions is necessary to complete this overview of South African trade unions (see SALB 10.2).

The books contents include details of several struggles over recognition and wages, as well as recent material on health and safety and women's rights at work. The historical sections are of necessity brief - and we still await a detailed analysis of the development of the last ten years of the labour movement. Lack of space means that some issues are dealt with inadequately - eg. the role of whites in the unions. (Why not the role of intellectuals generally? - JL) Despite these reservations, those interested in the workers movement in South Africa will find this book useful. Recent political debates in the unions are reviewed and several important documents are reprinted as appendices.

Of equal interest to trade unionists both in South Africa and internationally are the last two chapters of the book which deal with questions of international solidarity. This section includes criticism of the South African Congress of Trade Unions in exile for trying to prevent direct links between the new unions and trade unions overseas. SACTU's analysis of South Africa as an all-powerful fascist state made them initially sceptical about the possibility of genuine and independent open trade unionism. Additionally SACTU found its traditional role as sole representative of South African workers challenged by the re-emergence of a trade union movement within South Africa. The new unions have demonstrated their independence by refusing to be used against SACTU by the right-wing of the international trade union movement. In the meantime the emerging unions have built up overseas links with workers at all levels - with federations, trade secretariats, individual unions and plant leaderships. These links have provided concrete support for South African unions during a number of recent disputes. By publicising these the book will play a valuable role in encouraging direct links and solidarity between South African workers and fellow workers overseas.

(Jon Lewis, SALB)