

- Affairs, Gaborone, around 1980, p38
- 18 P S Mrausi, p39
- 19 These laws are discussed in J Parson, "Political economy", pp202-311; and D Cooper, "The state, mineworkers and multinationals: the Selebi-Phikwe strike, Botswana 1975", in P C W Gutkind, R Cohen and J Copans (eds.), African Labour History, Sage publications, 1978
- 20 Sekgoma, "History", p51
- 21 *ibid*, p45
- 22 in Cooper, "The state"
- 23 in SALB, 8.7, 1983, pp4-5, and interviews conducted by the author in Gaborone in January 1984
- 24 "Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations Bill 1983", Bill No 2 of 1985, published 14 January 1983, final form of the Act gazetted 9 September 1983
- 25 Southall, "Trade unions", p107

REVIEW: Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of BLACK TRADE UNIONS in South Africa

Don Ncube

(Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1985; 176pp + xvi; R8.95)

There is very little new material in this book. The historical sections rely heavily on recent scholarship whilst the contemporary material is largely drawn from official union statements or other secondary sources. Notwithstanding, Ncube's book makes available to a general readership some important subject matter on South African trade unions.

Black Trade Unions is divided into five sections:

- * "Black workers in the mining industry" which gives a good introduction to the system of labour exploitation which developed on the mines;

- * "The emergence of trade unionism in South Africa" which deals largely with the problems of the ICU;
- * "Black industrial unions" which goes up to the decline of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions;
- * "Black trade union federations" which takes us from SACTU to the trade union revival of the 1970s;
- * "The independent trade union movement" which gives a summary of the main trade union groupings to emerge since Wiehahn.

In the introduction Ncube gives the method he has adopted to explain the development of black trade unionism in South Africa: this "consists of the following different theoretical frameworks: the Unitary, the Pluralist, and the Marxist frame of reference". (pxiii) This is motivated as follows: "the arbitrary choice of one framework could be construed to be a biased approach which is expedient to advance a preconceived stance". Unfortunately there are a lot of preconceptions in the book. There is no attempt to synthesise the three theoretical frameworks which are discussed separately in the conclusion. The section on the "marxist perspective" presents a complete caricature. Fortunately these "theoretical" concerns do not impinge too heavily on the subject matter of the intervening chapters.

The material is summarised and conveyed in very readable language. But with this goes a tendency to oversimplify or condense arguments. A case in point: on page 54 Ncube argues that one reason for the decline of the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions after 1929 was the "extreme left-wing policies" of some Communist Party members (citing the author of this review as his source). What was at issue here was the ultra-left strategy of "bolshevisation" pursued at a specific period in the history of the Third International (body made up of communist parties from different countries) - not an attack on left-wing policies in general.

Another case: on page 21, Ncube collapses Johnstone's arguments about the origins of colour bars on the mines. Johnstone argued that the roots of the colour bar system are to be found in the class imperatives of the particular capitalist production process on the mines. High capital costs and a fixed gold price forced mineowners to reduce their labour costs in order to maintain profits. Hence the "exploitation colour bars" - compounds, pass system, contract system etc - by which

the mineowners secured an unfree and ultra-exploitable black labour force. And hence the "job colour bars" - a direct response from white workers to attempts by the employers to increase their profits by substituting black for white labour. Ncube's rendering ignores these class dynamics. He writes: "According to Johnstone there were two forms of racial discrimination in the mining industry."

The last point is symptomatic. Despite recognising the importance of "class", in the end, Ncube reduces most things to a question of "race". On page 23 he mentions the mechanisms used by the old craft unions to exclude unskilled blacks. In fact these unions excluded all unskilled workers. Moreover, some of them, in the Cape and Natal at least, admitted skilled black workers to membership. Ncube concludes on page 24 that all white workers formed a labour aristocracy. But this was the outcome of a long historical process during which certain groups of white workers waged important struggles against their conditions of exploitation. We need to be sensitive to such cleavages in the white working class, both historically, and perhaps even today.

Ncube interprets the International Socialist League's role in the Industrial Workers of Africa in the same racial terms: "the influence of white political interest groups that capitalised on black socio-economic grievances". (p26) Paradoxically, given his concern for autonomous black trade unionism (p86), Ncube actually understates the leading role of black activists. On page 49 we are told that the first black industrial unions were formed by white communists. A few lines later we are told who these communists were: Weinbren and Thibedi! Similarly there is much detail about Max Gordon's work in reviving trade unionism in the 1930s, but nothing about Dan Koza who worked with him and later ousted him. The general point is that we know much too little about the early black socialists and worker leaders in South Africa.

Ncube has some strange views about the workers themselves. On page 12 he discusses migrant workers:

since this labour was basically rural and unsophisticated it was not only hard-working and industrious, but loyal and malleable, especially as there was no external Black trade union interference.

Recent research shows that black miners were already developing strategies for resistance even before the advent of trade unionism - and in the last resort they showed their loyalty by simply deserting. Again on page 92, in describing SACTU's organising problems, Ncube writes:

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that SACTU was recruiting the most destitute and least sophisticated workers who could neither afford to pay union dues nor easily comprehend the concept of unionism, let alone politically oriented unions.

The statement on page 148 borders on liberal paternalism. During the second world war the CNETU unions largely refrained from strike action:

This action illustrated the level of responsibility of the Black union leadership and served to challenge the myth that Black leaders were susceptible to abuse union power.

The final sections of the book deal with the different groupings which comprise the emerging trade union movement: FOSATU, CUSA, SAAWU and BAWU (for the 1970s). The treatment is very evenhanded - although, given the pace of developments, now somewhat dated. The book does not mention the recent revival of black consciousness unionism - with AZACTU - and deals with SAAWU at its height. Also Ncube's conclusion is too simple, that: "In the main these unions were underpinned by two dominant ideological schools, namely non-racialism and Black Consciousness". (p114) In the case of FOSATU at least (and others that are not mentioned in the book) non-racialism was inextricably bound to an independent working class position and the principle of working class unity. Again, Ncube's real concern is with the "racial" question.

(Jon Lewis, June 1985)