

- shift work -

- work, second edition, Oxford, 1985. A favoured pattern of shift work is now a five team system which cuts working time to 33 hours and 36 minutes. This pattern is likely to become law in some countries; ICEF op.cit. p28.
32. The trade union demand in South Africa has been that the age of retirement should be reduced to 55. For the motivations behind this demand, see Federation of South African Trade Unions, Pension panic, Durban, 1981.
33. In addition to the reference in note 18 above, Bienefeld op. cit., M Weber, The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, London, Unwin University Books, 1967; P A Sorokin, Socio-cultural causality, space, time, New York, Russel and Russel Inc, 1964; and D S Landes, Revolution in time, Harvard University Press, 1983, provide fascinating insights into a story which has yet to be told in South Africa.
34. A recent settlement of a two week strike at Asea Electrical, a plant in the metal industry, resulted in an increase from 12% to 16% in the night shift allowance.

Review: Cast in a Racial Mould

Eddie Webster, Cast in a racial mould: labour process and trade unionism in the foundries, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985, xv + 299 pp, R18.

It can be said that the development of radical analysis of South African society has had as its two premises, first, the assessment of racism and the oppression of the indigenous population of the country and, second, the discovery of class in the wake of industrialisation. The consideration of class in turn has brought an intensified interest in the trade union movement and its history, about which we now have some good, if still too spotty, information. Eddie Webster's book pushes us one step further by examining the social relations of work, the actual history of labour process itself with its power relationships and intersection of technological change and class struggle. This is what Marx, scorning the mere analysis of buying and selling that market-orientated economists made their object of study, called the "hidden abode" of

production. Webster does not actually desert the sphere of trade union studies, however; instead, his analysis is intended to deepen our understanding of why South African unions are the way they are through considering their relationship to the job and to society.

Webster brings to bear for the first time in South African studies a new theoretical literature that has been emerging in America and Europe. Its godfather was Harry Braverman, author of Labour and monopoly capital who made the history of twentieth century capitalism centre on the process of job deskilling - the bosses' response to the struggles of skilled workers over control of labour conditions. In addition to Braverman (and his critics, who see considerable worker success in resistance to deskilling), Webster makes use of the work by American radical economists on the structured segmentation of the labour market, divided through discriminatory means into sectors that differ in terms of security, skill and pay levels and of economic historians who have shown that technological innovations are very often a direct weapon in the class struggle the bosses are waging against the workers. New machinery reduces the numbers and skills of workers and re-asserts the control of the capitalists on the factory floor more effectively than any number of foremen. Nonetheless it may in turn create the basis for new forms of worker organisation and resistance.

Cast in a racial mould aims to illustrate and explain the "complex nature of the interactions between the labour process, workplace organisation, and divisions within the working class". It focusses on one industry, metal foundry work, from its origins to the present. Webster makes use of unpublished trade union records, his excellent knowledge of the COSATU unions and a set of in-depth biographies meant to bring the experiences of different strata of workers over time to life. Five exemplary individual workers' lives are examined, constituting the heart of a conclusion that makes vivid Webster's analysis.

The first part of the study looks at the old days when metal work consisted mainly of jobbing and was the province of highly skilled immigrant craftsmen. Trade union organisation focussed on the defense of craft privilege and access to skills against all comers. The relationship between craft defense and racism was important but complex and not always direct. The development of heavy industry in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s, however, greatly changed the foundry. The white workers were no longer sufficient in number to do the work while capital became increasingly

pervasive in its efforts to institute deskilling processes that went together with mass production. White workers enjoyed considerable success in resisting these changes but as time went on, white moulders tended to be shifted from production into supervisory positions. The craft unions turned into benefit societies. This harmonised with increasingly racist trade union practices. Some of the white metal workers follow this course to the present day and Webster gives attention to Yster en Staal politics. Most, however, with the Boilermakers in the lead, have had in time to find ways to incorporate black workers into the trade union movement for their own self-defense. The Boilermakers were a force within TUCSA but have left it entirely in recent years having regenerated through the rise of shopfloor activity. Webster devotes considerable space to the efforts made by white unions to try to incorporate the growing black workforce in the 1970s: parallel unions, separate branches, etc.

The arrival of a large black semi-skilled labour force into the metal industry was at first heralded by the effective application of American-style "scientific management" principles. However, while the poverty and difficult situation of the black migrant worker at first made resistance difficult, in time the migrant condition itself bred the solidarity of a new kind of trade unionism based on shop steward action. MAWU, unlike white unionism with its roots in the past, "has taken on some of the characteristics of a social movement", notably on the East Rand, and presents the possibilities of an unprecedentedly political kind of trade union structure. This coincides with the post-Wiehahn reform process which creates a less despotic form of control on the factory floor (to use Webster's terminology) and with the township insurgencies of the past couple of years. From a socialist perspective, there is more potential for this kind of workers' movement than the older type to pursue general objectives. On the whole, this makes South Africa an interesting and important contrast to the situation in the advanced capitalist countries where something like the reverse progression has been true.

This book is very rich in ideas and approaches. Some of its approach, especially on the new union movement, requires far more critical research to be supportable without question. It is not easy to absorb because of the range of topics it touches on and not entirely integrated by the author, but it is a pathbreaking work that repays careful consideration.

(Bill Freund, University of Natal, Durban, March 1986)