

## **The Organised Labour Movement and State Registration: Unity or Fragmentation?**

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This article attempts both to trace the historical development of the organised labour movement and to examine its changing relationship to the state from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. It will try to explore the nature of state intervention in restructuring the industrial relations system and will concentrate on the state's enforcement and redefinition of racial and other sectional divisions within the South African working class. The responses of the organised labour movement will be examined and an attempt made to characterise the different tendencies that developed over the years among the various trade unions in terms of their strategies and practices.

Two qualifications need to be expressed at the start of this analysis. Firstly, it is important to remember that in analysing the organised labour movement we are dealing only with a minority section of the South African working class and consequently the full significance of this analysis can only be assessed in relation to the general movement of the working class as a whole.

Secondly, the state's role must be seen alongside various other political factors in the South African system of industrial relations as tending to undermine the economic processes which are creating the possibility for the building of a united non-racial labour movement in the country. For example, it is clear today that the whole of the South African working class is under attack through falling living standards, rising unemployment and job de-skilling as well as being subjected to a certain homogenisation within the production process; however, this economic backlash, far from breaking the racial prejudices and traditional exclusory practices of the bulk of the white, coloured and Asian sections of the labour force, seems to provide the state and some sections of the union leadership with the opportunity to further entrench the divisions existing within the labour movement by exploiting the workers' insecurity and by playing one group off against the other. Thus, it is necessary to understand precisely the nature of the various political tendencies within and outside the labour movement which obstruct or at least set back the building of a united movement.