

of strikes and some of the provisions proposed may well have the opposite effect. Bearing in mind that illegal strike action is a criminal offence, the proposed further restrictions on legal strike action are quite unacceptable. Criminal prosecutions and police intervention will never promote industrial peace.

One can weigh up the good and the bad in the proposed amendments to the Act, but until more careful thought has been given to its effects, the Bill in its present form should not be made law.

“Factory vrouens”

REVIEW: Factory Vrouens - Die Waarlike Lewe van die Werkendeklas Vrou, a play presented at the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, 10 - 13 February 1987; compiled from the writings and documents of the garment workers by Elsabe Brink and directed by Alwyn Swart.

In the 1930s and 40s the Garment Workers' Union was one of the strongest trade unions in South Africa. Its members were mainly white Afrikaner women who worked as machinists in the clothing factories on the Witwatersrand. Under the leadership of its general secretary Solly Sachs the union was forged into a militant organisation which challenged the exploitative practices of clothing bosses. Arising out of their experience in the union and in the factories the women of the Garment Workers' Union began to express themselves in plays, poems and short stories. It is these writings which Elsabe Brink has brought together to form the script of Factory Vrouens.

For the purposes of the play Brink has divided the writings of the garment workers into four distinct areas. Firstly the play looks at the life of the garment workers before they left the land and the pressures that forced them to go and seek work in the clothing factories. It then moves onto the life in the slums of Johannesburg and Germiston where many of them lived upon arrival in the city. The play then portrays the forms of extreme exploitation in the clothing factories which the workers had to endure - speeding up, low wages, long hours of work, filthy and noisy factories.

Finally it tells of their struggle to better their conditions at work and at home by organising into a strong militant trade union.

What comes across most strongly in these writings of the garment workers, and in their enthusiastic depiction on stage by students of the University's school of dramatic art, is that they reflect a militant tradition among white Afrikaner women workers. For many of us today who are witnessing the militancy of black workers it is hard to realise that only some forty years ago a group of white women workers were espousing the cause of socialism.

White Afrikaans women today perhaps represent the most conservative element in South African society. Yet, as the play clearly shows, this hasn't always been the case. These women engaged in many strikes, wrote socialist literature and participated fully in trade union activities.

Thus possibly the most stirring moment in the play is when the Red Flag is sung in Afrikaans:

Dus steek omhoog die rooibanier,
Wat leef en dood sal ons regeer,
Die lafaards spot, verraaiers lag,
Maar ons staan by die Rooie-vlag!

The obvious question which must arise is what has happened to that militant tradition among white Afrikaner women. Unfortunately the play does not set out to answer this question for us as it is only concerned with the 1930s and 40s.

While to the purist these writings of the garment workers put together for this play may not represent "good theatre" they must be seen as part of a process in the politicisation and unionisation of the workers. They were specifically written as propaganda pieces by Solly Sachs and various members of the union to organise and rally other workers behind the union. As such their appeal is to workers and it is remarkable that many workers who saw the play could associate with the struggles of the Afrikaner workers which were depicted.

But while Factory Vrouens is very strong in its portrayal of a militant tradition among white Afrikaner workers it fails to come to grips with the context in which much of the garment workers' literature was produced. The problem is that in the play this literature is seen as having been ignored and that it should be

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added to the mainstream Afrikaans literature of the period. In fact the writings of the garment workers lay claim to a different cultural heritage to that of mainstream Afrikaans literature of the time.

Most of the Afrikaans literature of the 1930s and 40s was written with one aim in mind: to promote the Afrikaner Nationalist movement. The Afrikaans petty-bourgeoisie was attempting to forge a culture which would unite all Afrikaners irrespective of class into an Afrikaner nation.

The Garment Workers' Union, on the other hand, was trying to arouse class awareness among its members. It aimed to show that the workers were first and foremost part of the working class. The writings of the garment workers depicted in the play thus portray a working class experience. This was not the same "classless" culture which the Afrikaner petty-bourgeoisie was trying to promote!

It is little wonder therefore that the Nationalists saw the Garment Workers' Union as a threat to its plans to promote the idea of a united Afrikaner nation. A concerted campaign was launched by the Nationalists to wrest the union leadership away from Sachs and to gain control of the union themselves. It was in response to this attack that both the members and leaders of the union went on a splurge of writing plays, poems and short stories in Afrikaans on which this play is based.

The writings of the garment workers thus arise out of a fundamental conflict with "mainstream" Afrikaner writings rather than through any similarity. Through an understanding of this conflict one would have been able to grasp the significance of what the workers were expressing in their writings.

Factory Vrouens is thus a very important play for its enthusiastic depiction of a militant white working class culture. But by placing the writings of the garment workers in the context in which they arose it could have made an even more valuable contribution to our understanding of working class organisation and culture in South Africa.

(Leslie Witz, March 1987)