

# Rhetoric, Bureacracy and Co-option

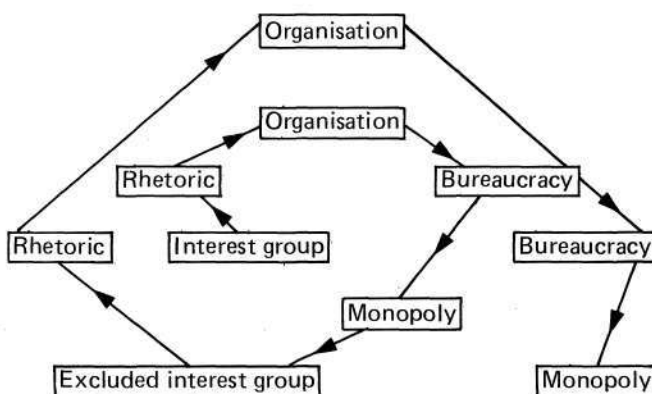
The Expanding Cycle of Trade Union Development in South Africa.

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The model presented here does not purport to be a precise reflection of any specific social reality which has confronted the South African economy over the past century or so, nor can it incorporate all the relevant variables. Rather, we identify a process which both recurs in a predictable cycle, and which shows a development over time. The model can be applied to the rise of the craft unions, to the development of predominantly Afrikaner unskilled and semi-skilled unions during the first part of this century, to the development of unions – among the so-called “coloured” factory workers, and to the current wave of black general unions with strong community rather than workplace orientation. If the model is valid, it may help to explain both successes and failures, albeit *post hoc* and in accord with Tolstoy’s view that success lies with the men who understand the processes of history and make their decisions accordingly, rather than with those who seek to change or defy them.

Thus Kadalie’s attempt to form a general union for blacks would appear premature in terms of the cyclical process, and unfortunate in terms of the economic state of the nation at the time, while the rise of FOSATU in the 1970’s was timely both in terms of the cyclical process and the economic climate. The process is paralleled by the strengthening of capitalist monopolies and their incorporation into or co-option by the state over the same period.

## The Model



The cycle begins when a body of workers recognises that its interests will be best advanced by some form of corporate action. This is most likely to be successful in a period of economic upswing, when there is a strong demand for workers possessing certain skills and habits of industry. Ideology, rhetoric (1) and the structure of legally defined groupings will clarify for the workers who may or may not be included

as members of their corporate body – a set of factors peculiarly applicable to South Africa with its “racial” hierarchy and power structure which has enabled certain categories of workers to be excluded from parts of the labour market on non-economic criteria.

The worker leaders, or committed outside organisers, who seize the time, initiate the cycle by endeavouring to organise their fellow workers to combine to fight for their rights as workers. The rhetoric of the leadership is essentially polemical and presents management or capital as being in structured opposition to labour and as taking more than its fair share of the fruits of the enterprise. The rhetoric is heightened and the solidarity of the workers enhanced when appeals are made not only on a class basis, but also on an ethnic basis. The bosses are then not only “bosses”, but “foreign”, “Anglo-Jewish”, “white” or “non-black”, in opposition to the ethnic identity of the group being organised. For the workers able to press for a sectional monopoly of certain jobs, the combination of ethnicity with class provides both a rationalisation for promoting a labour aristocracy, and a more evocative rallying cry than an appeal to class alone. Examples of this have been the slogan of the white communists in the 1920’s “Workers of the world unite for a white South Africa”, the rhetoric and practices of the white mineworkers’ union leaders, and some of the rhetoric of the present (1980’s) wave of new unions engaged in organisation of black workers and their communities. In this phase of the cycle there is liable to be considerable labour unrest, as the leadership of the new unions is inexperienced and probably engaged in a certain amount of jockeying for position, and the workers are eager to translate rhetoric into action by demonstrating their new found strength and unity. It is also a time of casualties among both the leaders and even whole unions as managements exercise their strength in organisation, negotiating expertise and wealth to destroy where they cannot mould the fledgling unions. State intervention in support of the *status quo*, which in practical terms means the employers and perhaps the established unions, also occurs in this phase. Recent events in East London and Port Elizabeth provide abundant examples of these pressures on newly formed unions.

A union which survives this phase is one which carves out for itself an exclusive niche in the labour market, either by obtaining state protection or a monopoly over trained men and entrants to its niche. In earlier cycles white and some

1) We distinguish between ideology – an organised set of values according to which adherents order and evaluate their experience and plan their actions, and rhetoric – the verbal appeal to emotionally charged values and interests.

non-black unions obtained this position through the legally defined industrial conciliation machinery which in some instances included the closed shop. In order to establish itself in this way, the union must also develop a bureaucracy of full-time, increasingly skilled organisers and negotiators able to meet their counterparts in management on equal terms, at least as far as knowing the rules of the game. At this stage the union may be faced with a dilemma, whether to broaden its membership and so dilute its monopoly control of certain areas, or to specialise on the more skilled workers and strengthen its monopoly power on a narrower base. Regardless of which way the union goes, whether to represent a craft, an industry or even a community, the institution of a paid bureaucracy transforms it from a movement into a true organisation. Formal or legal recognition or registration is obviously relevant in the process of establishing a bureaucracy — in general one would predict that a bureaucracy will seek formal or legal status as to reject it is to invite harassment by the state, with full-time officials as the prime targets.

With the bureaucracy develops a new set of relationships and constraints. The workers depend upon their full-time executives to negotiate the best possible deals with managements. The bureaucracy however evolves its own interests — the continued strength of the union, and of his own position as its chief executive, will become a priority for the General Secretary. Obviously, in the long run, there is a coincidence of interests between the professional unionists and the workers they represent, just as there is between management and labour — the more efficient and profitable the business, the greater the potential return to all the factors of production. But in the short term, sectional interests may be dominant, and it may offer quicker returns to fight for a larger segment of the cake than to co-operate in the uncertain processes of growth.

Freed from direct dependence on the labour process for his income, the professional unionist is able to contemplate strike action with more equanimity than the man who must answer to his wife and family when he goes home without his pay. At the same time, failure to achieve tangible results for his members can cost the professional unionist support, even his position if he cannot protect himself constitutionally. Like all elected officials, he must please those who have the power to remove him, whose interests may not coincide with those who form the nominal membership and electorate, for, except in the initial phase, ordinary members generally take little interest in the work of their union and elections are rarely contested fiercely. The minority of enthusiasts and activists are thus able to exercise influence disproportionate to their numbers. On the other side, continual negotiations with industrial-relations managers demand that some *modus vivendi* be established and that each understand the problems of the other. In many situations the reputation of the one depends very much upon the co-operation of the other. In time the relationship between unionist and industrial-relations manager tends towards that which exists between attorneys — while representing the interests of their clients, they communicate in an arcane jargon and reach agreements so complicated and detailed that their clients are unable to challenge them. Examples of these can be found in any Government Gazette dealing with a substantial Industrial Council agreement. Such agreements do not imply collusion in the normal sense of the term i. e. two ostensibly opposed parties conniving to the detriment of other parties, but an inescapable series of compromises on the basis of shared expertise.

Since the strength of the individual union depends largely on its ability to gain a monopoly over a segment of the labour market — either on the basis of skills or by closed shop agreements — it must operate against the interests of those who would compete for the jobs which it controls (potential “scab” labour). The deal with management involves the concession of, or connivance at, monopoly power for the union in exchange for “orderly industrial relations”. “Orderly” when used in almost any economic context, such as production, marketing or industrial relations, implies an attempt to subvert the free market, and monopolists speak much the same language whether they are state boards, industrialists or unionists — once one has penetrated the rhetorical fog. In the argot of industrial relations what emerges are “laid down dispute procedures” and “closed shop provisions”.

The exclusion of a substantial segment of the workforce, or potential workforce, and the co-option of established unionists into an informal association of monopolists, sets the stage for the next round of union growth. Among those who have been excluded an awareness of common interests develops, the familiar rhetoric is heard, the next round of battles is fought, and the survivors establish their own bureaucracies to protect their interests once more.

With each round of the cycle there will be a measure of inter-union strife between the established unions and the new ones, as well as trials of strength between the new unions and the employers, especially in the phase prior to the formation of a bureaucracy. The motor industry has been experiencing this over the past two years. The established unions will seek to protect their monopoly interests and their membership from the demands and “poaching” of their young rivals — in part by recourse to the traditional rhetoric of class unity. Into this fraternal, and often inter-ethnic, strife the employers may well be drawn — having to take sides on such issues as closed shops and apprenticeships and, at a more fundamental level, on whom to recognise as appropriate negotiating parties. The application of even a simple rule such as recognition for a union which has fifty per cent representation can lead to an “Irish” situation in which one union claims representation on the basis of one ethnic constituency, while another claims to be numerically stronger in the company as a whole, and hence the appropriate representative of all the workers. The established union bureaucracies can offer managements the promise of “orderly industrial relations” and a familiar process of bargaining, while the new generation of unions may offer an opportunity for a management-worker alliance against established union monopolies. Managements are generally very wary of engaging in such alliances, unless, as has happened in recent years, the demand for certain types of labour cannot be met by the established white union. However, two leading industrialists in the Eastern Cape have recently stated that there will be no industrial peace until black workers are incorporated into areas of decision making wider than the workplace — a position which is being pressed by the latest generation of unions, but which has, thus far, had little support from established unions.

Each time the cycle goes round, the number and proportion of workers who are unionised increases and, in the peculiar situation of South Africa, the proportion of politically unenfranchised i. e. black workers grows. It is this phenomenon which has important structural implications for the future of the country as a whole and not merely for the labour movement. It turns Nkrumah’s dictum, “Seek first

the political kingdom and the rest will be added", neatly on its head. As organised labour becomes increasingly black labour, so the political role of organised labour will increase in the absence of acceptable political rights for blacks. The white workers who were organised between the wars might have cheered the heady rhetoric about fighting for their rights against the alliance of government and capital, but once beyond the mists of electioneering promises, there proved to be no enemy to fight. The blacks perceive clearly for what they must fight, and whom they must fight in order to get it.

The current wave of new unions is distinguished from the last (the FOSATU generation) by its sense of community involvement, which is manifested by the tendency towards general rather than craft or industrial unions, in the efforts being made to unionise the unemployed and domestic workers, and in the mobilisation of the community as a whole in mutually supportive action (e. g. pressure on the company managements to take up the cudgels with the authorities over housing problems, and the use of consumer boycotts by the communities to put pressure on intransigent employers). From this it might appear that we have reached the final stage of union development and that there are no more disadvantaged groups to be drawn into the labour movement.

However, if our analysis of the cyclical process is correct, then the present wave of unions will either collapse (in part due to state intervention) or they too will bureaucratise and seek the advantages of some sort of monopoly control over a segment of the labour market in exchange for industrial peace. The most obvious group to be disadvantaged in the interests of the new unions and their supporters are the potential workers who are not a part of the local communities. In the case of those urban areas which are not very close to a "homeland" from which they draw commuter labour, this means the migrant workers and those who are seeking to escape from the impoverished rural areas, notably the "homelands". Outside East London, which draws much of its black labour from the Ciskei, and to a lesser extent Durban with its dependence on nearby spots of Kwazulu, the new unions may well find themselves involved in a bizarre alliance with the state as it endeavours to implement the Riekert proposals and to divide the blacks into the urban privileged and the homeland labour pools. Our observations would suggest that behind the rhetoric of black unity, there has been very little practically expressed concern among black workers over the plight of the migrants who have been dismissed by the Johannesburg City

Council or by the mining companies, or for the people who have been "resettled" in their hundreds of thousands. Schooling, housing, rents and other urban concerns which touch the lives of potential and actual union members have had almost exclusive priority.

If the urban blacks are divided from their rural kinsfolk, as our model would suggest (as one possibility at least) then we can expect the next wave of union activity to develop in the mines, with possibly the homeland governments promoting the interests of their major export by allowing the unions freedom to organise from the security of an "independent state" or "self-governing homeland". Areas such as the Ciskei might well see the development of unions as a threat to their own economic development, fuelled as it is by very cheap labour without union protection, and there will doubtless be pressure from Pretoria in support of that view, and the economic balances have to be calculated on a state by state basis. The rapid implementation of the policy favoured by some mining houses to stabilise their workforce would also have a dramatic effect on the operation of the model, but the demographic and infrastructural implications of a stabilised workforce living under normal family circumstances are such that significant change is unlikely in the short run.

Those observing the evolution of organised labour should not be surprised by either the new wave of unions coming to terms with influx control, or by moral support being given to the unionising of migrants by the "homeland" governments. The rhetoric will still proclaim the incompatibility of those odd couplings, and the form of co-operation may well be no more than tacit non-interference. There will also be considerable regional variations based on the proportion of migrants in the workforce and the proximity of employment centres to the homelands. But real interests are readily pursued behind a smokescreen of rhetoric and it is in those real interests that the future may be divined.

More immediately, the model suggests that if the current wave of unions is destroyed, whether by state action or by organisational failures from within (or by a combination of both which seems more likely), then it will build up again. The constituency is large, politicised and able to force its attention on industry. As such, it will either move into the organisational phase and hence towards industrial peace, or remain an untamed force and a menace to profitable and productive industry until it is given its place in the political economy of the country. □

● What astonishes and angers the Pretoria regime about the UN General Assembly's refusal to accept its credentials is the fact that a relevant set of opinions is not receiving a proper hearing. Nothing like that has ever been known in South Africa.

Vortex

● Having prepared the way with the customary discreet diplomatic gestures (bombing, invasion, flame-throwing, etc.), Mr Pik Botha has high hopes for the new Southern African summit meeting that he has just announced.

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