

THE INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NATAL

This is no more than a quick review of the independent trade union movement in Natal. The unions to be considered are "independent" in the sense that they are outside the establishment trade union movement (such as TUCSA – the Trade Union Council of South Africa), are not company unions, and are part of the 'new wave' unionism that has swept the country since the early 70's. However they do not constitute a 'movement' in the sense of a single, unified structure.

In Natal, this form of unionism is represented by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA), Food and Canning Workers Unions (FCWU), General Workers Union (GWU), South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), National Federation of Workers (NFW), Media Workers Association (MWASA), Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU), and African Workers Association (AWA).

FOSATU, CUSA, CCAWUSA, FCWU and GWU can be grouped together as they, along with the Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association, are in the final stages of 'unity talks' aimed at creating a new national federation that will bring together some 300 000 workers – probably early in the New Year.

In Natal FOSATU is the largest and most established grouping of these unions, with a membership of about 27 000. It is a tight, disciplined non-racial federation of nine unions, seven of which have offices in Natal: Chemical Workers Industrial Union, Metal and Allied Workers Union, Natal Sugar Industries Employees Union, National Union of Textile Workers, Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union, Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union and Transport and General Workers Union.

CUSA is a much looser federation of 12 industrial unions, 10 of which operate in Natal: Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union, Food Beverage Workers Union, South African Black Municipal Workers' Union, South African Chemical Workers' Union, South African Laundry, Dry-Cleaning and Dyeing Workers Union, Steel Engineering and Allied Workers Union, Textile Workers Union, Transport and Allied Workers Union, United African Motor Workers Union, and Security Workers Union. CUSA follows a Black-only (Africans, Coloureds, Indians) policy – though more recently this has come to mean that Whites are allowed to join CUSA unions as workers, but cannot take up any official position as CUSA is firmly committed

to encouraging Black leadership. CUSA membership in Natal is just about 10 000, while nationally it has about 140 000 members. The well-known National Union of Mineworkers is its largest affiliate.

The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa organizes mainly in the commercial and distributive sectors. It has recognition agreements in some of the large chain-stores like O.K. Bazaars, Woolworths and Checkers. Of its national membership of just over 40 000, about 5 000 are in Natal. It was until very recently open to Africans only, with Coloured, Indian and White workers in the same sector being organized by the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW), an ex-TUCSA affiliate. However, at its conference in Pietermaritzburg in July this year, it opened its ranks to all Black workers – just a few weeks after the majority of NUDAW's members in Natal decided to join CCAWUSA.

The Food and Canning Workers Union operates together with the African FCWU as a single non-racial union. The FCWU was established in 1941 and was one of the leading affiliates of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the fifties. With the crushing of SACTU in the early sixties the union was reduced to dormancy. It was revitalized in the early seventies and the Natal branch was revived a few years ago. It organizes mainly in the food and canning industry around Durban and the North Coast and has about 1 200 members. Membership nationwide is believed to be about 20 000.

The General Workers' Union (GWU) organizes mainly stevedores. Its strength is based on the dockworkers. It organizes too in the transport, building and engineering industries. It has about 2 500 members in Natal, with a national membership of around 9 000. It is a non-racial general union, with its headquarters in Cape Town.

These then are the unions in Natal which are to be part of the new national federation. Although there are differences between these unions, sometimes marked, they are evolving a unity, and there are certain general characteristics that might be said to define them even if these general features do not apply to all of them to the same degree.

To begin with, the unions are committed to the establishment of strong shop-floor structures and a shop-steward system that will allow for as much worker control as possible. Depending on the resources available to the different union groupings, they organize shop-steward education and training programmes to provide workers with the skills

necessary to more effectively assume leadership of the unions and erode their dependency on intellectuals.

They aim to establish strong, national industrial unions – and it is on the success of this, as well as the creation of strong shop-floor structures and democratic worker control, that the ultimate strength of the new federation will be based.

In this context, the question of registration and participation in Industrial Councils is not seen as a matter of principle; the view seems to be that where unions feel that advantage can be gained and that they can be strengthened by it, they should opt for it, but if it will mean their being weakened or shackled in any way they should avoid registration and participation in Industrial Councils. The basic issue is whether it advances or retards the development of a strong organized trade union movement.

And it is on the basis of a powerful, united well-established trade union movement that these unions will more stridently take up political and community issues beyond the shop-floor. Not that they are not doing so at the moment – but at this stage, even if there are differences in emphasis on this between the different unions, there seems to be a general agreement that the political issues taken up should be those that affect workers most immediately and as far as possible they should be taken up through the structures of the unions themselves. These unions do take part in campaigns waged by community and political organisations which also affect workers – but they do so without affiliating to these organisations and on the basis of their organisational strength on the shop-floor. They see as their basic political task the building of a strong, united, independent trade union movement – and precisely how this will impress itself on the wider struggle for change in South Africa remains to be seen – and is awaited with the keenest anticipation.

The South African Allied Workers Union and the National Federation of Workers share many similarities. Actually they are both break-aways from BAWU and they are both non-racial general unions which are in the process of demarcating their membership into organised, industrial unions. To this end SAAWU has created the following affiliates: Baking and Allied Workers Union, Blind Workers Union, Building and Allied Workers Union, Mine and General Workers Union, National Industrial Steel and Metalworkers Union, National Stevedores Workers Union, Printing and Allied Workers Union, Textile and Allied Workers Union, and the Unemployed Workers Union. SAAWU's national membership is between 100 000 and 130 000. Figures for Natal are difficult to come by.

The NFW operates only in Natal, with offices in Durban, Empangeni and Ladysmith. It has an estimated membership of 20 000. It has the following affiliates which it hopes to establish as industrial unions: Brick and Clay and Allied Workers Union, Commercial and Distributive and Allied Workers Union, Farm Workers Union, Health and Allied Workers Union, Liquor, Catering and Allied Workers Union, National Domestic Workers Union, National Municipal Workers Union of South Africa, National Post Office and Allied Workers Union, Security Guards and Allied Workers Union. Until recently it also had the National Iron, Steel, Metal and Allied Workers Union as an affiliate.

SAAWU and NFW are what have come to be termed 'community unions'. They take a very much more overt

stance on political and community issues beyond the factory-floor and lend their support to many campaigns in the community, believing that "the workers are the community and the community the workers". They tend to blur the distinction between shop-floor and community issues. They don't seem to have very strong shop-floor structures – which both reinforces and is reinforced by their community orientation. Both of them have affiliated to the United Democratic Front. Their overt involvement in community and political issues has meant constant police harassment of their officials – indeed at the moment of writing SAAWU's leading organizer in Natal, Sam Kikine has had to "disappear" to avoid being served with a detention order. Both the unions are opposed to registration and Industrial Councils, believing that compliance will mean the bureaucratization of unions and their control by the state.

Being general unions with a 'community orientation' has meant that SAAWU and NFW have very different structures and organizing strategies and practices from the unions that will constitute the new federation – and so at the moment they are not part of the proposed federation, though the door remains open to them to join once they have constituted themselves into industrial unions and arrive at some agreement with the other unions on how to take up political issues.

The Black Allied Workers Union is also an unregistered general union. It sees itself however as a federation of industrial unions, having the following affiliates: Black Allied Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Workers Union, Black Allied Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Black Allied Shops, Offices and Distributive Trade Workers Union, Black Allied Building and Construction Workers Union, Black Allied Air, Railways and Harbour Workers Union, Black Allied Municipality Workers Union, Black Allied Mines and Tunnels Workers Union, Black Allied Passenger and Goods Transport Workers Union, Black Allied Electrical Workers Union, Black Allied Chemical Workers Union, Black Allied Rubber and Tyres Workers Union, Black Allied Nurses Union, Black Allied Garage and Motor Industry Workers Union, Black Allied Liquor, Hotel and Motel Workers Union, and the Black Allied Household Technicians Workers Union. Its membership in Natal is difficult to determine, but the information available suggests about 12 000. While it is not a registered union, it is not opposed to participation in Industrial Councils and in fact attends some Council meetings as an observer.

BAWU was initially a 'Black Consciousness' union having close ties with the now-banned South African Students Organisation and Black Peoples' Convention. At present it follows a Blacks-only policy but stresses that it is basically concerned with African workers. It does not have any ties at the moment with any of the 'Black Consciousness' groupings, and seems to keep a low profile; at least it's not known to overtly identify itself with political or community issues outside the shop-floor. BAWU is however very much against the involvement of whites at any level in the independent union movement. It also has severe reservations about the new federation.

The Media Workers Association which seeks to represent all workers in the media industry, irrespective of skill, is a very small union. It has a national membership of around

1 400, of whom there are about 300 in Natal. An unregistered union, it has recognition agreements with South African Associated Newspapers and Argus. It has been a staunchly 'Black Consciousness' union, but in recent years cracks have appeared, and early this year, in fact, the union split over the issues of having a non-racial membership and affiliating to UDF. The union is in disarray at the moment with some of the regions following a non-racial, pro-UDF policy and others a Blacks-only non-UDF position — though there are talks underway to bring the two factions together. Natal is firmly committed to the 'Black Consciousness' position and in fact was one of the regions which walked out of the congress at which the split occurred.

Little is known of the African Workers Association — but that it survives on the energy and determination of its one full-time organizer, Thizi Kumalo. It has a membership of just under 7 000, many of whom are not paid-up. The union functions from an office in Durban, with the most limited resources. It organizes mainly in Durban and the surrounding areas, and does not have any members outside Natal. It is a registered, general union and takes part in Industrial Councils. It organizes mainly in hospitals, municipal departments and hotels, and has some membership amongst security guards and in the engineering sector. AWA is a non-racial union but believes firmly that leadership roles in the unions must be served by Blacks. The union is against affiliating to any political or community organisations but 'respects' organizations that are fighting for democratic rights in South Africa.

Though there are these definite differences within the independent trade union movement, as a whole it can be distinguished from the established trade union movement. There is actually an uneasy relationship between the independent unions and the established trade union movement. In part, this is because in some sectors the independent unions are attracting TUCSA members — who are often forced to belong to these unions because of the operation of the closed-shop.

In Natal this tension has surfaced several times this year. For example, in Pinetown there were difficulties between the National Union of Leatherworkers (NULW), a TUCSA affiliate, and SAAWU in the shoe industry, and at present the NULW is resisting the claim for recognition by the National Union of Textile Workers, a FOSATU union, at Jaguar Shoes in Pietermaritzburg. The Garment Workers Industrial Union of TUCSA has even threatened to take strike action if necessary, in defence of the closed-shop which it sees as being undermined by NUTW organisation in the garment industry. The tension between the independent trade union movement and TUCSA is likely to increase as they both seek to establish their dominance within the working class.

But there is rivalry too within the independent trade union movement. Of course the new federation will eliminate this somewhat — but there are sections of the independent trade union movement which are not part of the new federation, and continued, and possibly even increased, competition for members between them and the unions in the new federation is likely. Only time will tell — but at this stage there appears to be only the most remote possibility of a single federation of all the independent unions. We have looked only at Natal, but if we have to throw our glance outside it, a whole number of other independent unions catch the eye, making the picture even more hazy.

Ultimately, however, behind the differences in organising strategy, shop-floor structures, notions of worker control, attitudes to industrial unionism, and relations with the community lie political differences — and so the fractures in the trade union movement are not likely to be healed completely. But this isn't cause for dismay. For in a society as complex and volatile as South Africa, one could hardly expect otherwise.

N.B. The figures provided of union membership should be treated with some caution. Accurate statistics on union membership are notoriously hard to come by — but every effort has been made to provide reasonable estimates. □

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