

# **SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR BULLETIN**

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**Rob Lambert**

**SACTU and the IC Act**

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**Jon Lewis**

**Steel Unions & Nationalism**

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## **THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR BULLETIN**

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## **The Basic Conditions of Employment Act**

### **The Position of Women**

The growing importance of women workers in the labour force was highlighted by changes to the Factories and Shops & Offices Acts. The new 'Basic Conditions of Employment' Act (No 3 of 83) confers dubious new rights on women workers. This Act consolidates and amends the above mentioned Acts. Once it is promulgated women will be 'free' to work longer and more abnormal hours.

The changes to women's working conditions follow the report of the Wiehahn Commission and reflect its general concern with the optimal utilisation of labour.

Protective legislation was first introduced in South Africa in 1911 through the provisions of the Mines and Works Act which prohibited the employment of women and children underground. The 1918 Factories Act laid down maximum working hours and conditions for women. The existing legislation safeguards the reproduction of the labour force in the following ways. Women are excluded from working underground and from handling substances harmful to the foetus. Pregnant women are prohibited from working four weeks before and eight weeks after child birth, unless the baby is still-born. Maternity benefits are also provided through the Shops and Offices and Factories Acts. Under the Factories Act women cannot work between 6.00pm and 6.00am. The maximum overtime permissible is 2 hours per day, on not more than 3 consecutive days and on not more than 60 days a year in total. The Shops and Offices Act does not limit overtime on the basis of sex but different maxima apply according to the type of work performed. Women under 18 are prevented from working later than 6.00pm unless they work in a tea-room or restaurant, where they may work until 8.00pm. Women may not work after 1.00pm on more than five days in any one week.

The Wiehahn Commission found that working conditions for pregnant women were considerably worse in South Africa than in other industrialised countries, particularly as regards protection from dismissal because of pregnancy, the right to re-instatement after confinement, the amount of leave prior to confinement and the level of compensation payable during the approved period of leave. The Commission felt that the following adjust-



ments should be made: pre-natal leave should be increased from four to six weeks; sacking because of pregnancy should be prohibited; re-employment within a specified period should be guaranteed; and maternity benefits should be increased from 45 percent to 60 percent of normal earnings.

They felt that restrictions on overtime and night work reduced the earnings of women and recommended that the amount of overtime permissible be the same for men and women.

In August 1981 the Government submitted two draft bills consolidating the Factories and Shops & Offices Acts. These were the Conditions of Employment Bill dealing with hours, overtime, leave, etc. Matters of safety were covered by the new Machinery and Occupational Safety Bill. The aspects of these two bills relating to women workers were debated and enacted in the current session. A provision has been retained in the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act whereby women may be excluded from working in certain occupation.

The Government white paper (following Wiehahn Commission Report V) had rejected the extensions of pre-confinement leave, maintaining that existing provisions had not created undue hardship and that there was no sound reason for the period being extended to six weeks. However, the post-confinement leave has been extended to women whose babies are still-born or die soon after birth. With regard to maternity allowances, rather than increasing those under the Unemployment Insurance Fund, the new Basic Conditions of Employment Act abolishes the allowances previously available to women through the Factories and Shops & Offices Acts. Such benefits are now only available through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). Thus women who work in industries designated as seasonal and who are therefore not covered by the UIF will no longer receive any maternity benefits. Previously they could draw these through the provisions of the Factories Act. Many women, particularly those in the Food Industry will be adversely affected by this new exclusion. The government rejected the proposal protecting pregnant women from termination of employment and that of obligatory re-instatement of employees after a given period, on the grounds that 'such a proposal would result in serious complications for employers' (WP Q 81). The government would urge employers to consider these cases sympathetically. So too was its response to the proposals that legislation be implemented requiring employers to assign light duties to pregnant women.

The Government white paper endorsed the commission's recommendations on hours and overtime for women. The new laws mean that women can work at night and the same amount of overtime as men. This is a maximum of 10 hours a week and 3 hours a day. They will no longer receive advance warning or a meal in lieu of this. The new Act does make this overtime dependent on prior agreement between worker and employer.

While the Act on the whole has extended coverage to more workers, the provisions affecting women deserve closer attention. It has been lauded as an advance for women workers, placing them on an equal footing with men, enabling them to share the fruits of overtime labour and to enter jobs requiring shift and other night work. However it might result in increased hardship for women, outweighing any possible financial gains.

The Government white paper asserted that 'circumstances which led to the introduction of these protective measures decades ago have in the meantime changed to the extent that such practices are no longer necessary' (WP Q 81). However, there is no evidence that working class women no longer bear the brunt of domestic labour, that day care facilities and creches have improved sufficiently or that problems of transport at night have disappeared. As an official of the Garment Workers Union points out 'the clothing industry employs a large number of blacks, coloureds and asians, all of whom have to travel long distances to get home. It is evading reality to pretend that it isn't a problem for women to travel to Soweto late at night'. (S. Express 6/2/83). On the other hand Mrs Roberta Johnston who headed the Study Group on Women and Employment which gave extensive evidence to the Wiehahn commission is reported to have said, 'If women have the wits to work they'll have the wits to make their own way home' (Star 11/2/83).

The advantages of optional overtime for employers are obvious: flexibility. The working day can be increased to suit current needs and reduced at will. It has relative cost advantages: overtime is seen as being cheaper than employing additional workers on whose behalf contributions might have to be made to various benefit schemes. Also changing the amount of overtime is easier than retrenching workers, which can entail severance pay.

Ironically it was Mrs E.M. Scholtz (Conservative Party) who, although concentrating on women's role in the family, raised important points during the recent debate in Parliament: 'Cheaper labour for longer hours — and that at the expense of the woman — is simply not desirable'. As regards voluntary

overtime she said, 'It is true that women can refuse to work overtime but in this connectin we should like to have the assurance that she will not be intimidated and that the possibility of discriminating against such a woman could be regarded as an offence' (Hansard Q pp 519/520).

Though the removal of restrictions on women's work follows trends in industrialised countries there is growing concern in these counries about the harmful physical and social effects of shift work and excessive overtime, and there have been calls for improvement of these conditions for both men and women. All workers, men and women, should receive adequate wages for a normal day's work.

(Shirley Millar, Cape Town, May 1983)



## **Repression Against Unions.**

While the number of trade unionists detained has not increased this year, a campaign of intimidation, harassment and 'strange events' has been stepped up against unions. This has been interpreted by unionists as just another attempt to frustrate and disorganise their activities. But some observers have noted that such incidents have been experienced by journalists, community activists, churchmen and even liberal critics of the government. The frequency and similarity of these incidents in different parts of the country suggest that they may be part of a campaign against all critics of government policy.

### **Some 'Strange Events'**

There have been several incidents of the cars of unionists being tampered with. The consequence of this has, in some instances been fatal. While there is no direct evidence to suggest foul play, there exists suspicion that not all were 'accidents'.

Mr Jan Theron, general secretary of the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU), while in George for negotiations with a company, found that his three tyres had been over inflated, while one had been deflated. He had checked the tyres on the previous night and pumped them to normal pressure. He commented that if he had travelled to Cape Town he would definitely have had a blow out. Mr Theron said he could only conclude that 'this very unsafe situation had been deliberately created'.

Three trade unionists have died in car accidents this year. In March, two organisers of the National Union of Mineworkers, Mr Teboho Noko and Mr Paul Leboea died in a car accident near Welkom. It took the union two weeks to trace the bodies of the victims to the Teba Labour recruitment offices. Also in March, Stephen Maseko, a Pretoria organiser for the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) and a companion died in a car accident after the brakes failed.

In another strange event, the General Workers Union (GWU) offices in Cape Town were broken into in March. Describing the burglary as 'peculiar' the GWU pointed out that no money was taken — only a book containing the minutes of all union meetings over the past year and a few other union documents. Union officials expressed concern about the 'loud

hammering' heard by the caretaker on the night of the burglary and felt that 'bugs' might have been put into the office. Even more strange was that a combi with the same registration number which the caretaker said he saw at the scene of the burglary was seen two days later at the Caledon Square Police Station. Police sources confirmed that the vehicle belonged to the SAP, but said that the vehicle concerned 'was not near the scene of the burglary at the time'. This is the third known burglary at the GWU offices in the past year. The GWU has said that it was 'astounding' that the police were dismissing the available evidence so hastily. 'We are an open legal organisation with nothing to hide, and find it reprehensible that our offices are entered unlawfully in this manner' they said.

### **Harassment and Intimidation**

Trade unionists within the progressive independent trade union movement cite quite a few instances of harassment and intimidation. The incidents range from the Group Areas police frequently visiting the home of one trade unionist within a short space of time to Security Police questioning union officials on company premises about their organising activities. The union concerned in the latter incident accuses the management of having called in the Security Police with the aim of 'intimidating and bulldozing' their efforts.

In the latest instance of police harassment the third annual congress of the Motor Assemblies and Component Workers Union in April (MACWUSA) was marred when police arrested the guest speaker, Frank van De Horst. They also barred two other speakers and many others from entering Port Elizabeth's New Brighton Township. Mr van De Horst, president of the SA Council of Sport (Sacos) was detained at a roadblock and taken to Security Police headquarters and questioned for three hours. Attacking the police action, MACWUSA trade unionist, Fikile Kobese, said that he 'saw this harassment and intimidation as a deplorable tactic to sabotage the congress'.

After the release of the six trade unionists in the Ciskei in March, SAAWU criticised allegations by Lt-General Charles Sebe that SAAWU was engaged in activities of the banned ANC. They saw this as an excuse to continue the harassment of unionists in the East London area, as SAAWU activities increased and the union gained strength. SAAWU said that the involvement of union members in activities outside the scope of the union had 'no sanction' from the union which was known to be functioning constitutionally.

## **Detentions**

A trade unionist, Mr Dlaki Vani (AFCWU) in Queenstown and Mr Linda Ngodeka, a member of the union, were detained on 3 May. The detentions followed a stoppage at the Eastern Cape Agricultural Cooperative Creamery. Mr Ngodeka was released a few days later. On the 5 May, head of Security Police in the Border Area, Col AP van der Merwe, confirmed that Mr Vani was detained. However a few days later Lt-Gen Charles Sebe claimed that Mr Vani was in detention in the Ciskei and said that he was 'picked up' after a 'long search'. Numerous witnesses saw Mr Vani being taken away by police in Mlungisi township, Queenstown, which is some distance from the Ciskei. The African Food and Canning Workers' Union has expressed shock and outrage at Gen Sebe's statement and say the events can only mean that Mr Vani was handed to the Ciskei police by the SAP. They demanded to know how Mr Vani came to be in the custody of the Ciskei police. The AFCWU has said that they did not have the slightest doubt that 'Mr Vani's detention as part of a co-ordinated campaign to destroy our union in the region'. They demanded his immediate release and alleged that his detention was strongly linked to the stoppage at the creamery in Cape Town.

On the 13th May, the Minister of Law and Order confirmed in Parliament that Mr Vani had been handed over by the SAP to the Ciskei police.

Sidney Mafamundi, General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) General Secretary, and Monde Mditshwa, GAWU National Organiser, were detained on Friday 20th May in East London by Ciskei police. On Monday, 23rd May, General Sebe confirmed their detention but said they had been released on that day. He declined to say where they had been released. None of the union officials in the East London area was aware of their release and expressed serious concern about their whereabouts. They expressed fears that the two unionists were still being held. This was confirmed by the detained trade unionists who said they were released only on Wednesday 25th May. Their detention was condemned strongly by other trade unionists.

## **Court Cases**

In March, the president of SAAWU, Thozamile Gqweta, was called to give evidence for the defence in a security trial in Zwelitsha in the Eastern



Cape. He was called in order to determine the admissability of statements made by the accused. Mr Gqweta gave horrific details of his own conditions of detention in 1982 during which he was subjected to electric shock treatment, assault, near strangulation and other forms of torture. Mr Gqweta was in detention in the Ciskei when he gave evidence.

In April, the former Transvaal secretary of MWASA was jailed for two and a half years for the collection and possession of literature published by the Pan African Congress. Mr Thloloe who was charged with four others, was found in possession of one such document. Mr Thloloe had spent ten months in detention prior to the trial. Mr Thloloe has appealed against the sentence and an application for bail pending the appeal has been made.

The marathon three year trial of AFCWU organiser, Oscar Mpetha (73), ended on the 6th June. Mr Mpetha and twenty-two others were charged on two counts of murder and of participating in terrorist activities. Mr Mpetha was acquitted on the two charges of murder but found guilty of terrorism. In his judgement Mr Justice Williamson said that although he suspected Mr Mpetha of planning the violence that occurred, there was insufficient evidence to show that 'he was the brains behind the events'. However it was clear that Mr Mpetha had encouraged the crowd who were bent on violence, he said.

Five of the twenty two accused were acquitted, three men were found guilty on two charges of murder and taking part in terrorist activities, and one man was found guilty on the two counts of murder. Sentences for all the accused have yet to be passed.

(Shereen Motala, Johannesburg, 8 June 1983)



## **Union Unity**

At a meeting in Athlone, near Cape Town, on the 9th and 10th of April this year, twenty-nine of South Africa's emerging independent trade unions representing approximately 250 000 workers met to discuss trade union unity. The outcome was the establishment of a steering committee to investigate the structure of a new federation and a decision to reconvene before the end of the year. Fourteen of the unions present at Athlone joined the steering committee, thereby agreeing to take immediate steps to form a federation. All others agreed to the idea of a federation but wished either to seek mandates to join the steering committee or felt that to form a federation in the near future would be premature.

The tone of the Athlone meeting was set by the presence of large delegations of elected worker representatives. Of the industrial unions present the Food and Canning/African Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU/AFCWU) had elected delegates from branch level throughout South Africa, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) had representatives from each of its unions, from its regional committees and from its central committee. Similarly the Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association (CTMWA) was represented by elected delegates and officials. Of the general unions present the General Workers' Union (GWU), which had called the meeting, had a large elected worker contingency and SAAWU was represented by officials from its three regions and fifteen unemployed volunteer organisers from East London. The other unions present, including the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), were represented by officials. The numerical preponderance and active participation of workers was decisive in ensuring that the discussion at the meeting were, for much of the time, practical and constructive and gave the meeting a determination to see that wider unity was achieved. This can be contrasted with the previous unity summit in Port Elizabeth, a small gathering mainly of union officials, which broke down in disagreement over abstract principles (SALB Vol.8.4 pp11-15).

Most of the debate at Athlone was over the steps that should be taken towards widening unity. All unions agreed on the need for a federation. The disagreement was over the correct way to approach a federation, how soon this should be done and the form that the federation should take. Two posi-

tions emerged. The first was that there should be a return to regional solidarity action committees through which unity could be built from the base upwards in each region of the country. A national federation of unions should only be established once unity had been achieved at this level. The second position was that immediate steps should be taken to form a federation. The mandate to do this, it was argued, came from the membership, and wider unity could be achieved through the process of formation of the federation itself.

Debate over which of these two paths was the correct one took up the major part of the first day. A heated dispute arose over whether the agenda accompanying the GWU invitation allowed for a general discussion of the basis for unity and hence consideration of the solidarity action committees as an alternative to the formation of a federation, or whether it precluded this and allowed only for a discussion of the structure of the federation.

The South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU), the Motor Assembly and Component Workers' Union/General Workers' Union of South Africa (MACWUSA/GWUSA), Orange Vaal General Workers' Union (OVGWU), General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) and Municipal and General Workers' Union of South Africa (MGWUSA), joined by the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) on this issue, felt that it was premature to form a federation at this stage. Unity had to be built from the base upwards, not imposed on workers from above. Regional solidarity action committees composed of workers delegated on a proportional basis from organised and unemployed workers in an area were the most practical means of doing this (see SALB Vol.8.5 pp57-63)

FCWU/AFCWU, GWU and FOSATU unions argued that regional solidarity action committees had been tried and had proved a failure because in practice they had been attended mainly by officials and had generally been characterised by rivalry and disagreement. The regional solidarity action committees were too loose to ensure effective unity action. Because they were constituted and operated locally, the regional solidarity action committees could not deal with the most serious threats to the workers' movement — state intervention and the manoeuvres of capital — both of which operated nationally, not being confined to any one region. Joined by CCAWUSA, these unions argued that union unity could be achieved through the process of formation of the federation. The desire and mandate for the formation of a federation came from their membership and

it was necessary to take immediate practical steps in this direction. Regional structures could be considered within the framework of the federation, but the federation had to be based on industrial, not regional, lines.

The CTMWA also supported the proposal to move directly towards the formation of a federation but argued that this should be subject to the establishment of regional structures as well. During the course of the first day SAAWU said it would endorse the move to form a federation, if this was agreed to by workers and by the meeting.

The second day was devoted mainly to a discussion of the structure of existing federations, those of FOSATU, CUSA and SAAWU. FOSATU explained its structures. It was a federation of industrial unions with a system of national, regional and local congresses and executive committees. Recently the federation had incorporated shop stewards' councils into its structures. Policy resolutions taken by the national congress of FOSATU were binding on all union affiliates. Resolutions taken by the central committee were not binding but were nevertheless usually carried out by member unions.

CUSA explained its national conference, held every two years, and the functions of the joint and national committees which were responsible for the interim management of the federation. CUSA had no regional or local structures apart from those of its union affiliates. Policies of the national conference were binding only if accepted unanimously.

Finally, the structure of SAAWU was explained. It emerged that SAAWU was still a general workers' union but it was in the process of re-organising itself into a federation of industrial unions. Provision was being made by SAAWU for the establishment of regional and provincial committees which would be intermediate structures between the branch executive committees and its national executive committee.

During the latter part of the second day resolutions were put forward regarding the formation of a federation and a discussion took place over the terms under which unions would join the steering committee. The industrial unions present, excluding CUSA, and one general workers' union, the GWU, wanted unions to join without laying down pre-conditions. The CTMWA and SAAWU agreed to join subject to the regional solidarity action committees being considered by the steering committee, but dropped this when pressed to give unqualified support. GAWU also stuck on the point of regional solidarity action committees but appears at the end of the



meeting to have dropped this qualification. CUSA expressed commitment to joining the steering committee subject to its principle of 'black leadership', but said it had no mandate to dissolve its federation. MGWUSA also expressed commitment to the steering committee, subject to regional solidarity action committees being considered, but later indicated that it had no mandate to join. Other unions present stated that they had no mandate to join but would take the question to their membership. The steering committee would remain open for a fixed period to enable other unions to join at a later stage.

In contrast to the Port Elizabeth unity summit in July 1982 which ended with agreement only on the point that there was no basis for unity amongst all unions' the Athlone meeting represents a significant step forward in the struggle for unification of the independent unions in South Africa. But there should not be an under-estimation of the difficulties that lie in the way of a powerful union federation. Both the state and capital in South Africa have fought against the emergence of genuinely independent worker-controlled, non-racial unions and will attempt to undermine and disorganise, if not block, initiatives to unify such unions within a federation. But it would be seriously misleading to suggest that all the obstacles to wider unity lie outside the workers' movement.

One major difficulty in the way of forming a new federation of independent unions is the prior existence of two federations, FOSATU and CUSA. Although these federations are young, the structures of any organisation forged through a process of struggle develop a durability and momentum which cannot be readily changed. FOSATU, but as yet not CUSA, has agreed to disband, with the proviso that the new federation must not be too loosely organised. Despite this commitment the difficulties facing FOSATU may be greater than those encountered by CUSA once dismantlement is attempted. This is because FOSATU is more highly centralised and tighter in operation than CUSA, and combines both a powerful central committee and strong shop-floor based structures. CUSA unions, with their greater autonomy, may find it easier to break with that federation to join a new one. A specific problem to be confronted by FOSATU and the other unions willing to form a new federation is the FOSATU regional structure. The point was made at the Athlone meeting that the regional structures of FOSATU which brings all unions in a wide area (for example Pretoria and Witwatersrand) together at executive and congress meetings, foster iden-

tification with the federation rather than the union, thus lending the federation the character of a large general workers' union. The regional structures thereby tend to displace power from the union branch level to the central level, away from the foundations of direct worker control.

Perhaps even more difficult than the existing federations will be the problem surrounding the integration of the general workers' unions into a new federation. With the exception of the GWU, it is the general unions (and also CUSA) which have pressed for the alternative of regional solidarity action committees. This approach is a logical outcome of their methods of organisation, structures and size. All these unions are regional, that is their operation and impact has been restricted mainly to one region or locality. They have tended to organise through strike waves, relying in most cases on the mass open township meetings as their major organisational method, and have consequently achieved strong shop-floor organisation only for a relatively small proportion of their total membership. In the cases where these unions have set up outside their home bases this has been as relatively autonomous outposts of the mother union, connected mainly at the level of union leadership rather than through factory-to-factory linkages. This is an outcome of the fact that as general unions, they organise across industrial sectors (thereby cross-cutting the socialising tendencies which monopolisation of production in South Africa has brought to an advanced level) and the absence of a strong worker executive level between the leadership and ordinary membership. This combination of features has made the regional-general unions vulnerable to splits along regional lines.

The resuscitation of regional solidarity action committees as an approach to union unity is attractive to the regional-general unions because it holds out the prospect of expansion from their home bases. At this point in time entry into a federation could entail their fracture into industrial components which would ultimately be drawn into the larger industrial unions, thereby resulting in the disappearance of the general unions in their present form.

The question of the feasibility and desirability of the regional solidarity action committee alternative should be approached with the history of these committees and the recent history of union growth in mind. The idea of regional solidarity action committees was first proposed at the Langa unity summit in August 1981. At that stage virtually all the independent unions, industrial and general, were based in regions in which the proportion of

organised to unorganised industrial workers was small. But the phenomenal expansion of the independent unions during the boom of 1982 has brought several to the point where they operate nationally, with branches and a significant presence in every major industrial area of South Africa. The unions that have achieved the widest spread are industrial, for example the National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union (NAAWU) of FOSATU and the unaffiliated FCWU/AFCWU. Only two of the general workers' unions have moved out of their home bases, the GWU and SAAWU. In both cases organisation on a number of sectoral fronts in a number of different regions has brought these unions up against rival industrial *and* other regional-general unions, at a moment when, due to expanded organisation in this form, the structures and resources of the unions have been stretched. The response of the GWU has been to delimit its organising activities and concentrate on inter-connected sectors, the dock and transport workers. The response of SAAWU has been to contemplate re-constituting itself as an industrial federation thereby attempting to hold on to all its factories. The rest of the regional-general unions, given that they are very small and have a significant presence in only one locality, do not at this juncture have either of these alternatives.

In assessing the alternative of regional solidarity action committees and their corollary, further expansion of regional-general unions, it is necessary to consider the question of their wider appeal across classes within the townships in which they operate, and their capacity on this basis to take up and express demands relating to conditions of life outside the factories. This is the attraction of such unions and in part accounts for the rapid expansion of some of them during the boom period. The question however, is whether this capability cannot be built into the structure of a federation based on industrial lines. This would necessitate the establishment of cross-union local structures (not at the level of the region which covers dispersed industrial and residential areas) capable of taking up both factory and community-based issues, in the manner of the shop stewards councils presently operating within FOSATU. In this way it may be possible for the new federation to incorporate the strengths of the regional-general unions within a structure based on the foundation of objective co-operative relations amongst workers, in the workplace, thereby avoiding their weaknesses.

(Doug Hindson, Johannesburg, June 1983)



## **Wine and Spirits Union Growing**

When thousands of workers downed tools in February last year, to protest the death of Neil Aggett, the participation of a number of factories went largely unnoticed. Nine hundred workers at Distillers Corporation and SWF (Stellenbosch Farmers Winery) plants in Wadeville (Germiston) stopped work and 120 workers at Distillers Corporation in Durban also took action. These workers are members of the National Union of Wine, Spirits and Allied Workers (NUWSAW).

According to general-secretary Fay Mandy the union was launched in the Transvaal in June 1978. At that stage the moving forces were B.L. Krynauw (the former general secretary of the TUCSA-affiliated Garment Workers' Union) and Tom Mashinini who is employed by the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW). The union thus emerged from a TUCSA background. But from the start the organisers emphasised shop-floor organisation, according to Mandy.

In 1981 the union decided to register. Because of racial laws it registered two unions, one for 'coloureds' and one for 'Africans'. When the Act changed, 6 months later, the unions merged. 'But', says Mandy, 'we were one mixed union all along'.

Starting from the Transvaal, the union spread nationally. Today it boasts a paid-up membership of around 5000, an impressive 62% of the industry, and has seven branches nationally: Transvaal, Western Cape, Kimberly/Douglas, Bloemfontein, Natal, Port Elizabeth and East London/Kingwilliamstown. The union president is Mr. November Nkosi.

The union concentrates on the five large manufacturers - SFW, Distillers Corporation, Union Wine, Gilbeys and Douglas Green. Workers from the largest plants (up to 1000 workers) to the smallest depots (as few as 5 or 6) are organised.

The union's sphere of activity excludes the many liquor workers employed by farmers co-ops. Classified as agricultural workers, they are excluded from the Industrial Conciliation Act. Until recently the union has not organised these workers, but organisation has now begun at KWV.

The organising style and structures of NUWSAW give it much in common with the rest of the emerging union movement. According to Mandy, there is strong emphasis on the shop-stewards as the basis of the union. Shop-



stewards are expected to deal with all shop-floor matters that arise, and to have regular monthly meetings with management. The union is there to fall back on if additional assistance is needed. All shop-stewards are elected by the workforce and the union has negotiated, in all factories, a report-back period of one hour (paid) per month. This is to ensure that the shop-stewards don't lose touch with the general membership. 'The relationship between members and shop-stewards is very good' says Mandy.

Each factory is represented on the branch executive committee (BEC) which meets monthly. Each branch sends one or two delegates to form the National Executive Committee (NEC).

However the union also has a number of features indicative of its TUCSA-oriented origins. For example, the hiring and firing of union officials is handled at a national, and not a branch level. 'But organisers must be appointed,' says Mandy, 'on the recommendation of the branch concerned.'

Until a few years ago wages in the industry were set by the Wage Board. But since 1981 the union has negotiated on a national, industry-wide basis, with the employers association. This is probably the only example of such an agreement *outside of an Industrial Council*. 'There was talk of an IC in 1981,' says Mandy, 'but it didn't go far. The members generally didn't know much about Industrial Councils.'

At present NUWSAW meets the Wine & Spirit Manufacturers Association of South Africa annually for wage negotiations. At least one or two other meetings occur during the course of the year. These meetings are attended by workers representatives. Not every factory is represented directly since the union operates in 60 to 70 plants. 'What happens, for example, is that the three Transvaal plants of Distillers Corporation will be got together and the workers will be asked to send one representative,' says Mandy. The union ends up with a delegation of 12 workers together with the branch organisers and general secretary.

The annual wage negotiations take place in March. From the previous October all branches begin collecting proposals for a new agreement. The NEC collects all proposals, draws up a final proposal and sends this back to the branches for approval. 'We're trying to get away from the NEC doing everything,' according to Mandy, 'even though it's time-consuming. The agreement doesn't affect me, it affects the workers out there. With important decisions the workers must share responsibility.'

At present the basic minimum wage in the industry is R55.60 per week.

The latest round of wage talks has reached deadlock and a mediator has been appointed. The employers have offered 10% (i.e. below the inflation rate) whilst the union is demanding 25-30% increases.

NUWSAW describes itself as 'an independent thinking union'. At present it is unaffiliated to any larger federation. 'We first want to get our union firmly organised,' says Mandy. But the union appears to be watching developments closely. 'You have a broader platform with affiliation. What can a union of 9000, if we're organised fully, achieve on social and political questions? We cant sit on the sidelines forever.'

(Jeremy Baskin, Johannesburg, April 1983)

## Katlehong Removals

Let's come together. When they demolish 10 shacks tomorrow we must build a hundred behind them. These people believe we should stay in a hostel. It's unchristian to stay alone without a family. The best way is to fetch our families from the homelands and come here. If we are cowards we'll achieve nothing.

(Speaker at May meeting in Katlehong)

In November last year the East Rand Administration Board (ERAB) began demolishing shacks in Katlehong. Katlehong is part of a group of townships south of Germiston on the East Rand. There are an estimated 44 000 shacks in Katlehong. But only 27 000 'legal' box houses.

The chronic shortage of municipal houses has forced workers to construct their own homes. The shacks are built out of corrugated iron with a timber frame. Sometimes they have a cement floor and have newspaper or cardboard 'wallpaper'. Workers call them 'umkhukhu' which literally means chicken hocks. The umkhukhu are cramped, cold in winter and often leak. In places, up to 16 families or more have built umkhukhu on the narrow strips of land surrounding each two-roomed municipal house.

In Skosana Section, in Katlehong, piles of corrugated iron and bare cement floors are evidence of demolitions carried out by ERAB. Baznaar Moloji, former secretary of the Katlehong Shop Stewards' Council of Fosatu (The Federation of South African Trade Unions) said, 'As the Administration Board knocks down homes like a wave, workers jump ahead and around the wave and reconstruct their umhukhu behind it.'

Some workers have moved onto wasteland to the East of the township in the hope of escaping ERAB. Moloji predicted that as the months go by, these and other areas would turn into squatter camps.

The demolitions are specifically aimed at workers who don't qualify for urban residence — 'illegals'. Migrant workers are especially hard hit, but residents claim that a lot of umkhukhu's belonging even to 'legals' have been knocked down.

Many workers in the Fosatu unions which organise in the area are migrants. These people have faced increasing hardships through changes in influx regulations. Urban residence in terms of Section 10 (1)b is denied to migrants even when they fulfil the legal requirement of working for one

employer for more than 10 years. 'Specials' have been withdrawn. These permits allowed migrant workers to seek employment and register at the pass offices after finding a job. Pass offices now also refuse to transfer contracts even when a worker is retrenched. Frequently a clause was introduced into the standard contract which allows it to be cancelled if a worker brings his family to the urban area. Metal workers have been forced to sign shorter contracts of 6 months. To back up this tightening of the regulations, workers have faced more frequent pass raids and the demolition of their homes.

These attacks on migrant workers give a foretaste of the proposed Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill. The Bill aims to reduce the number of people eligible for permanent urban residence and links this to legal accommodation. Preference will be given to local labour in the allocation of employment. The Bill provides for stricter influx and recruitment controls.

To get a permanent urban residence exemption under the Bill, a person must be a citizen of SA. This excludes Xhosa, Tswana and Venda speaking people. As other 'homelands' go 'independent' it will exclude their 'citizens'. A person must also have lived in an area continuously for 10 years and both his parents must have the right to permanent urban residence (PUR). Urban residence is made even more tenuous than in the past because a person who loses his approved accommodation also loses this right.

Migrant workers will only get work through a centralised system of labour bureaux in the 'homelands'. This control is reinforced by a 10pm to 5am curfew for workers without permanent urban residence certificates. The Bill sets down massive fines for breaking these laws; R500 for workers and R5000 for employers, in the case of illegal employment.

But the attacks that migrant workers already face in their day to day lives are evidence that many of the controls envisaged by the Bill are already practiced by the East Rand Administration Board.

It is in this context that angry workers raised the issue of demolitions in the Katlehong Shop Stewards' Council (referred to as SSC).

The SSC represents stewards from all Fosatu unions in the Wadeville and Alberton areas. But the meetings are open to all Fosatu workers. It meets every week. This year numbers attending the meetings have varied between 100-200 workers. At its peak in the middle of last year up to 500 workers were attending meetings. Ronald Mofakeng, a former chairman of the



council, explains the decline in numbers in terms both of mass retrenchment and the lack of transport to take workers home late at night. But he also sees it relating to the level of worker struggle in the area. Two committees have been elected to tackle this problem, one to research why factories are no longer attending and the other to follow up the research committee and attempt to re-organise shop stewards in the factories.

Workers at the SSC have decided that office bearers, such as the chairman and secretary, should be rotated and elected for a maximum of one year. This is to give others a chance and to prevent 'power mongering'.

In the future the SSC may meet once a month, over a weekend, to allow the maximum possible attendance. The weekly meetings would continue, but would only be obligatory for committee members.

The demolitions have been discussed at SSC meetings this year. Some workers suggested approaching community councillors in Katlehong and Thokoza, an adjoining township. Other workers rejected this, saying that the community councillors were 'part of the system'. The workers should go straight to Koornhof, the Minister of Co-operation and Development, who, they said, was the top boss of the community councillors. Still other workers wanted more direct action in defence of their homes.

It was finally decided to test out the community councillors to see if they would respond to the workers.

In the first week of February, letters were sent to the Katlehong and Thokoza community councillors calling for a meeting. The first letters were unanswered. More letters were sent off. Finally, the Thokoza Community Council agreed to meet with the SSC on February 21. But the councillors failed to turn up at the meeting. A few days later elected worker representatives cornered a councillor, who 'probably stressed to the others the need for a meeting'. A month later, in March, they met. The councillors claimed there had been no demolitions. But that in the future people who didn't have urban residence rights; and people with rights but who weren't on the waiting list for houses, would definitely have their umkhukhu knocked down. However the councillors also claimed that they had no power to prevent demolitions. They said the decision was taken over their heads by ERAB. Workers have completely rejected this saying the Community Council has done nothing to prevent demolitions, and had given their consent. As one worker put it, 'These people we elected as CC's. I didn't see them telling us about the demolition of shacks. I only saw them when they wanted votes.'

Mofokeng explained that having found it useless to speak to community councillors, the SSC decided to address itself to the government. In March a general meeting took place in Katlehong. The meeting was a reportback for all Fosatu union members in the Wadevill and Alberton areas. Two important issues at the meeting were the demolition of umkhukhu and the proposed Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill.

A report was given about the community councillors. Workers agreed to withhold their votes in the next elections. Workers expressed concern that the councillors obtained their votes from women who were at home during the day. They demanded that the councillors come to the factories.

A decision was taken to approach employers and ask them to intervene against the demolition of umkhukhu. Mloi said, 'We felt we could use management as a weapon. Management needs workers.' Finally a declaration was agreed upon. This states that:

1. Workers must be free to seek employment wherever available, and management must be allowed to employ any worker, with no interference from the pass offices.
2. That all people born in SA should have equal rights to citizenship.
3. That all workers must have the right to decent housing within reasonable distance from their place of work.

The declaration lists and rejects all the measures used by the Administration Board to tighten the pass laws. And it rejects in its entirety the proposed Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill. It provides space for workers, union members in a factory, and management to sign.

After the meeting in May some workers took the declaration to their managers, but reports are that few companies responded. However the Fosatu unions took up the issue throughout South Africa and, following meetings in all the Fosatu regions, it was decided by the Central Committee that independent action should be taken. The declaration is to be retained but only union members in a factory are to be approached to sign it. In addition there is to be a petition which all are to be encouraged to sign, non-union members and management included. The original declaration and the petition are to be submitted to the Minister of Manpower Utilisation.

This decision was discussed at a Fosatu meeting on the East Rand in May. Workers at the meeting stressed that those with and those without Section 10 rights (residence qualifications under Section 10 (1)a and b of the Urban Areas Act) should stand together. Opposition was expressed to state at-

tempts to divide workers ethnically. As workers at the meeting put it, 'They want to divide us. If we keep thinking this Sotho or that Zulu we'll get nowhere. Let's unite brothers!' And, 'They are trying to get us back to the Bantustans. After the Bill, no-one will have rights to stay here even if born and bred here. In the Bantustans hunger will strike you until you come back as cheap labour.'

Anger was expressed at the housing situation in general. One worker explained how an administration board employee had entered his house without permission to put in a pipe: 'The land belongs to them. When I complained they said, 'Why don't you put your house on wheels and go somewhere else'. Another reported, 'These umkhukhu are still being demolished. People disappear. We don't know where they are. Other people go up and down looking for a place to stay.'

The declaration and petitions are going to be collected in the next two weeks. What they achieve is impossible to say. It is clear though that feelings amongst the workers of Katlehong are running high. They are aware that the outcome of their struggle will affect many others who face similar attacks from Bantu Administration Boards in other areas: 'The eyes of other workers are on us in Katlehong. They are ready to back us up in any action we take.'

(Johannesburg Correspondent, May, 1983)



## **Cape Town Trade Union Library Opens**

A new service for the trade union movement has started in Cape Town. It has been set up by a group of trade unions which have pooled their resources to provide a central reference service for themselves, and a reading room for all trade union members. Although the collection of books, pamphlets and journals is still small, the Cape Town Trade Union Library is now open for use on Saturdays between 10.00am and 2.00pm. The hours will be extended soon.

Because books (especially essential reference works) are so expensive; because workers live in overcrowded housing conditions which make reading very difficult; because many of the books that workers and trade unionists want to read are not readily available even when they are affordable; because there are hardly any public reading rooms: these are the reasons for the establishment of the Trade Union Library.

The trade unions who have started the Library wanted to overcome these problems because they believe that *workers' education* in the broadest sense is vital to the growth and development of the trade union movement. The Library will help the unions themselves to improve their collective bargaining; it will help shop stewards and union committees to learn more about trade unionism, its aims, roots, methods; and it will draw the ordinary union members more actively into the unions, and equip them with a sounder understanding of the workers' position in society.

The Library is not merely a collection of books. It will become an active resource centre and a spur to workers' education. Trade unionists who wish to join the Library will be asked to join the *Readers' Club* which will have its own committee. It is hoped that the Readers's Club will become an active body in its own right, participating in the affairs of the Library and organising programmes of its own.

The Library already has a good deal of material useful to trade union officials and shop stewards in particular. There is a complete, up-to-date set of all industrial council agreements and wage determinations current in the Western Cape; trade union directories; material on shop steward training; industrial health matters; labour history etc. Most of the material has been donated or obtained at reduced prices. The Library is under-financed.

The Cape Town Trade Union Library is a wholly trade union organisa-

tion, whose members are the Bakery Employees' Industrial Union, the Brewery Employees' Union, the Domestic Workers' Association, the Jewellers' and Goldsmiths' Union and the Liquor and Catering Trades Employees' Union. Membership of the Library is open to all trade unions which subscribe to the Library's aims and objects. Membership of the Readers' Club is open to *all* trade union members, even if the trade union concerned is not a member of the Library. Anyone who is not a trade union member may apply to join the Readers' Club as an associate member. Unemployed workers, pensioners, students, for example are welcome as associate members. A small membership fee is payable by members of the Readers' Club.

The library is situated at 108C Malta House, Malta Road, Salt River. It is only 5 minutes from Salt River station, which connects with every railway station in metropolitan Cape Town. The postal address is P.O. Box 376, Salt River, 7925. Anyone in other centres wishing to find out more about workers' libraries should write to the Secretary at that address.

All trade unionists in Cape Town will be welcome to visit the Library and to join the Readers' Club.

(Gordon Young, Cape Town, May 1983)

## **SACTU and the Industrial Conciliation Act**

### **Rob Lambert**

1983 is a crucial year for the independent labour movement in South Africa as determined efforts are made to transcend the fractionalised nature of that movement. State repression of sectors of the movement during 81 and 82, culminating in the death in detention of Neil Aggett, gave unity talks a new impetus, while the work stoppage of 101 000 workers to protest Aggett's death expressed the potential of unity and laid the basis for further unity and co-operation of a more permanent kind in the future<sup>1</sup>. With the rapid expansion of sections of the independent trade union movement since Wiehahn, the large permanently established unions had shifted the balance of forces, thereby bringing to the fore the possibility of further repressive intervention by the state and new initiatives by capital to limit union power. This new objective situation makes the forging of an organically united labour movement imperative. Nowhere was this more forcefully demonstrated during 1982 than in the General Workers' Union recognition dispute on the Port Elizabeth docks. Railway workers were harshly repressed and the union was forced to retreat, leaving the large state-run transport sector outside of the ambit of the independent unions. This is a setback as the establishment of an effective worker movement must extend beyond the manufacturing sector to state run transport, the mines and white capitalist agriculture. The Port Elizabeth dispute reveals that this can only be placed on the agenda once unity is firmly attained.

In the earlier unity discussions, differing positions regarding the proper relationship between the unions and the apartheid state served as one impediment to progress. On the one side it was argued that unions that register in terms of the Labour Relations Act and enter Industrial Councils compromise basic principles to such a degree that it is not possible even to discuss unity with them. Such discussions could only take place if these unions deregister and withdraw from the industrial council system. The Motor Assembly and Components Workers' Union of South Africa has articulated this position consistently. On the other hand it is argued that such issues



should be discussed tactically in terms of whether or not such decisions advance or inhibit the growth of an independent, democratic worker movement. At the most recent talks held in April this year, differing perspectives on this issue were secondary to the need for a new federation.

In this context it is constructive to examine the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU's) response to the 1956 amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act, amendments which attempted to impose rigid racial divisions on the trade union movement in keeping with Nationalist party ideology.

The amendments led to intense debate within the SACTU national congresses in which both positions were strongly articulated. On the one side it was argued that registration and industrial councils must be viewed tactically rather than in terms of principles. On the other it was argued that participation in the industrial relations system represents compromise with the apartheid state, the result of which is that political struggle is irretrievably dissipated, leaving in its wake emasculated weak unions.

This article details both positions, by outlining the debates within Sactu, and by presenting the participants' own evaluation of the consequent effects of decisions taken.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Apartheid State's Offensive**

The rapid development of the manufacturing sector during the 1930's and 1940s was accompanied by a substantial increase in the size of the black proletariat with the African urban population trebling between 1921 and 1946 so that by 1946 almost one in four Africans were in the cities.<sup>3</sup> The process of organising black workers into trade unions advanced through the formation of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) in 1942. By 1945 CNETU had some 158 000 members in 119 unions, representing 40% of the total African workforce employed in manufacturing and commerce. During the war years the bargaining position of organised workers strengthened with the exodus of white workers in support of the war effort, with the rationalisation of production processes, the breakdown of the artisanal-unskilled division of labour and the growth of semi skilled operatives.

This changing size and position of the black proletariat, together with organisation at the point of production generated a dramatic increase in the

level of strike action during the war years as black workers pushed for, and won, wage increases.

There were two dimensions to the strategy to contain this upsurge — repression and reform. War measure 145, introduced in December 1942, imposed severe sanctions on striking workers, while the United Party debated the most appropriate response to the increased worker militancy. The 1948 Native Laws commission (Fagan Commission) in recognising the permanent urbanisation of African workers in the manufacturing sector, attempted to formulate exploitation in class rather than racial terms. The national system of labour bureaux was to be established, and the pass system replaced by a simplified identification system. In 1947 legislation in the form of the Industrial Conciliation Bill was introduced which had as its intention the diffusion of the bargaining power of African unions through statutory recognition that included illegalizing all strikes, electing union officials under government supervision and approval, and the channelling of disputes through compulsory arbitration by mediation boards.

The Industrial Conciliation bill was finally not introduced into parliament when the Nationalist party came to power in 1948. The Nationalist Party initiated instead a more aggressive drive to extend and reform controls over the labour movement and denied any form of recognition to African unions, as this implied the recognition of urban rights which they rejected. When the Nationalist appointed Industrial Legislation (Botha) Commission argued that African unions should be recognised on a similar basis to that proposed in the earlier bill, minister of labour Schoeman responded:

If we give them that incentive to organise and should they become well organised — and again bearing in mind that there are almost 1 000 000 native workers in industry and commerce today — they can use their trade unions as a political weapon and they can create chaos in South Africa at any given time. I think that we would probably be committing race suicide, if we gave them that incentive.<sup>7</sup>

This speech was made in the context of the militant upsurge of the exploited classes. The repression of the mine strike in 1946 stimulated the coalescence of various opposition groupings around a programme of action in 1949 that gave impetus to organised resistance in the form of stay aways and passive resistance. Rather than recognise African unions in such a context, non-recognition was coupled with the repression of trade union leadership.

The drive to contain the militant upsurge extended beyond the continued non-recognition of African unions to the introduction of changes in the Industrial Conciliation Act so as to impose a restructuring of all existing unions along racial lines. The amended Act introduced provisions whereby no further 'mixed' unions would be registered; 'mixed' unions would have to separate into uniraical unions if more than half of either the white or coloured workers chose to break away; any 'mixed' union that did not divide voluntarily into separate racial unions would have separate racial branches of whites and coloureds. Meetings would be separate and only whites could serve on the executives of different branches. Mixed meetings of shop stewards and mixed Congresses were to be prohibited. The Act also introduced a statutory colour bar (clause 77).

In the post-war period a widespread reorganisation of the labour process was taking place, giving rise to the semi-skilled operative drawn largely from within the ranks of the growing African working class.<sup>5</sup> This process of 'rationalisation' increasingly threatened many Trades and Labour Council (TLC) unions, comprising white, coloured and Indian workers. Differences over the most effective strategy to respond to this process was an element in the demise of the TLC and the formation of TUCSA in October 1954. TUCSA supported the recognition of African trade unions, and opposed the racial provisions outlined above, because it was held that the retention of mixed unions could more effectively prevent undercutting through closed shop agreements.

As regards the rise of the semi-skilled operatives and African unions, TUCSA leadership believed that recognition and registration under the Act would lead to a process of incorporation that would institutionalize conflict, thereby containing political struggle.<sup>6</sup> While TUCSA called for recognition, it nevertheless excluded African unions, in deference to the position of the predominantly white artisan trade unions.

SACTU was formed in March 1955 as a non-racial co-ordinating body in response to TUCSA's rejection of the African Trade union membership on the one hand, and their explicit statement of the need to control these unions on the other.

Trade unions should be willing to guide the native along the path of responsible Trade unionism without endangering their own standards of leadership....Suppression will instill in workers the desire for political power to alleviate their lot. That is a possibility which we can-



not contemplate without grave misgivings if the European people wish to remain in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Comprising former CNETU unions and the left wing of the TLC, the new leadership based itself firmly in the African working class, seeking essentially to respond to and articulate the heightening political struggle of that class as the ANC mobilized black workers in the face of the apartheid state's offensive outlined above.

In contrast to the TUCSA orientation, SACTU developed a defined political unionism.

You cannot separate politics and the way in which people are governed from their bread and butter, or their freedom to move to and from places where they can find the best employment, or the houses they live in, or type of education their children get... Trade unions must be active in the political sphere as they are in the economic....<sup>8</sup>

But as the following debates will show, SACTU opposed the Act on a basis that differed radically from TUCSA. While TUCSA unions were threatened by the reorganization of the labour process, deskilling and the rise of the semi-skilled operatives; such developments provided the material power base for SACTU unions. For the SACTU leadership, willing to link with the ANC programme of action through the Congress Alliance, this provided an opportunity, but also raised a difficult issue. How could the emergence of industrial unions play a role in furthering the political struggle against the apartheid state? It is within this problematic that the following debates should be situated.

### **SACTU Responds to the Act**

From the outset, the leadership pushed the following question to the forefront: how could the new apartheid provisions be effectively opposed?

A policy document analysing the likely effects of the new provisions on the trade union movement and advancing a strategy to counter the state's offensive was presented at SACTU's first annual conference in March 1956. The new bill was part of a fascist onslaught designed to fundamentally weaken the trade union movement by dividing that movement along racial lines and depriving it not only of its right to strike, but also of its right to control its own funds and elect its own officials. Decades of compliance with the provisions of the IC Act had incapacitated the unions.

In the field of trade union organisation the emphasis had gradually



shifted from the shop and factory floor to the trade union office. It became a tendency to settle disputes by legal procedure rather than through militant struggles of the workers.<sup>9</sup>

This legalistic tendency even permeated the existing unregistered African unions, and while progressive unionists recognised the need to link militant struggle with legal procedure, difficulties were experienced in applying this. The established unions failed to mobilise all workers in the face of the Nationalist Party's new onslaught against the trade unions because they were bureaucratic, had disconnected themselves from the political struggle for the rights of the working class, and were infested by the 'scourge of racialism'. The task of rectifying the mistakes of the past rested on SACTU, a body which recognized no colour bars in the working class struggle!

For SACTU to fulfil this task adequately it must develop clarity in its future policy direction, and workers must be educated through the process of struggle. Such policy must recognise and develop the following orientation:

The highly centralised type of trade union machinery is at a great disadvantage in such a situation (i.e. developing a clearer political direction. R.L.), and although the necessity of it is recognized and must be maintained, it will be the militant factory unit which will be the most effective in the struggle. It is on these factory units that the organizational emphasis must be placed. Workers in the factory must receive the necessary theoretical education in working class struggle to equip them for independent struggle. The emphasis must, further, be on the development of leadership in the factories....SACTU must vigorously pursue a policy placing the interests of workers in the forefront of the struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Basic demands should be integrated into this programme of developing new factory structures and stimulating a self conscious leadership. These should include the demand for higher wages; better conditions of life and labour; elementary human rights in workshops and factories; full and equal rights for prospective working mothers; guaranteed annual leave on full pay for all workers; full equal workman's compensation, unemployment insurance and the right to engage in skilled occupations.

The conference considered the document and, with the failure to win TUCSA's support to counter the amendments, plans to organise a national petition, lobby parliament and make approaches to the minister failed to materialise. With the exception of regional conferences in the Transvaal, Port Elizabeth and Natal, organized during March, opposition remained

dormant during 1956. In contrast, 1957 was a year of intense debate within SACTU over the correct tactical responses to changes in the Act which became effective on January 1.

### **The Registration Debate**

The issue at the forefront was the question of formal registration in terms of the Act. Just prior to the second annual conference held in April, Eli Weinberg, General Secretary of the National Union of Commercial Travellers, argued in the pages of *Truth*, the Laundry workers' paper, that SACTU unions should voluntarily deregister so that Africans could be equal members of mixed unions. In his view this would also strengthen democratic control within individual unions and widen the scope for strike action and political involvement. Underlying his argument was an optimism in the inherent power of the workers' movement.

*The African workers are on the move again, and they, no doubt, will again prove to the members of registered unions that the most effective way to secure benefits is workers unity and not some kind of nebulous 'recognition' which is bound up precisely with the sacrifice of working class unity.<sup>11</sup>*

Any decision to deregister would affect SACTU's largest unions. At this point in time it comprised 26 affiliated unions, 5 of which were registered. These were the Textile Workers' Industrial Union (TWIU), the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), the National Union of Laundering, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers (NULCDW), the Metal Workers' Union (MWU) and the South African Tin Workers' Union (SATWU). While the majority of SACTU unions were unregistered, the registered unions in Textiles, Food and Laundering comprised the greater majority of SACTU's organised membership. The unregistered unions linked to the registered unions in these three sectors had a smaller but still substantial membership, and taken together these unions were the backbone of SACTU. The remaining 20 unions were extremely weak.

This issue was brought into sharp focus at the Second Annual Conference of April 1957 where the registration debate dominated, consuming a full two of the three available days. A resolution on the IC Act was submitted for debate. In essence it argued that the amendments would have a two fold effect on the trade union movement: firstly, they would 'deepen and perpetuate the disastrous racial divisions which had plagued the South

African trade union movement since its inception,<sup>12</sup> and secondly it challenged the independence of the progressive labour movement, for workers would no longer have the right to run their own organisations in their own manner. The very right to elect leaders of their own choice will be denied them'. Thus compliance would transform unions into nothing more than instruments of government policy and they would become 'trapped in a mesh of legislation designed to cripple them'. However tempting 'the fruits of legal recognition', 'capitulation' in the face of the new provisions would prove disastrous. Again the argument that working class strength is a surer basis for employer recognition was advanced. The preamble called for a 'vast counter offensive' based on a drive to organise African workers who were 'suffering under the double yoke of extreme class and national oppression'. A vote was called on the following resolution:

'This conference of SACTU conscious of the gravity of the situation facing the workers of our country:

1. Appeals to all registered trade unions to resist all efforts to split their organisations on racial grounds and if necessary to forgo registration under the Industrial Conciliation Act.
2. Calls upon newly formed trade unions not to register under the Industrial Conciliation Act but to form broad, multi-racial trade unions.
3. Calls on all trade unions, registered and unregistered; those affiliated to SACTU and the SA Trade Union Council to sink their differences and to build complete working class unity so that this Industrial Conciliation Act and all other anti working class legislation could be defeated.
4. Instructs all its local committees and affiliated unions to embark on a campaign to organise the unorganised workers so that mass pressure can be brought to bear on the Nationalist Government to repeal all unjust anti trade union laws.

Don Mateman, SACTU National Treasurer and National Secretary of TWIU, intervened immediately and proposed an amendment to the resolution's first proposition. The Mateman amendment read:

Registered trade unions should resist all efforts to split their organisations on racial grounds. Unions should devise ways and means, despite the Act, to maintain and strengthen the unity of all workers, and where possible to forego registration.<sup>13</sup>

When Moses Mabida, the Natal regional President, held that the original wording 'if necessary' covered the proposed amendment, Mateman clarified by saying that what he envisaged was registered unions devising ways and



means of maintaining the unity of workers, despite the Act, without deregistering. That is, means should be found for the unions to work outside the Act, despite their remaining registered. This pro-registration stance was vigorously attacked by Oscar Mpetha, organiser for the unregistered African FCWU in a speech stressing the innate strength of African working class.

The reason we are today faced with an IC Act of this nature is because workers had accepted previous IC Acts, which gained them temporary advantages. We need not find ways and means of working within the Act. We could not leave the onus to a few unions. SACTU as a progressive organisation had to reject the Act. If we accept the amendment we are going backwards. Why could we not negotiate from strength? Must we beg that a piece of paper will negotiate for us, that white workers should negotiate for us? Have we no confidence in our own workers that they will change the tide in South Africa? We must not underestimate their strength. I ask the conference not to accept the amendment.

Malika and January, both of NULCDW, intervened — rejection of the Act in the form of deregistration was a principled stand,

SACTU came into being on the basis of certain principles. These principles had to be adhered to.

To this Mateman retorted that he was not compromising principles. Conference must consider the effects that deregistration would have on the Textile Union in order to understand his argument for remaining registered. At this point he was supported by Turok of the MWU,

We should not run too far ahead. If we deregister we would lose many advantages under the Act, and some of the unions might leave SACTU.

The debate then shifted to Mpetha's contention regarding the strength of the African working class. This Marcus, of the Shops and Office Workers' Union (SOWU), challenged.

The conference should face facts and consider how many *organised* workers there were in South Africa, when they called for negotiations from strength.

At the end of the long, two day debate Mpetha again took the floor,

Working within the Act was to agree to baaskap ... SACTU must give a lead ... progressive unions will have to undergo deregistration ... we must reject the Act in toto for it is our doom to accept it.

Delegates were deeply divided on the issue and because of the lack of unanimity, a policy making vote was postponed. The question of registration was referred to the incoming National Executive Committee for further consideration. They decided to organise a special conference in December to canvas opinion on appropriate responses to the state's offensive once again.

This initiative was however rendered redundant as individual SACTU unions made decisions independently of the NEC. At the 16th Annual Conference of the 9 000 strong FCWU, held in September, the Union, while emphasising its total opposition to the IC Act, decided to comply with the Act, thereby altering its constitution so as to confine its membership to coloured workers. Following on the FCWU, the TWIU amended its membership to coloured workers only, while the NULCDW divided into separate uniraical unions, with the larger coloured union retaining the name and the new white union being known as the Laundry, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers' Union. Faced with this independent initiative on the part of the major unions the December special conference could do nothing other than endorse a de facto situation.

While it is clear at this point, that the major SACTU unions had undercut the deregistration thrust, this move should be situated in the context of the historical development of these unions. They would argue that drawing on economic gains that could be made through the IC Act, FCWU and TWIU were able to develop a base during the 1940's. Each established a linked but separate union for African workers. Organisationally the two worked together so that the gains that FCWU made through Conciliation Boards, also brought economic gains to AFCWU. In other words, the decision to comply with the Act was not a rupture at a union level, as structurally these unions were separate, despite their acting together. It was however a rupture in terms of the co-ordinating body. In the aftermath of these union decisions delegates pledged a continued campaign against the Act, while at the same time retracting and transforming the unambiguous April resolution calling on unions to forego registration into a vague and general appeal that:

... the present registered unions work towards greater unity and strength.<sup>14</sup>

Mpetha spoke. This move by the major unions was a temporary measure designed to 'safeguard' those unions. They were prepared to deregister, but

would do so gradually. The resolution was adopted unanimously and the conference endorsed the existing practice of splitting unions, arguing that this side-stepped the problem of 'white baaskap': subjecting 'non-whites' to the position of inferior members. Unions were called on to campaign for private agreements with employers outside the IC Act as a method of countering the effects of the Act. This was endorsed at the 1958 conference where the general secretary congratulated the registered trade unions for their 'heroic opposition to the Act, despite the fact that because of their small numbers they were unable to hold out against the overwhelming odds against them'.<sup>15</sup> Despite a public statement at the conference that these unions were consistently working towards eventual deregistration no SACTU union adopted this strategy in practice.

### **Registration and the Issue of Democracy**

Clearly, there is a fairly dramatic shift between the inconclusive debates of the 2nd Annual Conference, and the independent initiatives of certain SACTU unions six months later. Why was there this rupture, and the inescapable question: if individual unions act in this manner, can one still talk of a coordinating body capable of uniting and giving direction to the working class?

Internal democracy implies that coordinating body structures facilitate the participation of ordinary workers in open debate and decision making. This is not simply a question of the extent to which the SACTU constitution of 1955 corresponds with this model, for the attainment of internal democracy is a process of struggle waged during the growth and extension of member unions.

SACTU had been in existence for a mere 18 months when the congress debate took place, hence the disconnected nature of the decision making process and the consequent lack of organic unity. At this early stage SACTU annual conferences were little more than a platform for discussion between unions. As the 2nd Annual Conference could not reach consensus on the registration question the NEC could exert no direction other than asking member unions to delay a decision until after the December special conference. The unions did not delay, exposing the weaknesses of SACTU at this juncture.

Reflection on the 1957 debate further reveals the problems surrounding the question of internal democracy as a process of attaining organic unity.



Current research seems to suggest that individuals made interventions in the debate without any mandate from union membership. In the words of one delegate, the intervention on deregistration 'came out of the blue'. It had not been discussed with other union officials. Individuals therefore acted on their own. Nor was the conference resolution circulated to the individuals unions prior to the conference. Delegates received it on arrival and there was little opportunity to discuss responses within the crowded agenda. Leading proponents in the debate had no mandate from the union members and simply reacted to the resolution according to their own individual perceptions of the most effective response.

A complicating factor in this issue of a mandate was the fact that the leadership of both Textiles and Food and Canning did not want to open the registration issue out to general debate at the membership level, at this point in time. It was argued that the registration issue was never discussed with the general membership because it gave unnecessary emphasis to a sensitive issue in the Western Cape — the state's differential discrimination against coloured and African workers. 'Africans are very, very sensitive to discrimination and it is a point that can hurt a lot'.<sup>16</sup> Mateman argued that only certain leadership decisions had to be referred to the membership. At certain points strategy needed to be discussed.

We used to sit down and get the wisdom of the workers. We would ask, what line should we take, then work out new strategies together. Rank and file members always had a lot of confidence in their leaders at that time.<sup>17</sup>

Only decisions that affected the real needs of workers were referred and it was felt that the registration issue did not fall into that category.

The decision to comply with the amendments was never canvassed in the factories for the reasons outlined above. The debate and the decisions that followed thus reveal SACTU's early stage of development so that while debate was open and democratic at the national conference level, organization and consciousness had not developed to the point where these debates could permeate amongst ordinary members, thus connecting individual unions in a more organic response. The rupture can thus be explained and it is naive to judge SACTU on this issue. It had not had the time to crystallize as a coordinating body. This should serve as a warning to all: an organically united movement capable of giving direction to the working class is not attained simply because union delegates meet at a conference. The achieve-

ment of internal democracy is a process of ongoing struggle requiring time to mature. On what basis, then, can the registration decision be evaluated?

### **Towards an Evaluation — Negative Compromise or Principled Strategy**

SACTU's final response to the apartheid state's offensive could be evaluated as a negative compromise. A union grouping committed to a militant resistance campaign against the state at a political level had subordinated itself to apartheid to such an extent that its 'resistance' was limited to rhetoric only. Principled opposition had thus been emasculated. The official SACTU history views the decision of the various unions to comply with the Act as a negative compromise. In their terms, deregistration would have been the correct decision and the alternative reveals the divisions created even within the progressive trade unions by apartheid legislation. They interpret the outcome of the debate in racial categories, determined by existing social structures: militant African leaders favoured defying the Act and pushed for deregistration whereas registered unionists were reluctant. This arose out of differing social experiences. For African leaders defiance of the IC Act was simply an extension of their experience in resisting the 1953 Native Labour Act, whereas others were unwilling to forgo the benefits they derived under the IC Act. The latter feared that their largely coloured membership were unwilling to accept short term sacrifices associated with the loss of registered status, thereby failing to educate their memberships on the long term political advantage of deregistration.

Exponents of the deregistration position essentially argue that compliance plays into the hands of the state in that it divides the labour movement racially, weakens it and furthermore bureaucratises that movement. This runs counter to the gains made through struggle as the emphasis shifts from the factory floor to the trade union office and legal procedure. Underlying the position is a belief in the strength of the African working class, a closeness to the notion of the spontaneous movement of the class: 'The African workers are on the move again'.

During 1957, while these debates ran their course, African workers were on the move. At the beginning of the year SACTU members had participated in a spontaneous upsurge of mass action on an unprecedented scale, when an estimated 70 000 Africans from Johannesburg and Pretoria townships boycotted the PUTCO buses and walked 20 miles to and from work each day. The action was sustained for three months, spreading to Port

Elizabeth, Uitenhage, East London and Bloemfontein in the form of acts of solidarity. When the fares were forced back to their original levels, a new sense of optimism permeated the Congress alliance. During the course of the boycott SACTU organized a Worker's Conference which gave rise to a nationwide £1 a day campaign. Speaking from the floor, Leslie Massina, Secretary of SACTU, declared:

The bus boycotters have shown up, as never before, the terrible hardships of African families on their present wage scales ... Asinamali exactly states the position of the workers today. 18

The slogan 'Asinamali — Sifun'imali' — we have no money — we want money, took root in the factories and 1957 witnessed the highest level of factory strikes for the decade.

Confidence at this level translated into national campaigns and the June 26 national stay away call, 'stop work, stop the nationalists' linked to the £1 a day campaign and the rejection of passes and permits. Despite the considerable forces mobilized against the campaign by the state and capital, the strike was 70 — 80 percent effective in the Johannesburg, Vereeniging and Port Elizabeth areas, where the majority of workers ignored the threats. On other parts of the Reef, except the East Rand where the response was poor, there was a 50 percent stay away. The strike was most solid in unionised factories.

It was in this context of continuous, interlacing, militant struggle, that the deregistration position was advanced. Delegates had experienced and participated in the upsurge, and were in no mood for tactical compromises. The deregistration thrust can only be grasped in this wider context. The Act was being opposed so as to extend the political struggle against the State, in a phase of movement and increasing commitment by a substantial segment of the African working class to tackling the issue of the State directly. The official history is thus correct in pointing to social experience as determining positions vis-a-vis the Act, but it fails to understand the rationale of the alternative. The argument for registration cannot simply be explained by reference to the race of the exponents, but must be traced back to more substantive reasons.

### **The Case Against Registration**

Those participants in the debate who expounded the alternative, argue that the decision to comply with the Act far from being a negative com-



promise actually embodied a defined and principled strategy. Such a strategy is based, they argue, on a knowledge of worker consciousness and the levels of union organisation during the 1950's; the internal situation and organisational problems of particular unions; the limits of law and the way in which it can be turned to the advantage fo the working class.

Despite the revival of trade unionism amongst black workers during the 1940's, worker consciousness remained at an elemental level during the 1950's. Many ordinary members still viewed the trade union as an office, or a bureau that could offer legal advice on a variety of everyday problems or a group that was ready to take up individual grievances with particular employers. A trade union consciousness had not yet emerged, that is, they had to discover through experience that 'the work of a union is to fight, to go on fighting, and at no stage to give up. Unions are to change conditions. We had to make workers realise that it was they who had to come together to take a stand'.<sup>19</sup> With class consciousness in embryonic form it was not possible to approach workers with 'fancy ideas' on the merits or otherwise of registration. The spadework had yet to be done. Furthermore, trade union organisation was at an early stage of development and needed to expand quite considerably so as to make tactical decisions from a position of relative strength. Arguments for deregistration rested on the assumption of the strength of the working class, despite the lack of organisation of that class and made no assessment of the balance of forces.

Unions such as Food and Canning, Textiles and others, were committed to the establishment of strong industrial unions, nationally. Deregistration was opposed because some of the exponents argued for large mass general unions, in opposition to strengthening the existing industrial unions within SACTU. It was felt that this position confused the specific role of the trade union within broader based political struggle.

Nor did the deregistration position take account of the internal situation and organisational problems of particular unions. During the period of the debate the TWIU faced the full power of the Frame company as managing director Philip Frame orchestrated Industrial Council proceedings through Alex Wanlass, an ex Labour Party MP who became secretary of the Industrial Council with Frame's assistance. A strike of almost 700 workers was broken at the giant Consolidated Textile Mill in Durban, with the Industrial Council forcing major concessions from TWIU members, while Wanlass, an energetic opponent from the outset of TWIU memberships of SACTU,

sought registration for his new union, the Fibers Spinners and Weavers Union. This took place during June 1957, the precise moment that the TWIU NEC were considering the deregistration issue. Executive members felt that deregistration would simply provide new avenues for the Frame group to attack TWIU, weakened as it was by the defeat at Consolidated. It was a time to consolidate on the factory floor, and deregistration would only complicate this endeavour.

Similarly Liz Abrahams, secretary of FCWU, said that at various points in its history FCWU had to face the challenge of opportunistic leadership who sought to establish an alternative union under cover of formal recognition, built upon attempts to create coloured worker antagonism towards black workers, something FCWU refused to tolerate.

Opportunistic leaders often argue that the government should not give Africans in the Western Cape rights to work there because they are taking bread from the Coloured people's mouth. We dismiss any leader who disorganises and speaks against the workers. <sup>20</sup>

In the Textile industry the task of organising black workers was problematic because factories were being increasingly located in rural areas with sources of cheap labour. There industrialists obtained large tracts of land and union organisers found it impossible to establish contact with black workers without being charged for trespassing. Registration and thus recognition of the right to organise coloured workers in these factories facilitated contact with black workers, who were then organised into the unions. TWIU organised black workers at a Zwelitshwa cotton factory and at Fine Wools Uitenhage in this manner. Because unions within SACTU were weak, space had to be created to draw in new factories.

Those that argued for registration stressed the crucial importance of establishing legally binding agreements.

Workers must build themselves up on what they have achieved. They must maintain what they had won, and like soldiers, they need to dig trenches. What you have suffered and fought for, you must maintain. If you conquer one space, you can move onto other factories. Workers can only be strong in an *organised* fashion and they must preserve what they've got otherwise it becomes a very cheap struggle. <sup>21</sup>

Given the repressive context of the 1950's such agreements could only be established within IC Act structures such as Industrial Councils and conciliation boards. These created the right of access and enabled the union to

organise black workers, who were in a majority in textiles. Textiles strategy was to consolidate in one factory before extending to others thereby utilising leading workers in other areas. Leaders from the solidly organised Amato Mill in Benoni, for example, travelled to all the major Textile centres in South Africa to extend the union.

Matemen evidenced an awareness that involvement in IC Act structures could have the bureaucratizing effect that the SACTU conference resolutions spelt out.

In these days when bosses gave you recognition they were quite blatant about it. You wash our hands and we'll wash yours. They were determined to maintain the status quo by giving little sops, but not higher wages.

With the exception of the SACTU unions, the leadership of the registered unions failed to develop and struggle for working class demands, hiding instead behind weak agreements on management's terms that were negotiated without shop floor involvement. FCWU, TWIU and NULCDW stressed shop steward involvement and raised demands such as the £1-00 a day, often engaging in strike action to back the demands as in the case of Amato in 1958. This the employers vigorously resisted. What is being suggested is that bureaucratic practice is not a *necessary* consequence of entry in IC Act structure, but depends on the practice of the leadership and whether it is controlled by democratic and participatory structures.

Registered trade unions were making the workers unmilitant. We realised that we had to get the militancy of the workers. We made them feel that *they* could win small victories. They must be led to know that its through *their unity* that strength comes, and this strength must be seen in small victories.

### **The Practice of Union Organisation**

Were one to accept that there were certain advantages at the level of organisation, how could exponents counter the central criticism that they compromised with apartheid by accepting racially defined union constitutions. SACTU's registered union ignored the amendments at the level of practice. There was no racial division in the work of Oscar Mpetha and Liz Abrahams, organisers of AFCWU and FCWU. They moved together to the same factories and organised all workers, regardless of race. According to Abrahams,



We just split the name, but everything remained the same. In those early days we did not even take notice of the race issue — our aim was to build up the workers, unite the workers and unite the unions. Ray Alexander and Oscar, then later myself and Oscar would never visit factories without each other. Canning factories mainly employ Coloured and African women and all departments are mixed. So there were only the two names, and separate books in case they came to check: 22

Mateman stressed that the priority was the unity of all workers — SACTU's bedrock principle. The registered unions therefore made organisational gains through their registered status, while simultaneously defying the amendments to the Act. All the amendments were 'ignored in fact' and the labour department never enforced the provisions. If there had been any attempt on the part of the state to enforce the racial provisions of the Act the registered unions would have deregistered. For Mateman,

Registration was not a holy cow. We decided to stay registered for as long as it suited the workers, but if they had tried to interfere we'd tell them to take their registration and go to hell. Amato proved this. Here we had an African majority, but the amendments didn't stop TWIU organisers working there.

The state never had the will to enforce the racial provisions on the progressive labour movement and so the leadership of SACTU's registered unions argued that because of the state's weakness in this regard, they were able to avoid any compromise of basic principle, while at the same time by responding tactically were able to extend and consolidate factory floor organisation, an urgent priority given the weakness of SACTU's industrial unions in the mid 50's.

### **Democratic Commitment and Unity**

These debates and decisions of strategy throw into sharp relief a number of the tensions inherent in any progressive trade union organisation moving towards effective resistance against racial capitalism. There is the tension between the felt spontaneity of the class, and the need to consolidate organisation; between the need to make immediate economic gains, and broader political objectives; between a sense of the innate strength of the working class, and its weakness under the domination of capital. The decisions can only be fully understood within the context of SACTU's organisational 'immaturity' at this point in time. Various positions in the

debates had not been adequately discussed at a union level, hence the rupture is fully understandable. Evidence seems to indicate that the decision to comply with the Act, far from leaving in its wake weak emasculated unions, did not inhibit the continued growth during the 1950's of TWIU, FCWU and NULCDW. This still leaves open the question of whether the development of strong national unions advanced the political goals of SACTU, that is, liberation from all oppressive laws? Nor does this evidence automatically imply that there was no case for deregistration in the context of widespread worker participation in explicitly political campaigns. Could not consciousness at a factory level be further developed by exposing the nature and intentions of the Industrial Council Act, that is, the separation of economic from political struggle, ensuring a narrowly defined and economic trade unionism, as opposed to a working class movement, interconnecting different levels of struggle. It could be argued that the deregistration position linked more easily with the political campaigns.

Returning to the present, there is little doubt that debate over trade union tactics and strategy will continue to generate divergent viewpoints, as it did during the 1950's. There is however, one powerful lesson to be learned: SACTU leaders *practiced* democracy. When conference debates ended, those who had canvassed different opinions worked together to realise the goals of the workers' movement. This deeper sense of unity through shared commitment is what is sorely needed at this point, if the present unity talks are to realise a more organically united labour movement.

#### Footnotes

The comments of Eddie Webster, Doug Hindson and Ari Sitas on a draft of this paper were valuable. While I have the advantage of their insights, they have the advantage of not sharing responsibility for criticisms that may arise, political or academic.

1. SALB, Vol.7 No.6.
2. The article has its limits in that I was unable to speak to Oscar Mpetha. This trade unionist of stature continues to languish in the apartheid state jails. A deep sense of outrage is felt by all and this piece brings to the fore Mpetha's commitment to democratic practice. He debated the issue with vigour, challenging the position of other trade unionists, then once decisions were taken, worked with all to strengthen SACTU and thereby advance the worker struggle. Is there not an important lesson in this?
3. For a more detailed analysis of the political economy of the 1940's see Dan O'Meara, The 1946 Mine Workers Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa, *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*.
4. See parliamentary debates on the report of the Industrial Legislative Commission.
5. D. Innes, *The State, Post-war manufacturing and Class struggle*, Mines, 1978.
6. L. Ensor, *TUCSA's relationship with African Trade Unions — an Attempt at Control — 1954-1962*. SALB, Vol.3 No.4.
7. Sunday Times, 29/5/55, statement by TUCSA, quoted in Ensor TUCSA.
8. Chairperson's Address, Inaugural Conference.
9. Policy document, submitted to the 1st Annual Conference, March 1956.
10. *Ibid.*

11. Truth, March 1957.
12. The quotes that follow, and the resolution are contained in the Minutes of the 2nd Annual Conference.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Minutes of the December special conference.
15. Minutes of the 3rd Annual Conference, March 1958.
16. Interview, 1/7/82.
17. Interview, 16/7/82.
18. New Age, 14/2/57.
19. Interview, 16/7/82.
20. Interview 1/7/82.
21. Mateman, *op cit.*
22. Abrahams, *op cit.*



## **Steelworkers, Craft Unions and Afrikaner Nationalism**

**Jon Lewis**

The early history of the South African Iron and Steel Trades Associations (ISTA) has suffered from confusion and neglect. This confusion has been caused only in part by the incorrect dates given for the formation of the union in some sources.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, the ISTA has posed real problems of analysis and categorisation for writers of South African trade union history. The union, founded in 1936, the same year as the Nasionale Raad van Trustees (NRT), a constant champion of 'European leadership', and predominantly Afrikaner in membership, is nonetheless difficult to define as christian nationalist. Members of the rival craft unions in Pretoria certainly believed the ISTA to have been financed by Albert Hertzog's NRT.<sup>2</sup> This, however, is most unlikely. Not only was the steelworkers' union founded some eight months before the NRT,<sup>3</sup> but, also, the 'official' history of Albert Hertzog's trade union activities makes no mention of the steelworkers.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the steelworkers' union is hardly mentioned in the writings of those trade unionists who actively opposed Hertzog's activities. Only the official South African Trade Union Council (SACTU) history written in 1961 describes the ISTA as 'christian national minded'.<sup>5</sup> However, the establishment of the Co-ordinating Council of South African Trade Unions (CCSATU) in 1948, largely on the initiative of the steelworkers, was variously described by Sachs and the Simons' as 'inspired by the Nationalist Party' and a 'major success' for Afrikaner nationalism,<sup>6</sup> whilst Hepple ascribes the 1947 split and the establishment of the CCASTU to the issue of African trade union affiliation to the Trade and Labour Council (TLC).<sup>7</sup> The exact relationship of the ISTA to Afrikaner nationalism especially in its early years remains a dilemma.

Much of the confusion over the steelworkers' union reflects a particular ideological view of South African trade union history. This interpretation traces racism and division within the movement to the influence of nationalist organisations and christian national ideology. In fact, of course the ideology only succeeded where it struck a resonance with the perceived

needs of workers. It was equally possible for groups of white workers to evolve a strategy of racially exclusive state-oriented trade unionism, independently of christian national influence. In the case of the steelworkers' union, either it has been assumed that it fell under the definition of christian national trade unionism, or it has been largely ignored and attention concentrated on more straightforward examples like the South African Mineworkers' Union (MWU), which more closely fit the schema. Thus O'Meara dismisses the ISTA on the grounds that its withdrawal from the TLC in 1947 was not prompted by christian nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

Given this general neglect, it is perhaps necessary to emphasise the historical importance of the steelworkers' union. From a small nucleus of 300 members in 1936 the union has become the largest white union, with a membership of over 38,000 in 1976.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the union has since 1947 consistently worked to organise the right-wing of the trade union movement according to principles of 'European leadership', first through the Co-ordinating Council and later through the Confederation of Labour. The establishment of the Co-ordinating Council was by no means catastrophic for the TLC, although the former general secretary of the ISTA, L.J. van den Berg, identified it as a turning point which marked the beginning of the breakup of the TLC.<sup>10</sup> Through the Co-ordinating Council, the ISTA assisted many smaller white unions, particularly in the state sector, such as roadworkers and civil servants.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the steelworkers provide an exemplary case study of a group of unskilled and semi-skilled white workers who sought to ensure employment in the face of competition from cheap black labour and who looked to the state to secure this objective.<sup>12</sup> In the process of advancing the interests of their membership, the ISTA clashed with the older craft unions, which although representing primarily the interests of artisans, continued to view the metal and engineering industries as their private preserve. These conflicts with unskilled blacks and skilled whites resulted from wider changes in the technical and social division of labour, and go some way towards explaining the strategy adopted by the ISTA.

Commercial metal working grew on the Rand on a small scale with the development of the gold mining industry.<sup>13</sup> However these activities remained limited to repair work and lacked the necessary plant for mass production. Initially metal products were almost entirely imported. From around 1909 a number of firms were founded which started to produce pig

iron. During the early 1920's the government sponsored a feasibility study into establishing, in conjunction with British, Dutch and German interests, a large-scale iron and steel industry in Pretoria. The Pact government, eager to encourage industrialisation, took up the scheme, although without calling upon foreign capital. In the face of considerable opposition, particularly from the mining companies which preferred cheaper imported metals,<sup>14</sup> the South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation Ltd. (ISCOR) was established in 1928, and in 1934 commenced production. In 1935 South Africa was producing 17.2% of its steel requirements, a figure which rose to 70.6% by 1955.<sup>15</sup> This growth formed the basis for the production of metal products and machinery.<sup>16</sup>

The Pact Government determined that ISCOR should be run with 'civilised labour'.<sup>17</sup> Despite state policy, white operatives perceived two threats to their position. The threat of undercutting by cheap black labour remained, whilst their presence was resented by the skilled workers who regarded them as a potential threat to their own craft status. Thus in 1940 the ISCOR management replaced skilled moulders on ingot moulding with semi-skilled men.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly artisans were restricted to maintenance work, whilst actual production was in the hands of operatives. On the first score, ISCOR remained subject to competition from more efficient overseas cartels. Protectionism simply raised prices and was opposed by industrial and mining interests. Consequently, from December 1937, ISCOR was obliged to moderate its 'civilised labour policy' in order to reduce costs. The company began replacing semi-skilled whites on boring and milling machines with black labour at lower wages.<sup>19</sup> By November 1938, 200 whites had been dismissed and replaced by Africans,<sup>20</sup> whilst some 875 jobs were involved in all.<sup>21</sup> Over 1,000 whites attended a mass protest meeting called by the ISTA. The association charged that ISCOR was 'following a policy of profiteering at the expense of the European workman',<sup>22</sup> and that as a state-financed corporation ISCOR's first duty was to implement the government's labour policy. Although the ISTA failed to prevent black labour being introduced into ISCOR, the white-black labour ratio remained high compared to private industry.<sup>23</sup> The Association's failure was probably in part due to the fact that it was still numerically small and was actively opposed by the craft unions. 'Until 1939 there was doubt whether the Association would survive'.<sup>24</sup> The insecure position of white operatives in ISCOR, and these early experiences of undercutting by cheap black labour, helps to explain



the development of a racially exclusive trade union strategy and the subsequent support by the ISTA for government legislation on job reservation.

Initially, semi-skilled steelworkers had been organised as a branch of the Boilermakers' Society.<sup>25</sup> However, the threat of deskilling produced a conflict of interest with the skilled members, and in 1936 a small nucleus of operatives in the ISCOR works formed the ISTA: 'because the interests of semi-skilled workers were neglected shamefully by the craft unions'.<sup>26</sup> Even so, objectors from the craft unions prevented the ISTA obtaining registration until 1937.<sup>27</sup> This animosity between the craft unions and the Association<sup>28</sup> continued over questions of demarcation<sup>29</sup> and 'poaching' of members.<sup>30</sup> In 1948 the ISTA absorbed 578 steel window makers, previously members of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU).<sup>31</sup> In retaliation for poaching, the craft unions sought to enforce the closed shop agreement in such a way as to exclude the ISTA from certain categories of workers,<sup>32</sup> whilst there were several allegations of intimidation of ISTA members.<sup>33</sup>

As a consequence of these hostilities, the employers' organisation 'frequently found themselves confronted by conflicting sets of proposals when current collective agreements expired'.<sup>34</sup> The craft unions negotiated jointly through the Mechanics' Unions' Joint Executives (MUJE), from which the ISTA was excluded until 1964.<sup>35</sup> The result has been that the rival unions have undermined each others' activities. In 1946 the ISTA complained that its ability to win improvements for its members was being hampered:

the major problem of the workers in the Iron and Steel Industry lies in the fact that the Craft Unions have the dominating say and they are principally concerned with the interests of artisans, production workers and operatives still receive second consideration with some of them.<sup>36</sup>

The metal unions were divided when it came to negotiating an industrial agreement in 1949 and again in 1951.<sup>37</sup> In 1952 certain of the craft unions who had not accepted the 1951 ISCOR agreement struck to increase rates for artisans.<sup>38</sup> They made no effort to gain the co-operation of the ISTA. Eventually the craft unions were forced to submit their claim to arbitration, and in turn received no support from the ISTA, which made a separate agreement with the management.<sup>39</sup>

The initial animosity between ISTA and the craft unions reflected the insecurity of the latter in the face of mechanisation. The establishment of ISCOR, which was capital intensive and required a predominantly operative

semi-skilled work force, challenged traditional work practices. However, in the post-war years as the metal and engineering industries as a whole were mechanised and as semi-skilled operatives were increasingly employed at the point of production, whilst journeymen came to occupy auxiliary positions in maintenance, planning and toolsetting, so the basis of conflict between the groups disappeared. These changes transformed the traditional craft unions, which were forced to open their ranks to admit white operatives into membership.<sup>40</sup> Conversely in the post-war years, the ISTA was successful in attracting artisans, particularly from the state sector, into membership.<sup>41</sup> After the unsuccessful strike led by some of the craft unions in 1952, a number of artisans lost confidence in their unions,<sup>42</sup> and by the end of 1953 the Association had enrolled 516 out of the 900 artisans employed in ISCOR's Pretoria plant.<sup>43</sup> It was in response to these developments that in 1954 the MUJE issued a series of acrimonious pamphlets attacking the ISTA.<sup>44</sup> The continued conflict was only in part due to 'poaching' members. More important, by the 1950's the ISTA and the craft unions had evolved different trade union strategies with diverging ideologies.

The ISTA appealed to its membership primarily as workers, rather than as Afrikaners. Although the membership was overwhelmingly Afrikaner, the union's literature was always published in both official languages. In the early days 'it was by no means an easy task for the leaders to make the members trade-union conscious'.<sup>45</sup> Many of the steelworkers came from country districts and had no industrial or trade union background. Moreover at this time, ISTA leaders complained, the Afrikaner newspapers and church leaders condemned trade unions indiscriminately. However:

We (the leaders) explained to our people from the countryside that we had new ideas in mind for our trade union, and that our aim with the formation of the trade union is mainly an effort to achieve jointly what we consider to be our rights, while individually we are powerless against our influential employers.<sup>46</sup>

Despite later ideological accretions the ISTA continued to espouse a primarily economic trade unionism:

We must always remember that the first object of a trade union remains to improve the working conditions of a specified group of workers.<sup>47</sup>

It was on trade union rather than 'ideological' grounds that the Associa-

tion sought to mobilise white workers. Initially ISCOR's semi- and unskilled white workers received low wages compared to artisans.<sup>48</sup> Unskilled whites commenced work for as little as 4/6 per day, whilst the majority of white semi- and unskilled workers received under 12/- per day.<sup>49</sup> Lack of uniformity in wage rates provided a further grievance. Like the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa (GWU), the ISTA maintained the loyalty of the members because it succeeded in improving their material conditions. The first industrial council agreement negotiated by the Association in 1939 raised the minimum rate to 12/- per day, and was followed by regular increases thereafter.<sup>50</sup> In 1942 the union established its own medical insurance fund.<sup>51</sup> Again in 1945 the union established a co-operative bank, from which members could take loans. By 1952 the bank had over £25,000 in circulation.<sup>52</sup> These benefits could not be matched by the craft unions. Writing in the craft journal *The Crucible* in 1948, one artisan member warned:

The mechanic is becoming a back number and the unskilled worker is coming to the forefront. He is joining a Trade Union which gives him sick pay, facilities to borrow money, co-operative stores and a host of other benefits which the old and staid Unions cannot and will not offer.<sup>53</sup>

The ISTA was established as an industrial union, the form of organisation most appropriate to a diverse membership which could not control the labour process by virtue of any monopoly of skills. It espoused industrial unionism as 'the only type of organisation that is able to safeguard and promote the interests of all classes and groups (of whites) effectively in our modern times'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the ISTA consistently proposed that there be one union for all white workers in the metal industry. As early as 1943 the union was recruiting staff members,<sup>55</sup> and in 1949 the union established a branch in Pretoria for salaried employees.<sup>56</sup>

By 1954 the ISTA had 9,767 members.<sup>57</sup> The MUJE was sufficiently worried to issue a series of leaflets warning of the dangers of industrial unionism,<sup>58</sup> as a 'possible means of forcing Artisan's to be subservient to all other elements in Industry ... an Artisan's enemy can well be the semi-skilled European who has found a livelihood in the rapid growth of our Industrial activities'.<sup>59</sup> The ISTA replied that these arguments denigrated white operatives, many of whom had been accepted for membership by the craft unions: 'One cannot help coming to the conclusion that they accept the operators in their ranks with one object only, namely to retard their



progress'.<sup>60</sup> Some ten years later, in a further propaganda exchange between the Association and the craft unions, the question of industrial versus craft unionism was still prominent. The ISTA argued that the conditions for craft unionism no longer existed:

(the craft unions) turn a blind eye to the phenomenal industrial development and to the fact that the dilution of trades has reached a stage where the majority of the members of many so-called craft unions are operators today. Were the craft unions in a position to prevent this dilution process, their survival could possibly have been justified, but they were powerless because they stood alone.<sup>61</sup>

This analysis is similar to that used by left-wing enthusiasts for industrial unionism in the twenties and thirties, an indication that there is no necessary correlation between the structure and politics of trade unions.

The ISTA's approach to wage bargaining differed significantly from that of the craft unions. The latter argued that the primary task was to maintain the conditions and wages of the highly paid tradesman in order to set a standard to which less skilled workers could strive.<sup>62</sup> The ISTA 'adopted the standpoint that the position of the operator must be improved and then improvements for the Tradesmen follow automatically'.<sup>63</sup> This difference in approach may explain the recurring failure to co-operate on wage demands.

The ISTA's roots amongst white operatives resulted in further differences with the craft unions over the question of piece-work and productivity deals. The traditional craft unions had always interpreted such moves as an attempt to undermine the status of their craft. The operatives which the ISTA represented had no status to lose, and incentive bonus schemes provided an opportunity of bridging the wage gap with the skilled workers. ISCOR was operating a bonus scheme at least as early as 1942.<sup>64</sup> In 1951 the ISTA welcomed the intervention by the Minister of Labour to ensure the widest implementation of incentive bonuses, against the opposition of some of the craft unions.<sup>65</sup> The Association only stipulated that safeguards should be included to prevent employers from exploiting the situation.<sup>66</sup>

The Association's rhetoric about industrial unionism - 'that the basic interests of all the workers in a specific industry are identical',<sup>67</sup> was of course misleading. At no time was there any suggestion that this included black workers. The ISTA was perfectly aware that the security and conditions of its membership rested upon a basis of racial exclusion. Thus the union vigorously opposed attempts by management to introduce black workers at

lower wages,<sup>68</sup> and fully supported the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act and the government's policy of job reservation.<sup>69</sup> The craft unions however rejected this strategy. Historically their artisan members had been guaranteed against undercutting by their monopoly of skills. In the Cape at least they had admitted Coloured artisans to membership and during the 1930's and 1940's they supported the non-racial stance of the TLC. Dilution forced the craft unions to open their ranks to white non-artisan workers, who could be undercut by cheaper black labour. To protect these workers the craft unions employed a closed shop agreement which reserved certain tasks to trade union members,<sup>70</sup> together with a policy of 'equal pay equal work' so that employers could not engage black workers at lower wages. The tactics were more delicate but amounted to the exclusion of Africans from certain categories of work.

The approach of ISTA and the craft unions also differed towards mixed unions and relations with black workers. The ISTA proposed a policy of 'European leadership'. Initially this did not necessarily involve separate unions for the different race groups, but rather that all decisions affecting white workers should be made by whites, and that mixed unions should be led and represented by whites. Although the ISTA affiliated to the TLC in 1944,<sup>71</sup> it continued to campaign for a federation of European trade unions, to be established on a non-party political basis.<sup>72</sup> When, in 1947, the ISTA led a breakaway of five Pretoria-based trade unions from the TLC, it was in response to the defeat of a motion calling for African trade unions to be expelled.<sup>73</sup> When the Co-ordinating Council was established in 1948 under ISTA leadership,<sup>74</sup> its policy was not to accept affiliation from any union in which blacks had voting power. 'It did for a time have one constituent union which had some Indian members but fulfilled this condition'.<sup>75</sup> After 1950, the Co-ordinating Council remained aloof from the newly-formed South African Federation of Trade Unions exactly on these grounds.<sup>76</sup> Some of the craft unions in the Federation had a substantial Indian or Coloured membership in Natal and the Cape. If these workers, many of them skilled, were to be alienated from their unions they might form rival unions and undercut established wage-rates. There was nothing altruistic about the policy of these white-dominated mixed unions. As the MUJE explained, they did not differ with the ISTA over fundamentals:

The difference between ourselves and the (ISTA) is that the Associa-

tion wants European leadership with Non-European enemies, whereas we want European leadership with Non-European Allies.<sup>77</sup>

It was only later as the Nationalist government spelt out its plans for industrial legislation, that the ISTA and the CCSATU adopted the policy of separate unions for the race groups.<sup>78</sup>

In attempting to analyse the links between the ISTA and Afrikaner nationalism it is important to distinguish between its relationship to the Nationalist Party and to nationalist ideology. Firstly the ISTA always denied any party political interest.<sup>79</sup> In 1944 and 1946 the ISTA promoted their own candidate, a local steelman standing as an independent in the Pretoria local elections.<sup>80</sup> In fact he appears to have stood in alliance with the Federation of Ratepayers' Associations, which was probably a front for Hertzog's Afrikaner Orde.<sup>81</sup> But the candidate's programme appealed simply to colour prejudice, rather than Afrikaner sentiment.<sup>82</sup> In 1944 the union's journal condemned both main political parties as agents of capitalism, and called for an end to 'racial party politics'.<sup>83</sup> At this point the ISTA supported the notion of a 'worker's candidate', as in Pretoria West, who would represent the interests of white workers.<sup>84</sup> Thus at the 1946 Conference of the TLC, ISTA's General Secretary, L.J. van den Berg, moved a motion calling for the Council to seek direct representation in Parliament. He argued: 'Labour (i.e. The South African Labour Party) will not win for many years ... We know that we cannot get our own members to agree on supporting any one party but they are sick and tired of these divisions'.<sup>85</sup> The motion was rejected and the opportunity of 'detaching a significant number of Afrikaners from their allegiance to the Nationalist Party' was lost.<sup>86</sup>

The official policy of the union towards party politics did not prevent members and officials from having more direct links with nationalist bodies. According to one source, after the union was established 'there were almost immediate attempts by the Nationalist Party and Die Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK) to gain control of the Association. This was at first resisted but by early 1938 prominent FAK members were well represented on the executive of the Association,<sup>87</sup> and the 1947 withdrawal from the TLC is given as evidence that it had come under nationalist control. However, van den Berg's motion to the 1946 TLC conference if successful would have diverted electoral support from the Nationalist Party. The Co-ordinating Council, when it was formed, professed the same non-political stance, although some of its affiliated unions ac-



tively encouraged their officials to become involved in party politics in support of the nationalists.<sup>88</sup> However, it would be naive to accept at face value the ISTA's protestations that it has always been non-party political. Certainly before 1948 there is some evidence to support this, but since that date the union has generally supported the activities of the Nationalist Government although with considerable hesitancy over the relaxation of job reservation in the sixties.<sup>89</sup> Indeed this policy was rejected by the Co-ordinating Council and also divided the Confederation of Labour. Even so, the union's opposition to the activities of the Conservative Workers' Party in 1961,<sup>90</sup> and the later opposition of the *Herstigte Nasionale Party* to the ISTA leadership,<sup>91</sup> would indicate the union's support, from the late forties, for orthodox nationalism.

This professed neutrality never extended to trade union politics. Thus the Co-ordinating Council supported white breakaway unions against established mixed unions. G.H. Beetge, a prominent member of the Co-ordinating Council, was active from 1949 in establishing the *Blanke Bouwerkersvereniging* in opposition to the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers of South Africa.<sup>92</sup> These efforts were actively supported by Albert Hertzog. In 1953 Mr Nagel of the ISTA helped Mr J. Loubscher of the *Blankewerkers se beskermingsbond* to establish a breakaway leather workers' union for European members only.<sup>93</sup> In the 1960's the CCSATU gave support to the *Blanke Distribusiewerkers Vereniging* against the multi-racial National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDW).<sup>94</sup>

In analysing the development of the ideology of the union, certain features remain constant. White racism, 'European leadership' and support for job colour bars did not falter, although specific policies, on mixed unions for example did change. Two developments are paramount for the late 1940's: the growth of anti-communism, and the adoption of christian national categories and language. The ISTA had always voiced opposition to the Communist Party,<sup>95</sup> but it was the latter's policy of racial equality which was at issue rather than its Marxism. Likewise, when the ISTA left the TLC in 1947, it gave the Council's non-racial policy as its chief reason for doing so.<sup>96</sup> It was only after 1948 that talk of 'foreign ideologies' and the communist threat became obsessive.<sup>97</sup> By contrast, anti-communism had been the main plank of the various christian national trade union organisations since as early as 1936. The ISTA supported the government's *Suppression of Communism Act*,<sup>98</sup> and sought to undermine protests over its use against trade

union officials.<sup>99</sup> However, this outgrowth of anti-communism was as much a result of 'cold war' developments as of christian national influence.<sup>100</sup> The divisions in the world trade union movement were reproduced locally. Anti-communism was no longer the preserve of christian nationalism but was also taken up particularly by the older conservative craft unions.<sup>101</sup>

At the same time as 'cold war' anti-communism was winning ground within the trade union movement, the ISTA's language and rhetoric was also showing signs of christian national influence. During the early forties the union's journal, *The Steelworker*, took its vocabulary and its general philosophy from the established trade union movement. Thus one article dealing with trade unionism in Britain described its history in almost classic Marxist terms of class conflict.<sup>102</sup> The journal also ran a series of articles on Marxist political economy, one of which ended with the statement: 'it must be understood and remembered that under capitalism workers are slaves and under socialism they are free'.<sup>103</sup> References to the struggle of the workers against capitalism recurred frequently.<sup>104</sup> Of course when the ISTA used this language it had in mind only white workers. Nevertheless the existence of a common language drawn from a British trade union tradition helped make it possible for this white racist and predominantly Afrikaner trade union to remain in the TLC between 1944 and 1947.

By the late 1940's, after the break with the TLC, the ideology of the union had changed. The language of class conflict gave way to a philosophy of community of interest: 'The fact that the basic interests of employers and employees are identical is accepted, without argument by the majority on both sides'.<sup>105</sup> This statement may partly reflect the influence of the 'cold war', and similar sentiments were expressed by at least some of the craft unions.<sup>106</sup> The academic justifications for this rejection of class analysis which appeared in ISTA's journal, now renamed *The S.A. Worker*, were very obviously composed by christian national ideologues. One article, 'Die Proletariaat Moet Verdwyn' (the proletariat must disappear), concluded that liberal freedoms had allowed the unrestrained growth of capitalist power resulting in conflict with an expanding proletariat. The answer was to oppose liberalism and so prevent the growth of a proletariat.<sup>107</sup> In later articles the lessons were re-iterated: there were no classes only 'groups'; workers are not a class but are culturally, nationally and politically differentiated;<sup>108</sup> it was necessary to prevent 'the creation of a mixed proletariat which would suit communism'.<sup>109</sup> This could only be achieved by enforcing the colour bar

and protecting European labour from unfair competition. In this way, it was argued, it would be possible to prevent white workers 'who mostly belong to the middle class' from falling 'to the level of the Proletariat'.<sup>110</sup>

During the early days, when the union had been struggling to establish itself, the rhetoric of class conflict had served well enough when given a racial interpretation. Certainly the older craft unions saw no contradiction between their racially privileged position and the traditional rhetoric of British trade unionism which they continued to employ. However, in the long run, and especially after the Nationalists came to power, christian national philosophy proved to be more suited to legitimise the ISTA's strategy of racial exclusion, and its reliance on the state to implement this policy. Once again it was not that a particular trade union strategy sprang from christian nationalism, but rather that the ideology articulated underlying economic relations.

#### Footnotes

- 1 J.A.G. Coetzee, *Industrial relations in South Africa* (Cape Town 1948) p.63; Steel and Engineering Industries federation of South Africa (SEIFSA), *Organisation and structure of the metal and engineering industries in the Republic of South Africa* (Johannesburg c. 1966) p.43.
- 2 Interview (1977) with Mr B. Plunkett, secretary of the Pretoria Branch of the Ironmoulders Society of South Africa (IMS) from 1928.
- 3 A. Hepple, *Trade unions in travail. The story of the broederbond-nationalist plan to control South African Trade Unions* (Johannesburg 1954) p.38; ISTA Archive, pamphlet: 'Werkers: ervaring en bekwaamheid tot u diens, Pretoria, 1978, p.7.
- 4 L. Naude, *Dr A. Hertzog, die Nasionale Party en die mynwerker* (Potchefstroom 1969).
- 5 I.L. Walker and B. Weinbron, *2000 Casualties: A history of the trade unions and the labour movement in the Union of South Africa* Johannesburg 1961).
- 6 S. Sachs, *The choice before South Africa* (London 1952) p.193; H.J. Simons and R.E. Simons, *Class and colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth 1969) p.566.
- 7 Hepple, *Trade unions in travail*, pp.84-5.
- 8 D. O'Meara, 'Christian-national trade unionism in South Africa, 1934-1948', paper to the University of the Witwatersrand Labour History Conference, 1976, p.1, p.12.
- 9 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: 'Werkers: ervaring en bekwaamheid tot u diens', Pretoria, 1978, p.7, p.9.
- 10 *ibid*, mimeo: L.J. van den Berg, 'Koördinerende Raad van S.A. Vakverenigings', 1969, p.60.
- 11 *ibid*, p.61.
- 12 D. Kaplan and M. Morris, 'Labour policy in a state corporation: a case study of the South African Iron and Steel Corporation, Article 2', *South African Labour Bulletin* 2 No.8 (1976), 2-21, pp.16-17.
- 13 SEIFSA, *Organisation and structure of the metal and engineering industries in the Republic of South Africa*, pp.5-8.
- 14 D. Kaplan, 'The politics of industrial protection in South Africa, 1910-1939', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 3 (1976) p.73.
- 15 D.H. Houghton, *The South African economy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford 1973) pp.126-7.
- 16 *ibid*, p.273.
- 17 D. Kaplan and M. Morris, 'Labour policy in a state corporation: a case study of the South African Iron and Steel Corporation, Article 1', *South African Labour Bulletin* 2 No.6 (1976), pp.21-2.
- 18 IMS Pretoria Branch minutes, 13.12.40.
- 19 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: 'Werkers: ervaring en bekwaamheid tot u diens', Pretoria, 1978, p.7.
- 20 Rand Daily Mail (RDM) cuttings collection, RDM 1.11.38.
- 21 Kaplan and Morris, 'Labour policy in a state corporation, Article 1', p.22.
- 22 Johannesburg Public Library (JPL) cuttings collection: RDM 7.11.38.
- 23 Kaplan and Morris, 'Labour policy in a state corporation, Article 1', p.21.
- 24 *The S.A. Worker*, August 1952, p.2.



- 25 *ibid*, April 1952, p.1.
- 26 *ibid*, January 1949, pp.6-7.
- 27 *ibid*, April 1952, p.1.
- 28 Interview (1977) with Mr B. Plunkett, secretary of the Pretoria Branch of the IMS from 1928: on one occasion this animosity led to an exchange of blows between officials of the rival unions.
- 29 SEIFSA, *Organisation and structure of the metal and engineering industries in the Republic of South Africa*, p.44.
- 30 *The S.A. Worker*, May 1953, pp.6-7: 'Statement in connection with our policy of expansion'.
- 31 *The Steelworker*, October 1948, p.7.
- 32 *The S.A. Worker*, April 1949, pp.9-11; July 1953, p.5.
- 33 *ibid*, April 1949, pp.9-11; March 1952, p.5.
- 34 SEIFSA, *Organisation and structure of the metal and engineering industries in the Republic of South Africa*, p.45.
- 35 *ibid*, p.47-8.
- 36 *The Steelworker*, October 1946, p.8.
- 37 *The S.A. Worker*, April 1952, p.2.
- 38 *ibid*, April 1952, p.4; March 1952, p.4.
- 39 *ibid*, April 1952, p.4.
- 40 See J.P. Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-1955*, D.Phil History, University of Cambridge, 1982, chapter 5.
- 41 *The S.A. Worker*, May 1953, pp.6-7.
- 42 *ibid*, May 1952, p.5.
- 43 *ibid*, September 1953, p.4.
- 44 JPL Archive, a series of four leaflets entitled 'Questions to be answered', issued by the Mechanics' Unions' Joint Executives (MUJE), 1954.
- 45 *The S.A. Worker*, August 1952, p.2.
- 46 *ibid*.
- 47 *ibid*, March 1955, p.4.
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- 49 *The S.A. Worker*, April 1952, p.1.
- 50 *ibid*, April 1952, p.2.
- 51 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: 'Werkers: ervaring in bekwaamheid tot u diens', Pretoria, 1978, p.7.
- 52 *The S.A. Worker*, August 1952, p.2.
- 53 *The Crucible*, September 1948, p.5.
- 54 *The S.A. Worker*, March 1952, p.3.
- 55 *The Steelworker*, 29.8.43., pp.15-16.
- 56 *The S.A. Worker*, March 1949, p.14.
- 57 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: 'Werkers: ervaring en bekwaamheid tot u diens', Pretoria, 1978, p.9.
- 58 *The S.A. Worker*, January 1954, pp.4-9.
- 59 *ibid*, p.9.
- 60 *ibid*, p.4.
- 61 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: ISTA, 'The trade union tragedy in South Africa', Pretoria, 1964.
- 62 Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation*, chapter 5.
- 63 *The S.A. Worker*, May 1953, p.6.
- 64 *The Steelworker*, 23.10.42., p.3.
- 65 *The S.A. Worker*, March 1951, p.2.
- 66 *ibid*, November 1951, p.4.
- 67 ISTA Archive: pamphlet: ISTA, 'The trade union tragedy in South Africa', Pretoria, 1964.
- 68 e.g. *The S.A. Worker*, August 1954, p.4; June 1955, p.3; November 1955, p.7.
- 69 *ibid*, June 1955, p.3.
- 70 *ibid*, June 1956, p.3: in fact all the registered unions in the metal and engineering trades, including the ISTA, agreed to this arrangement.
- 71 *The Steelworker*, 23.6.44., p.1.
- 72 *ibid*, 21.7.44., p.7.
- 73 Walker and Weinbren, *2000 Casualties*, pp.234-5.
- 74 *The Steelworker*, August 1948, p.6.
- 75 M. Horrell, *South African trade unionism. A study of a divided working class (Johannesburg 1961)* p.16.
- 76 *The S.A. Worker*, November 1951, pp.5-6; April 1953, p.2.
- 77 *ibid*, January 1954, p.8.
- 78 *ibid*, June 1954, pp.5-9.
- 79 Star cuttings Collection: *Sunday Times*, 30.10.49.
- 80 *The Steelworker*, 17.12.43.; 21.1.44., p.4.
- 81 H. Strydom and I. Wilkins, *Broederbond, the super-Afrikaners (Ealing 1980)* p. 177.
- 82 *The Steelworker*, 18.2.44., p.17; 20.9.46., p.14; November 1946, p.7.

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- 84 *ibid*, 22.1.43., p.8.
- 85 Simons and Simons, *Class and colour in South Africa 1850- 1950*, p.565.
- 86 *ibid*.
- 87 Kaplan and Morris, 'Labour policy in a state corporation, Article 2', p.16.
- 88 ISTA Archive, mimeo: L.J. van den Berg, 'Koördinerende raad van S.A. Vakverenigings', 1969, pp.67-8.
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- 90 ISTA Archive, pamphlet: ISTA, 'The position of the S.A. iron and steel trades association at the beginning of January 1963', Pretoria, 1963: Messrs Kruger and Nagel lost their jobs as officials of the union after being nominated as candidates for the new party.
- 91 M.A. du Toit, *South African trade unions: history, legislation, policy* (Johannesburg 1976) p.93.
- 92 Coetzee, *Industrial relations in South Africa*, p.63, p.66; Hepple, *Trade unions in travail*, pp.51-4.
- 93 Hepple, *Trade unions in travail*, p.56.
- 94 ISTA Archive, mimeo: van den Berg, L.J., 'Koördinerende raad van S.A. Vakverenigings', 1969, p.61; N. Herd, *Counter Attack. The story of the South African shopworkers* (Cape Town 1974) p.216.
- 95 *The Steelworker*, 23.6.44., p.13.
- 96 *ibid*, May 1947, pp.7-8.
- 97 *The S.A. Worker*, January 1949, pp.5-8; February 1949, pp.8-9.
- 98 *ibid*, December 1952, p.6.
- 99 *ibid*, June 1954, p.6.
- 100 *ibid*, March 1949, pp.2-3; December 1951, p.3; December 1952, p.6.
- 101 *The Crucible*, May 1950, p.2.; July 1952, pp.3-5.
- 102 *The Steelworker*, 16.5.41., pp.15-16.
- 103 *ibid*, 15.8.41., p.15.
- 104 *ibid*, 22.5.42., p.5; 23.6.44., p.13.
- 105 *The S.A. Worker*, January 1949, p.4.
- 106 *The Crucible*, October 1950, p.2.
- 107 *The S.A. Worker*, January 1949, pp.16-17.
- 108 *ibid*, March 1949, p.2.
- 109 *ibid*, June 1954, p.5.
- 110 *ibid*, March 1949, p.3.

## **SAAWU — Response to Sebe**

*This is a news release giving SAAWU's response to President Lennox Sebe's speech at the opening session of the Ciskei National Assembly, April 1983.*

Accusations that SAAWU's aims and objects are of a subversive nature as alleged by President Sebe at the official opening of the parliament at Bisho and by General Sebe in many previous statements, are fabricated lies of the most misleading kind. Their allegations go even further to claim that SAAWU is a front organisation for the ANC. What a politically naive statement!

SAAWU has on numerous occasions explicitly and unequivocally declared itself a trade union movement from its very inception in 1979. This declaration automatically gives it a public status as such and all our activities are above board. Subversion and violence is nowhere to be found in our activities and our constitution bears testimony to this. Our association with a person therefore goes as far as his activities as a worker and a card carrying member of SAAWU. SAAWU does not dictate (and has no right to do so) to its members as to what they can or cannot do in their own private capacities outside of their scope of membership to SAAWU. If one is therefore found with subversive literature or engaged in subversive activities of any kind such actions are not and will never be sanctioned by SAAWU. The fact that one might be found in possession of a SAAWU membership card does not mean that SAAWU has anything to do with subversive activities that particular individual might have been engaged in. SAAWU has never had anything to do with the ANC.

However it seems that homeland leaders have a tendency of turning a blind eye to the fact that our main concern as a trade union is the capitalist exploitation of the workers, which is the real cause of poverty to which millions of our people are subjected. In order to do away with poverty we must destroy the cause of the whole system of apartheid, of which the homelands are a product. Who in his right mind can really think it is just that the minority, through this evil apartheid system, should be allowed to continue to prey upon ourselves and our children forever. No man must find his profit in another's loss. The benefits and pleasures conferred upon mankind by science and civilisation must be enjoyed equally by all. What is more



brutal and senseless than to opt for homelands and hope that they will ever be a viable alternative to apartheid and capitalist exploitation. Homelands are like the seed in the parable of the sower which fell on the stony ground and withered away because it had no depth of proper soil.

All the evils which we have referred to are only symptoms of one disease that is sapping the moral, mental and physical life of our nation. All attempts to cure these symptoms are doomed to failure simply because they are symptoms and not the disease.

Finally, it could have been more to the point if President Sebe and General Sebe, as advocates of these character assassination campaigns, had taken some particular SAAWU doctrine and proved it to be subversive instead of adopting their cowardly methods of making vague and general allegations which they cannot substantiate. In fact they find it far more difficult to do that than it would be for us to show that what they have been telling the world is nonsensical claptrap of the most misleading kind. It further seems that those in authority in the Ciskei are under the delusion that due to their constant harassment of SAAWU members and officials within the Ciskei SAAWU will at some stage be confined to only areas outside the Ciskei. This is a gross miscalculation of the real state of affairs. No one who has been a true trade unionist can ever cease to be one. It is impossible for a man who has acquired knowledge ever to relinquish it. A trade unionist in the true sense of the word is one who truly understands the real causes of the poverty, misery and degradation we see all around us, who knows the only remedy to it is the abolition of the present state of society which is the only alternative to the subjugation of the working people.

## CCAWUSA Negotiations

*This is a summary of current negotiations for recognitions between the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union and a number of companies. Taken from CCAWUSA News Vol.1 No.2. May 1983.*

**Central News Agency** (Including Bookwise, Children's Bookshop, Expressions and Turntable). Negotiations for a recognition agreement are about half-way through. Negotiations for wage increases and Union recognition started in November 1982 after a widespread strike in October.

**Checkers** The first meeting for recognition talks was held on March 28. The next meeting will be held on May 2. Checkers workers have been demanding shop steward and full recognition for the past year.

**Makro** The first meeting for recognition talks was held on March 24. This is a result of, amongst other action, all three Makro branches in the Transvaal receiving demands from the Makro shop stewards for full recognition of their Union.

**Foschini Group** (Including Pages, Markhams and American Swiss) Recognition talks began on March 25.

**O.K. Bazaars** Negotiations for a recognition agreement are almost completed. A strike at three O.K. Bazaars branches in Port Elizabeth stopped the talks for some weeks but they have since started again.

**Woolworths** Recognition negotiations are also almost completed. Woolworths submitted its final proposals for the entire agreement and the Union has given its final proposals. Both Woolworths and O.K. Bazaars have tried to avoid negotiating a maternity agreement but the Union is pushing hard for it.

**Edgars Group** (Including Jet, Sales House, Fairdeal, Ackermans and Smart Western) A recognition agreement was signed last year. Preparations are now being made for the annual wage negotiations.

**Allied Publishing** A recognition agreement was signed in 1980. The annual wage negotiations are now completed.

**Southern Sun Hotels and Holiday Inns** Workers from these hotels are busy getting organised.

**Beare's Group (Natal)** Some communication has occurred between the Union and the Company concerning recognition. Beare's workers are getting organised in preparation for a push for recognition of their Union. The Beare's Group owns a wide range of stores, such as Game, Pizazz, Smallridges, Team Dennis, Rosdicks, Homeleights, Mercury, FM, Target, Savells, Al's, Savemore, Economic Outfitters, Chix Furnishers, Zodiac, City Furnishers, Happy Homes, Haydens and Summit Travel.

**3M S.A.** The company has agreed to go ahead with negotiations for a recognition agreement (date to be fixed) after one-and-a-half years of pushing 3M for recognition.

**Pick 'n Pay** The first recognition talks were held on March 10. The immediate use of a stoporder facility was also discussed.

**Safeguard (Natal)** After much worker action the company has agreed to meet with CCAWUSA to discuss recognition.

**Gallo** A ballot to determine Union support is soon to be held before embarking on recognition negotiations.

**Game (Johannesburg)** An access agreement has been reached pending negotiations for a full recognition agreement.

**Grand Bazaar** The workers' demand for Union access has been agreed in principle and a meeting is due to be held with management.

**Metro Cash and Carry (Including Bingo)** The Union has access, and Metro workers are now starting to push for full recognition.

**Truworths and Top Centre** These companies belong to the Woolworths Group and recognition talks are likely once the Woolworths agreement is completed.

**Spar** Many Spar workers are joining CCAWUSA and the Union met with Spar management last year for general discussions concerning the relationship between Spar and CCAWUSA.



## **Women and Trade Unions**

*In this interview 'Mama' Lydia Ngwenya the Transvaal organiser of the Transport and General Workers' Union (T & GWU) — a FOSATU affiliate — talks about some of the problems faced by women in the trade union movement. The interview was conducted by Jeremy Baskin.*

### **How did you join the Union?**

In 1974 I was working at Heinemann Electric and was approached by MAWU. After they'd explained what trade unions were, we became committed and we joined up the rest of the factory. There were 606 workers in Heinemann, mostly women. In 3 months we managed to organise almost the entire plant. I was elected a shop steward and was one of the main people pushing the union. I became an executive member at that time.

In '76 we were all dismissed after a strike and management re-instated selectively. I wasn't re-employed.

In '77, I started working for the unions, for MAWU, here at Sacta House. I was the only woman organiser in MAWU in the Transvaal.

I pushed on with these men for about 2 years, when I was nominated in October '78 to get T & GWU (Transport and General Workers' Union) off the ground. By then, there were still no women organisers. The areas we were organising, metal plants, were mostly men, except at Tensile Rubber where there were a few women.

### **What is it like to be a woman working with all these men?**

It was a real problem at the beginning but I learned to live with it. I felt inferior all the time, maybe because we African women think we're inferior to men.

They were expecting me to do things. For example, at lunch time, people would put in money and they'd nominate me to go and buy lunch with the excuse that I could choose better because I'm a woman. It became a habit that every lunch time I should run around buying lunch, making tea for them, after that washing the dishes ... My job would fall behind because I'd have to finish all the jobs they left behind from lunch time. Some of the young guys had already realised this was no good and suggested we should start rotating buying lunch. It was the young ones not the old ones.

By the end I was quite happy because other organisers were prepared to share the jobs with me and not push me too much at lunch time to do jobs because I was a woman. I got used to resisting saying, 'I'm not here to become the teagirl.' But at first it was quite hard.

**When you got involved in unions, did your husband object?**

That was a real problem. After I became a shop steward we were having excessive meetings, maybe twice a week. Our management was very hard so we needed a lot of planning. We'd have these meetings after work.

My husband expects me to be home between 5.30 and 6pm. But sometimes I wouldn't even go home because we'd have meetings at our centre in Tembisa and I was living here in Alexandra. Sometimes it was too late to go home and I'd sleep with friends. That made him very unhappy and it made our life very miserable. He couldn't see why I was involved in this. He was scared that I'd be in politics and land in jail.

He'd get very unhappy and think I was making excuses about meetings when I was going out jorling.

When we got dismissed it was worse because he felt I deserved it. How could we overpower the management?

**Did you try to explain to him?**

Yes, always, and encouraging him to organise at his place. He was a worker, at a laboratory in Jeppe. But they had no union.

We'd have general meetings on weekends in Alexandra. We'd leave 8.30am and have whole day meetings. He claimed I had no time for him anymore.

You know what husbands are like. He'd complain that I don't do anything — cook, make tea or do washing for him. It's true that I preferred to do the washing at night rather than miss any meeting. I'd rather strain and overwork at night to satisfy him. But he wasn't too happy and said that wasn't the answer. He needed me to be with him. But he couldn't put me off because I felt it was important to carry on. Now he's got used to it and he doesn't worry me so much. He's getting old.

That's the problem with married women in the organisation. You're in the middle and don't know what to do. Even at work if you think of the problems at home you don't concentrate ... you find yourself getting depres-

sed. What will you find at home? What attitude will you get from you husband and even your children?

**Do male organisers here have the same problem?**

Yes, their wives also complain about the same thing. One of our organisers had to break his marriage. His wife couldn't stand it. She felt she wasn't useful to him. She was young and didn't understand. Maybe because she wasn't a worker before. But even if she was, she wouldn't think it was worthwhile for her husband to stay away. She was not committed.

**But even when you were going to meetings you'd still have to do the washing when you got home?**

Yes. He didn't take anything in the union into account. It was as though I'd gone for my own purposes. He didn't think he could assist. You know, our people don't think we can share the work in the house. They think there's a specific job for women and for men. But here in town there isn't anything for the men to do, like there is on the farm. The men just come from work, take the paper, sit on the chair and relax. Even if the man arrives home earlier he'll never make you a cup of tea. It's in his mind that I must do all this because I'm a woman.

At one and the same time you have to have a job, be in the union and run the home. If you're a young woman maybe there's also a baby to look after. Maybe in the mornings you take your child to a creche or an old woman. If the man comes earlier he hasn't the ability to go and fetch the child and look after it while I'm still working. He expects the woman to go and fetch the baby, put it behind her back, get to the stove and cook for him ... and he's busy reading the paper.

And we do it happily because we grew up that way, we saw our parents do it and we think it's the African law.

**Do ordinary women workers have special problems at work?**

Yes. At present we're organising women cleaners in Anglo-American who work day and night shift. They have tremendous problems, especially the night ones. They have to leave Soweto at about 5pm but they must first cook so the husbands find food ready when they return home. They must also



clean the house. They finish work at 3am and they have to wait until it's clear to catch the train. When they get home maybe their husbands are gone already. They just leave a mess, the bed unmade. He can't do anything, not even wash the dishes. So she cleans again ... it's routine. This poor woman has no chance, at home and at work. Some only get half of Saturday and Sunday at home.

When they start work at 6pm they have a terrible time with the indunas. Most of them complain about 'love-abuse', because it's in the middle of the night. If she resists or argues then she knows she's in bad books, and can be reported as lazy and kicked out.

They also have to work very hard. The tenants seem to make no effort to keep the offices tidy. The most terrible thing is that Anglo-American isn't intending to promote women as supervisors. They haven't yet had a woman supervisor. There must always be a man to chase after you. They think a man is superior to me. Even the capitalists think the same. The women want to know why a woman with ten to fifteen years doesn't get promoted whilst a man can come with two to three years and get promotion to supervisor.

**Do women have special problems when it comes to joining unions?**

At Heinemann we had six women shop-stewards out of twelve. This was because we were insisting and our organiser, Khubeka, was encouraging us. But our chairman was a man.

During meetings we tried to fight the undermining of women's suggestions. They thought we were not saying strategic things. But we managed to fight that. If a woman stands up and puts a motion or a suggestion it should be taken into consideration. We succeeded in Heinemann because, as I said earlier, women outnumbered men. The women were taking the lead when we were on strike. They weren't scared even when the police were trying to thrash us and scare us with dogs. I think that's when the women realised that women can be determined.

But now, we have some women shop-stewards from Anglo and even though they're not taking the lead (there are some men), they're actually participating quite well. I don't know if it's perhaps because these men have been organised by me that they give them respect.

There are now a lot of women in FOSATU — for example Maggie Magubane, general-secretary of Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union

(SFAWU); Refilwe Ndzuta and Aninka Claassens in Paper, Wood & Allied Workers' Union (PWAU) although they have few women members; in CWIU (Chemical Workers' Industrial Union) we have Chris Bonner who assisted in opening the Transvaal branch. She has a lot of women at Piggot and Maskew.

But no union has yet elected a branch chairlady. Offhand, I don't know even of a chairlady of the shop-stewards committee. Perhaps a female treasurer, since people think a woman is more responsible and will be more careful with the money.

Even the women feel it's important to elect men. I don't know why. Even in textiles, where there's mostly women I've never heard of a chairlady of the branch or a president.

**Excluding officials, are there women workers on the Central Committee?**

Yes, particularly from Port Elizabeth, the coloured women, and some from the Western Cape.

**What can be done to improve the situation for women?**

If the women officials were allowed to have their own grouping to discuss the day-to-day problems that we encounter in the union. Having meetings of women is the first step. We can't just discuss it generally. Maybe lectures later to make an educational thing which will be transferred to our male executives and general membership. We must understand how we should see each other as a team and work as a team. Not have that spirit of undermining a person because she's a woman.

If we could give, particularly the young ones, an education, it would not only assist the organisation but even their families. This business of oppressing women at home, with unnecessary jobs, maybe it will come to an end and they will help out.

**But why should women be equal?**

Why can't we be equal? What do men see us as lacking? If they could tell what we are lacking to achieve the same rights in the union or the family, then I'd understand. But they don't give us proper reasons. Just that a woman is a woman! I'm not yet convinced.

We pay subs equally, we work the same shifts, we work the same jobs, we participate in the same way in the unions. So I don't see why we can't have an equal say and equal rights! Why can't we have a right to have a say in one grouping, even if at home we are suffering?

I think it's the time for women to come together and see this thing as a major problem for us. So that eventually we achieve the same rights. And we must think of many ways of doing it. It's a problem that will go ahead from one generation to another if we don't actually work on it. I wouldn't like my child to grow the same as I was, as I am now. I would like my grandchildren to actually feel free, in organisations, at home, everywhere. They should have the same say, the same rights.

**But will it happen?**

If we plan properly it will. The problem is also that we women accepted it. We didn't fight it from the beginning. We felt it was important for a man to be what he is. And so it became a habit and even in ourselves we sometimes become very shy, say when my husband has visitors and I ask him to help me. Because I think his friends will think he's a fool. But if we can start discussing these things everytime, our children will adopt another system.



## **B & S Struggles**

*FOSATU WORKER NEWS interviews the workers' committee from B & S Engineering and Steelbright in Brits in the Transvaal. From FOSATU WORKER NEWS No 21, May 1983.*

### **How did you first begin uniting the workers?**

In the beginning workers began going back to the factory to be re-employed and some of them just went back to their homes. We decided to organise them together and we felt that if people could report daily we could discuss with them their decisions.

### **How many people did go back in the end?**

Up to now about 600 went back and about 400 of those were actually not taken back at the factory, the 300 here never returned to the factory to seek re-employment - in fact we only collected our wages in December.

### **How did you survive from September to December?**

At the time some of us had savings and we lived on these and also shared them out. Also people in the community were initially willing to help us out, as well as some of the other workers in the area.

### **How did you plan all this?**

Well we decided that people should report every day and in fact they began coming from September 8 as this was the place where we normally held meetings.

### **What was discussed and planned in the first few weeks?**

We began discussing how we were harassed by management and how workers in other factories were also harassed such as FEMCO where they retrenched also to break the union. We would take examples of people's experiences and get workers to talk and comment. We discovered that if we want to survive here we will have to stick together as this will be the only way to keep the organisation strong. If we depart then it would all break up

and people would be weak if they were alone. Actually we spent a lot of time asking people how they felt about the dismissal — whether they thought it was unfair or fair — finally we all agreed it was unfair and we all decided to stick together.

**What were the problems you encountered?**

After the first meetings we discovered it was possible to motivate the people and not to separate ourselves from one another by being Xhosas or Tswanas — finding that each and everyone of us is useful to the others. On the other hand by doing so we discovered by sharing the information and our feeling about the situation in the factory — the bad conditions — people shared their experiences and exposed the way in which they were treated. This type of discussion helped a lot because it showed people that if they went to another factory the situation would be exactly the same and we thought we should rather stick together and fight the situation at B & S.

**How did you begin dealing with problems of survival?**

The committee planned that we should begin asking for help from the local churches and we got all the people involved in this by asking each and every one of them to take a letter to the church in their particular area. We also planned to get some help from other workers in the area. At that time we had no idea we would be out for so long and we also depended on our savings.

**Have there been any problems between the workers and the committee?**

No never. In fact when the entire committee was dismissed in July, management forced workers to vote for a new committee after we were re-instated but the same people were voted in. So all we did was bring in some new people. There were a few problems when we started getting money from outside as some of the workers did not trust that they were going to benefit — they thought that the money would just go to the committee. This led to a lot of discussions where we explained exactly how the money was going to be used. We explained that we were all in the struggle.

**What was the money spent on?**

Well to get to the place where we met. Some of us had real problems with transport and some of the money first went into making sure that those who wanted to come to the hall could. In fact what we used to do was share tickets. One day I would come and the next my neighbour would.

**Was the committee under a lot of pressure — did the situation become very demanding?**

Yes there were some problems, especially emergencies — people who could not pay for treatment, kids who were sick. The way we would deal with this was to all come together and make a contribution from our savings and then if we got money in from the churches these people would be paid back.

Also the committee found that people were complaining that their families were putting them under a lot of pressure, telling them to go back to work. The problem is that some of us are the only member of the family with a full time job and consequently the families had to make sacrifices for this struggle. This is why we are so close now. Anyway when there were problems in the families we would send a few of the committee members to talk to the whole family and explain the struggle and what it was all about.

**So the group has got stronger?**

Yes, we started quite strong and now we are even stronger.

**What else have you done all this time — nine months is a long time to meet every day?**

Each day we would report what we had heard about the factory — you see many friends working there and they tell us exactly what is going on. We would get stories from our brothers on the production problems — the amount of rejects that have been sent back, who they have hired, whether the factory is losing or not. For the first few months we knew that the trucks delivering were only half full. Production is still low — they are not producing the same number of units and they still want some of the skilled workers back.

**All of you here are from different positions in the factory — did you always trust each other?**



It is true, some of the supervisors were not trusted because they used to work very closely with the white foremen and management. But they have shown that there is no difference — they are not brothers of the foremen but workers like all others. We have begun to discuss this question of how management tried to divide us.

**What has been the role of the union in all of this?**

Sometimes the workers would ask where the organisers were and whether they had forgotten us as they did not come here very often. We had to explain that they were very busy and that they were proceeding with the discussions with the Industrial Council and the Court case. When two committee members were arrested under the Intimidation Act and the charges later withdrawn — this gave us faith in the union that something could be done for us.

**What have been the main sacrifices?**

Well some of us do not eat properly and cannot feed our children like we used to — some of us have sent our children away to our parents. Many of us have had to sell our belongings such as clothes and bicycles and watches and some of us have had goods repossessed. We also now have spent all our savings some of which we had saved for many years and were hoping to buy better things for our children. Some of us have had to sell our goats and cattle and this was very difficult as we sold them for very little.

**Do you think the workers have changed over the nine months?**

Yes people have changed through all the discussions. We have come to realise what it is to sacrifice and stick together and to trust one another — that an injury to one is an injury to all. Most of us only knew in the beginning that we were employed and that we should accept our situation and what they give us. Most of us were not aware of our rights. We learnt that by being alone nothing could happen and that the only way was to stick together. We are all suffering and sacrificing.

## Lockout in Queenstown

*A worker at the Eastern Cape Agricultural Co-operative Creamery in Queenstown gave this account of the lockout, which took place in March, to the SALB.*

We had to stop work.

There were many complaints. Our wages were R29 a week and R35 if you had long service. Our conditions of work were terrible. I have worked continually at Bowker's Park\* since 1971. I started at R7,33 a week, but I have never been handled decently. There was no way of resolving our problems. There was no one to whom we could refer these things. So you had to go yourself. And when you took your problem to the management, if they felt your complaint was something they didn't like they would tell you: 'If you are going to have complaints such as these, you are going to make us kick you out and that will be the end of work for you. We don't want a person who has complaints. We only want a person who is just going to work.' That made us weep. And that was not all. Workers were beaten. Women were insulted and called filthy names. But when one who had been assaulted went to complain he was just told that those who complain will be expelled.

There was another serious complaint which we had. We used to borrow money from the firm when we had problems and they would lend us this money. But now we can no longer borrow money. They said we could never receive loans again. But because of the meagre wages we get we often cannot manage. Sometimes someone in the family gets ill and you've got to take them to the doctor and you don't have the money. Now there is no place where you can get help other than the place where you work. This was a big complaint among us at Bowker's Park. It was one of the complaints which was taken by the liaison committee to the managers, to ask them why there were no longer any more loans.

### **The liaison committee**

In about 1980 we heard something about a workmen's committee or liaison committee which we should have to take our complaints. This idea came from near the offices of the employers. What I mean is that it was their idea. We were told to elect members who would represent us to them. The

managers would also take their complaints about the workers, those things about our work which did not satisfy them, to the committee. The committee would then bring those things to us.

So we elected members to this liaison committee which was going to represent us. And we used to send it to the managers and when it arrived it said what we had told it to say. When it had said what we had sent it to say we found that the employers would want to know: 'Who advised you to say what you are saying?'

But the committee would say, 'Nobody, this thing comes from the workers — from us all!'

Then the employers would say, 'If you come here with bad complaints we will start to expel workers and we will start with you, the committee. Then we will expel everybody who says things with which we don't agree.'

This happened when we took the complaint about the loans to the managers. The reply to the liaison committee was that the law of the firm stated that the managers should no longer give loans. One who is not satisfied with that could simply take his jacket and march out. There was nothing we could do and the committee said there was nothing it could do in such a situation because it had also been told it would be expelled if it caused any trouble.

At that point it was found that they were given loans when they wanted them, these members of the liaison committee, but were told not to tell the rest of us that they had received loans. But it soon became known. So we saw there was nothing we could do. This liaison committee was hopeless. The managers only wanted to use it to tell us of the things that did not satisfy them. But our grievances were not heard at all.

Some of us had children to support. And we pay taxes. Now if we talked we were going to be expelled. The best thing was to keep quiet and see whether God was not going to help us. We could see the liaison committee was not going to do anything.

### **We want our union to be recognised**

While we were still waiting to see who was going to help us there arrived in July 1982 this organisation, the African Food and Canning Workers' Union. We heard about the way it works to help people, the workers. Then we realised, as it explained to us how it works, that we should accept it. We accepted this organisation. I was one of the workers who accepted it. And



there were others here in the firm. There were quite a number of people who accepted it. In fact, after a time, all of the workers in the firm accepted it, in 1982.

After everybody in Bowker's Park had joined we wanted to know how this organisation was going to represent us. Because we had elected shop stewards and committee members which we were compelled by the rules of the organisation to elect. So we first had a meeting with other factories where workers had joined the union in Queenstown. This was at KSM (Kaf-frarian Steam Mills) and Dunn's Bakery. KSM and Dunn's had recognised the union. But our committee reported to us that our company had not responded to the letter written by the union. They said they would have nothing to do with the union. We had told the union to take the initiative but now we asked the committee to go and see the manager to tell him we wanted to speak to him. It was the 8th March, on a Tuesday.

The committee saw the assistant production manager who said, 'What do you want to see the Branch Manager for? He is not in.'

The committee replied, 'We have been sent by the workers.'

The manager repeated that the Branch Manager was not in and said that the committee should come the following day.

But after the committee had left this manager called one committee member aside and spoke to him on his own.

'Now tell me,' he said, 'What do you want?'

But the steward replied, 'No, we want to speak to him.'

Then he asked the shop steward, 'Have you joined the organisation? Do you want to see him about this organisation of which it is said there are people of this firm who have joined?'

The committee member replied, 'Yes! We want him for that. We want our union to be recognised.'

We did not know then what this shop steward had told the assistant manager. He just repeated that we should go the next day. But we saw that there was something going on behind this. We had already seen that they were not on good terms with this matter concerning this organisation of ours.

### **We only want to see the manager**

The following day, on the morning of 9th March, we arrived at work and entered the premises. We had already reached a decision that because

management was ignoring our requests there was only one thing to do, and that was to sit. We should go to work but not work.

So when we arrived we did not put on our overalls but asked to see the manager. Then he came and asked, 'What do you want to see me for?' So we said, 'We want to tell you about this organisation we have joined. It is a workers' organisation and we want you to meet it. We have sent it to talk to you about the things with which we are not satisfied in the firm.'

His reply was, 'This organisation has already written to us telling us it wanted to meet us. But we told it that we will have nothing to do with it.'

To which we said, 'If you say you will have nothing to do with it and it is the organisation which is going to represent us to you, then we are not going to work until you meet the union. We belong to this organisation because we have complaints which you don't accept when we come to you by ourselves. You just show us the gate and say that a person who has complaints should go through it.'

The manager then said, 'I don't want to talk to you about this organisation which you have joined. Now I am going to call the police.'

### **No! We will not march out of the gate**

He called the police. We were still inside the firm. The police arrived. A policeman, called a commandant, accompanied by his captain, came to us and said, 'We have been called by your whites who say that you no longer work here. They don't want you here, so go!'

But we said, 'How can we go when we are the workers of this firm? No, we will not march out of the gate. We want to speak to the manager.'

But the commandant just said, 'Go away from here. We have been called to arrest you for trespassing. These premises are not your territory. They have expelled you because they want nothing to do with your organisation. And they do not want you on their premises.'

Then we said, 'But this *is* our ground. We have not yet been discharged and we are still being hired by this firm. Everything of ours is still inside the factory. They cannot just say we must go without giving us any time to prepare. We are not going to march out.'

'Well I give you five minutes,' the policeman said, 'Otherwise I will call the police vans and arrest you for trespassing.'

**Then we got out of the factory**

Then a committee member said we should leave the premises. Then we got out of the factory. We went across the road, still near the firm in front of the gate, but on the opposite side of the road. But the commandant came again and said we still didn't have a right to stand there. We would be arrested under the law concerning Unlawful Gatherings. Then he advised us to go to the location but not to hold a meeting publicly, by just standing in the open. If we wanted to meet it should be under a roof, because even there in the location they would still arrest us if we stood together on open ground.

So we left and met to decide what to do the next day. We decided to go back to the firm because the manager had not yet given us a reply. We decided to go back there and speak to him because we were still workers.

**They were there with dogs, standing in the gate**

We arrived back at work the following day. We all were there and work was at a standstill in the firm. Then the coloureds who worked the computer in the office started doing the work. And then farmers also came with other whites from the farms to work and help in the firm. The white staff and these other whites helped to do our work.

We just stood in front of the gate. They were there with dogs now, the security, standing in the gate with their security dogs, so that we should not enter the gate again.

We wanted to enter because we were being hired by the firm. But we saw the presence of the dogs and that they had locked the gates. And there was also one who had gone to fetch a gun. But he did not use the gun because he was prevented by another white who worked in the firm.

And then the police came, the commandant and his captain. No bosses turned up; only police and the security patrolling the factory. On this second day they gave us thirty minutes to leave, repeating what they said the day before. We tried to say that we had not been expelled because our *dompas* had not even been signed. They told us we had been dismissed and we should come back on the Monday to be re-employed. We then left accepting neither the dismissal nor what was said about re-employment. This was decided at another meeting we held. We also decided not to be divided or separated in any way. If the police came to the gates on Monday we would all get into the vans.



**Then they came with vans and tried to arrest us**

On Monday we all arrived at the gates again. The police were waiting for us in vans. They told us again that we were dismissed and tried to arrest some of us. They pointed at me to get inside a van. They also pointed at one of the committee members that he too should get into a van. When a young policeman tried to arrest a third worker, a shop steward, he started wrestling with the policeman and they both fell to the ground.

By that time I was getting into the van when the people pushed forward and said to me, 'You are not to get into the van. It was our decision that if someone was arrested we should all be arrested together.'

So then we told the police that they should come with other vans to accommodate us all. We would all get inside the vans. There were 179 of us who didn't go to work, who were standing locked outside the gates of Bowker's Park.

**We will leave you to talk to your whites**

When the police heard what we said they called for the big van. It came. But then the commandant said to the policemen they should leave those they tried to arrest. So they left me and the other two stewards.

Then the police went to the managers. We don't know what they talked about. But they talked and talked to the managers and then the commandant and captain went and sat inside their car. They talked there for a long time alone. Our managers were standing inside the gate while we were standing on the other side of the road. When the policemen eventually got out of the car they went to see the managers again and then came to talk to us.

'You see we policemen have nothing to do with this case of yours,' they said. 'This thing is between you and your whites. We are going now and we will leave you to talk to your whites. But if something other than negotiating happens that will cause us to return, then we will do our work on you.'

After that they left with all their vans. We workers were left alone. Then our managers came to speak to us.

**We have expelled you, but will take some of you back.**

'We have told you that you are expelled, but we are going to accept those of you we want back at work. But even to those we want back we will not

talk about your organisation,' they told us.

Our question now was, 'If you say we must get inside and work and still have nothing to do with our organisation, how are we going to work? Under what conditions? Because what we want is that you should talk to our organisation which is going to represent us to you concerning our complaints.'

Then this manager tried to divide us. He wanted to know who had joined the union. And he wanted to know if there were people among us who were unemployed. So he started saying, 'Stand according to your departments because I want to know how many of you have already left and are working inside the firm.'

'Nobody has left to go and work,' we said. 'We are all outside here.' He insisted. But we didn't like the way he was talking to us so we told him, 'The only people to tell us to stand in departments and whom we will allow to count us is the union.'

But he continued to try to divide us on this fourth day of the struggle. He said there were other people not from Bowker's Park among us. We denied it. Nobody had broken our unity.

### **We will tell you of our complaints**

I said to him, 'When you said you expelled us, how can you do that when you still have our money here? The money that has continued to be deducted from 1970 to 1983, we from the Transkei, how are we going to get that money? We cannot get it from the Transkei and we never received it from the Department of Labour. When we went there they told us they sent it to Bowker's Park. Now we want to know about these things. So we want you to talk to the organisation which is going to represent us. You told us to elect a liaison committee and we did, but it never represented us. But you say you will have nothing to do with our organisation. Is it because it is illegal?' He could not answer.

'I will tell you those things you do with which we workers are not satisfied because we don't have a representative to tell you these things. We have many complaints which you never listen to. Our wages are R29 a week and R35 if you have long service. Our conditions of work are terrible. The women are insulted and called filthy names. Workers are beaten in the firm. One had his jaw broken and another was shot in the leg. A white foreman and a worker were fighting and the worker began over-powering the white.

So the foreman just shot him and left him lying there. Then he was taken to the police station and only then to hospital.

But the firm said nothing about what had happened. They didn't talk to us about it so we decided to take the case to court. We did so, but nothing happened and we heard there was bribery involved. The other worker was beaten so badly that he was off work for six weeks with wires in his jaw. He was back at work for two weeks when he was dismissed. In another case when a worker went to the police to complain of being beaten at work the police just beat him up again.'

All this time the manager stood and listened. There was nothing he could say, so I explained that it was for these reasons we workers joined the union. It was going to represent us concerning these things. But he simply repeated that the firm would not recognise our organisation and there was nothing more to say. Then he left.

### **Some are going back now**

The company started bringing in scab labour from then on. They started with the skilled machine operators who were the first to go back. But even now production is not back to normal. Those machines for making butter in the Creamery are old and awkward. And not all the machine operators went back.

They contracted other workers secretly to go back. Some workers are going back now. They are trickling back, claiming hunger. But there were never any dismissals, no books were signed off. They gave us one week's wages. Holiday money was not given and neither was our pension money. And other money of ours is still there. Like the UIF money which the Transkei will not pay out, but is still being deducted from the wages.

Our numbers outside here have started decreasing. Some have gone back to the countryside and about 30 went inside, back to work. That is why we are such a small number now, remaining in Queenstown. There are 40 of us still left here. It is all the old people who are strong. Some young ones, and even some shop stewards, were the first to go back. But we are continuing. The spirit is still alive in us.



## **Paul Leboea and Theboho Noka**

Two organisers of the National Union of Mineworkers died tragically in a car accident in the Orange Free State on March 7 while travelling to the union's head office in Johannesburg.

They were Paul Leboea and Theboho Noka. Noka was killed instantly while Leboea died in hospital the day after the accident which happened outside Vredefort.

Both were hardworking and sincere unionists whose dedication to the National Union of Mineworkers played a valuable role in building the union into the major force which it has become.

Noka (33), who was born in Maseru, Lesotho, worked as a clerk for Teba, the recruiting arm of the mines, before joining NUM as an organiser at the beginning of this year.

He was an asset to the union, and could speak Tswana, Sesotho, German and English fluently. He leaves behind a wife and three children.

Leboea (30), lived in Ficksburg in the Free State, and also worked for Teba as a clerk last year before joining NUM full-time as an organiser.

He was fluent in English, Afrikaans and Sesotho, and was completely devoted to his work as an organiser. He leaves behind a wife and four children.

NUM expressed its deep regret at the sudden death of the two men, and commended the enthusiasm and courage which they brought to their work.

'It was their original organising work which led to the success of the union,' it said in a statement.

(Tyrone August)