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15 A VERY OBVIOUS CONTRADICTION

A wave of strikes in Durban in early 1973 — the biggest since the Second World War — signalled the end of a decade-long lull in activity among ever-growing numbers of black urban workers.¹ The reinvigoration of the trade union movement sparked by those strikes gained valuable support from white intellectuals. In their academic writings they had challenged the traditional liberal assumption that a 'rational' capitalism would erode 'irrational' apartheid. In the unions they were drawing the crucial links between South Africa's economic, social and political structures, and introducing workers to new forms of mobilization and organization.

“My feeling that workers were central arose from my realization that, in fact, you had to restructure the economy if you were going to overcome the problems of underdevelopment. The change in historiography that was initiated in the '70s — looking at South Africa not just in terms of race, but looking at the economic structures that evolved, why migrant labour was so important to gold mines and how it totally reshaped the society — made it clear to me that the only way, in the long run, that this was going to change was through worker organization. Then when it came to unions as such, what we were looking at was to try and organize workers in a different way to the existing unions — organize them on the shop floor, organize them as participating in the unions as much as possible.

With regard to whites as such, white intellectuals were accepted in the organization for what they could offer and bring to it, so people would say, 'look, the fact that you are white mustn't block you from coming in, if you can bring something useful'. Then it became clear that in the wider arena, racism is not the answer — that we should take a non-racial position.

What was it like, moving from teaching white students to dealing with black workers?

Very definitely the worker stuff is much more exciting, more challenging. People were so keen to learn, and the problems they presented you were very much more difficult ones. Shop stewards would come and present a complaint in the factory and fairly soon it became clear that, in fact, shop stewards had as many ideas themselves, and it was possibly a mistake for them to ask you to give advice.

So the challenge, I think, was to link the answers that shop stewards had to wider perspectives. We'd talk about worker history, history of South Africa, and there I would use the information I'd gathered in reading at the university — because much of that history would also be new for black people because they had been given old, distorted history. Endless discussion was what taught you, and interaction in this discussion.

Let's take a problem about the role of supervisors, that supervisors are shits. Then you go on to ask, 'Well what is the job the supervisor's doing, why's he got to do it so strictly?' Or, 'Why are management pushing you so hard?' And from there you could work to a question of the role of profits. You can try and take workers away from just a perception that the supervisor himself as a person is a shit, and you try and move it into profits, and then from profits move it to a wider assessment of class. So instead of dealing with class in the abstract, which you would do with white students, here you would deal with concrete issues and try and elucidate those issues in terms of class.

Were there no anti-white or Black Consciousness views that hampered your interaction with black workers?

I think the first point that's very important to realize is that amongst black workers BC was not a force at all. You had a tremendous tolerance by black workers towards whites — even though they realize that it was whites giving them a hard time. And I feel that that arises out of their position in factories, where they can see that there's something bigger than just the whites that were suppressing them. They could see in the factory the black supervisors, black personnel people starting to rise in the '70s, and I think it was very obvious to them that a factory worked more than on just whiteness. On the other hand, that kind of more assertive feeling that BC had developed amongst students wasn't there amongst black workers. ”

And ever since then that's...the workers are...I am dealing with knew nothing else but that in fact..in our organisation the appreciation of a white skin working in, sacrificing for a black trade union struggle is so much that most of the workers...like them. They would treat the whites with better care than the blacks because they feel they are more to be appreciated for the sacrifice they have made. Because actually working in a trade

The influence of Natal University politics lecturer Rick Turner on a small circle of concerned students in the early 1970s led to the formation of a Wages and Economics Commission, a group which facilitated student involvement in labour issues.³ NUSAS then set up Wages Commissions on other white campuses: members in Durban set up the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund; in Johannesburg, the Industrial Aid Society; and in Cape Town, the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau.

“ Well, the political organizations were crushed and they went underground, but all the same there were things like the trade unions, and that sort of remained a voice of the people. SACTU collapsed as a result of a lot of pressure from the government, but it only collapsed for a period of about three years — from 1969 to '72. In 1972 things started towards forming something for the workers, and in '73 the new union was born out of ex-trade unionists that were banned and house arrested⁴ and who actually felt that workers were defenceless. Something had to take place in the line of helping workers organize, and how that was going to take place, nobody actually had the right pattern. So our beginning was starting it as a small advice bureau, that was our springboard.

And at that time as well, there was a project at University of Cape Town called the Wages Commission. Now the Wages Commission was also doing a survey on conditions of workers, and we needed a base which was actually getting workers organized and seeing to their day-to-day complaints. So we actually started the project with a lot of help from the Wages Commission, which actually had white students. And ever since then the workers I am dealing with knew nothing else but that appreciation of a white skin working and sacrificing for a black trade union struggle.

Did you ever get the feeling that the authorities thought whites were 'agitating' behind the scenes?

Yes, from the interrogations, the questioning that I used to get when I was detained. They didn't think of the people who actually said the union must be formed — they all thought it was a university move, a band of communists that were wanting to take over, and that they were using me for this. Because we were working together, black and white — we started the union together, you know.”

ZORA MEHLOMAKHULU, a former SACTU official in Cape Town

“ To some extent, it was easier for white intellectuals to go in and do it, because there's always a very obvious contradiction. The white intellectuals could never pretend that they were the leaders of whatever would emerge. There was, I think, a fairly constant awareness that leadership needed to be assumed by the workers. We had certain kinds of resources that we could offer, and we wanted to try and strengthen what little there was of a union movement at that stage. The idea was that hopefully we would phase ourselves out.

I think it's important for whites to be involved in the struggle, but I think there's a real need to be aware of the problems of white domination, which can happen helluva easily. For me, domination by intellectuals is really the problem.”

WILLIE HOFMEYR, one of 26 people (more than half of whom were white)⁵ banned in 1976 because of their work with the emergent trade unions

These various student-supported benefit and aid societies played a kind of midwife role in the birth of the 'independent' trade union movement of the 1970s — independent from statutory labour bodies and multi-racial union federations like the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). In Cape Town, the advice bureau became the General Workers Union (GWU). In Durban, the new unions joined together as the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC), which grew into the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979, the first national non-racial union federation since SACTU.

A basic conviction that all these new unions shared was that of non-racialism. In theory, this meant that they were open to workers of all races, but in practice, the rank-and-file membership was black, while some of the top officials were white.

FOSATU believes that the workers' struggle in South Africa cannot succeed without the elimination of racism, but that the elimination of racism will not by itself end the workers' struggle. FOSATU is therefore opposed to all racist legislation that denies fundamental democratic and human rights to the majority of people in our society. We are opposed to laws such as the Group Areas Act, Immorality Act, Mixed Marriages Act, pass laws, etc. FOSATU is therefore opposed to all forms of discrimination based on race, sex or creed within our movement. FOSATU is committed to building a strong independent trade union movement that can act and speak in the interests of workers. FOSATU's priority is the unionization of that great majority of unskilled and semi-skilled black workers who benefit least from our wealth and bear the greatest burden of racial oppression. Any person or organization of workers that shares our aims and objects is welcome in our ranks, irrespective of their race, sex or creed.

I think there was quite a big awareness of the problem - to some extent it was easier for white intellectuals to go in and do it, because there's always a very obvious contradiction - the white intellectuals could never pretend that they were the leaders of whatever would emerge

The Trade Union is made up of workers	Lekhotla la Basebetsi	<i>iBandla laba Basebenzi ibutho laba sebenzayo</i>
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who join together because	le etsoa ke basebetsi hobane	<i>bebuthana ngoba benezindingo</i>
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they have the same needs	seo ba se hloakang sea tsoana	<i>nezinxakeko ezifanavo</i>
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THESE EDUCATIONAL CARTOONS IN ENGLISH, SOTHO AND ZULU WERE PRODUCED BY THE URBAN TRAINING PROJECT (UTP), FORMED IN JOHANNESBURG IN 1971 AS A CHURCH SUPPORTED LABOUR TRAINING CENTRE BY WHITE OFFICIALS FIRED BY THE SEGREGATED TRADE UNION COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA (TUCSA). THE WORKER SUPPORT GROUPS FARMED AFTER THE 1973 DURBAN STRIKES INVOLVED A NEW GENERATION OF RADICAL WHITES FROM THE UNIVERSITIES, AND LAID A NEW EMPHASIS ON GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION.

FOSATU WORKER NEWS

Federation of South African Trade Unions



AUGUST 1983 NUMBER 23

AT 4.30 pm on Monday June 27 the first legal strike for many years began at Natal Thread at Hammarsdale.

Nine days later the company acknowledged its defeat and negotiated a settlement with the National Union of Textile Workers.

The Natal Thread workers not only won a 15c an hour wage increase with back pay (a wage dispute had been the cause of the strike) but they also won the effective right to strike.

In South Africa, after going through lengthy legal procedures workers can go on a legal strike.

No dismissal

This means that they do not face criminal prosecution for striking but does not protect them from being fired by the company.

In terms of the Natal Thread victory, the company agreed that in a legal strike it would 'either dismiss all such strikers or none of them'.

It also agreed that 'in the event of the company having dismissed the strikers it would only either re-employ all of them or none of them'.

This agreement is similar to British labour law where workers have won legal protection for strikers.

This agreement protects strikers from dismissal because it is highly unlikely that a company would fire the entire factory as it would have to train a completely new workforce from scratch.

Also, if the company takes back one of the strikers, it has to take back them all.

First success

This makes the Natal Thread strike the first successful legal strike in recent labour history in South Africa.

The strike was marked by the solidarity and discipline of the 400 odd workers involved.

For five hours a day machines, which usually thudded all day long in the factory, were silent.

At 4.30 in the morning and afternoon, the shift workers closed down their machines.

The machines remained silent until the next shift arrived at 7 and then began the long process of starting machines designed to run continuously.

Understanding

NUTW branch secretary, Prof Sineke said although the day shift had not been involved in the strike, there had been sufficient understanding among the workers not to cause division.

Through the strike, Natal Thread lost a full week's production - costing the company thousands of Rands.

Fair bargaining

But the workers won a significant worker right - the right to strike without the fear of selective hiring or firing.

This is surely a step towards a better and fair collective bargaining system. Let us hope that more employers follow the lead set by Natal Thread.

THE RIGHT TO STRIKE



The smile of a winner - Natal Thread workers.

In the first legal strike for many years, Natal Thread workers won a significant worker right

THE Natal Thread agreement marks another step toward winning an effective and legal right to strike for the workers of South Africa.

As we have seen over recent years workers will strike even when the law says it is illegal if they feel they have no other choice. However a strike is very costly for workers and the decision to strike is never an easy one.

Because the strike is such an important weapon of workers in the unequal struggle with employers they have also to fight to get legal protection. We want to change the moral right to strike into a legal right to strike as well.

This legal right to strike is important because it offers greater protection to strikers and allows them to use the strike weapon with more discipline and less risk of violence.

There are certain very important matters which together would create this legal right to strike. They are:

- The right to free and independent organisation
- Effective collective bargaining procedures that quickly resolve differences and disputes
- The right to picketing during a strike i.e. the right to persuade workers not to enter the gate
- The right and ability to pay strike pay
- Protection against dismissal during a strike.

In South Africa there are two reasons why we don't yet have this right. Firstly the Labour Relations Act procedures are so slow that they encourage 'illegal' strikes. Secondly even though the Labour Relations Act provides for legal strikes in which there can be picketing and strike pay other acts such as Internal Security and Intimidation are used to prevent these provisions being effective.

Despite this gains are made. The FOSATU type recognition agreements with shop stewards, and procedures for grievances, discipline, negotiations and disputes have improved the collective bargaining position of the unions.

The Natal Thread Agreement tackled the problem of dismissal. It is the usual practice of employers in illegal and legal strikes to dismiss all workers and then selectively reemploy those that they want back which usually excludes strong members and shop stewards.

The Agreement prevents such selective dismissal and re-employment during a legal strike so management now have a choice of dismissing all workers permanently or dismissing none.

This is not such an easy choice and gives workers a fighting chance in their struggle for a more equal balance of power in collective bargaining.

Even if as I said before the situation is changing - even though there are some people feeling anti-white, but if you look at what is happening in the township

“ Was there ever any criticism of the white union officials from the black union members?

Yes, well, there were a lot of criticisms levelled onto the white leadership. Some people felt that they didn't want to address themselves to the present situation, like the community problems — they were not directly wanting to get themselves involved in that. Some of them felt that you've got to maintain your trade union identity so you cannot get yourself involved in such things. Some of the whites felt like that.⁶

When I first started working, the unions were not very strong and what I heard at that time was that the unions are going to fight against the whites. I didn't feel that whites should belong to our union because they represented the oppressor, so I didn't have anything to do with the white man.

Had you never heard of any of the whites who had been involved in building trade unions in the past?

Well, I only read about those, but to me they looked like they were sell-outs, they were in this organization in order to get information for the government. This is how I understood things at that time.

When you were detained did you sense that the police didn't like the fact that there were white officials in your union?

Yes. In fact, the interrogation was directed at saying that I've got to change because I was being used by the ANC and that kind of stuff. They said a lot about the white officials — that they were in the unions to misdirect us and they were using the ideas of communism through us, so we've got to be careful about them.⁷ Well, everybody knows that with the government, anything that is against it is communist, so immediately they start to say that we know that that is the right stuff.

So you didn't come out of detention feeling anti -white in any way?

No, I only came out of detention feeling anti-police. If you look at what is happening in the townships right now, black and white policemen are the ones assaulting children, and sometimes it's worse with the black cops.

How did your non -racial views develop?

The change came about this way: when one started to look at the envisaged society. The society that you would be looking for, if you were progressive, would be a non-racial society. If you waged the struggle on a class struggle basis then it makes things easier, and at the same time you tend to win support from other countries and you tend to build relationships with other trade unions abroad.

How did you get acquainted with concepts like class struggle?

I started reading and I started to understand: it is not apartheid that makes us suffer, but apartheid as a form, covering the whole concept of capitalism. What I'm saying is, before 1982 we still had the Black Consciousness ideology in our minds, and I believed that whites were sell-outs because they were part and parcel of the oppressor.

And how did you feel about the whites who helped start FOSATU with you?

We were very suspicious of them, in fact. Although we accepted them in the federation, I did not believe that I can expose anything that I thought was secret to any of them. I would say most of the younger guys like ourselves, they shared the view of BC. It's only now that it's diminishing, people are moving more and more on to the progressive line. It's now spread out, it's a line that has been taken by the majority of the people, and it is not only challenging the apartheid system, but it's challenging capitalism as well. So the dangers are very high in a progressive line.

The workers that we represent, they support non-racialism, but sometimes if you can sit down with an ordinary member you would find that there is still an element of BC in his kind of thinking. And one cannot blame a worker for this, because it derives from the fact that in the plant where he works or she works, she is faced with the problem of whites being supervisors or foremen and the ill-treatment that one receives would be from whites. So although they support the idea of progressive politics, the element of BC still prevails in some people's minds.

What we try to say to people is that even though your boss is a conservative kind of Afrikaner or whatever, there are whites who are progressive and who are enlightened and who are sympathetic to our struggle. So to completely close the doors and say you don't want whites, you'd be closing doors even to people who could be committed to supporting our struggle. ”

CHRIS DLAMINI, a shop steward at a factory in Springs, on the East Rand, who was elected FOSATU president in 1982

No (Laugh) no – it was the first time then to see the whites – the white helping the black people to their organisation. Then I have to ask them carefully what they're up to – they are up to (Laugh)

You were a bit suspicious at first?

Oh, yes, I have to satisfy myself as to what they're up to, then they explain carefully for me.

“It was the first time to see the whites helping the black people to their organization. Then I had to ask them carefully what they're up to — I had to satisfy myself. Then they explained carefully for me. They said this is a non-racial union, everyone is free to join. It doesn't matter if it's a white or black or coloured or Indian — everyone is free to join.

That freedom was not without its tensions, for both the blacks and the whites who were consolidating this new, non-racial trade unionism in the 1980s. Many believed that these tensions stemmed from language and cultural barriers — inevitably race-related. Others argued that differences in class and intellectual backgrounds were at the core.”

ALFRED TEMBA QABULA, a former migrant worker from Pondoland who joined one of the FOSATU unions that emerged in the 1970s, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU)

“I think there's an unwillingness from some people to learn the languages of other people, and I think that's a hindrance. I'm saying this because we used to meet people who only could speak Zulu, because that's how they feel comfortable — yet I have these other comrades who can't hear what they are talking about. And there's no willingness from their side to learn. Those are some of the things that I used to discuss with comrades, that, 'Look here, Africans are in the majority and you better learn to relate to them.'

Again, it reflects that when people think of a future South Africa, they still think of it in their own terms — but that means an unpreparedness to change. I think there is quite a lot to be overcome. The fact is that you cannot be able to work with people if you don't want to get rid of some of your own hang-ups. I still had those hang-ups that other comrades are better off than me. Those are some of the things that can cause some kind of friction — sometimes unfounded.”

PETER MAHLANGU, an organizer for the independent South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), formed in 1979 as a breakaway from the Black Consciousness supporting Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU)

“How I, as a white, function is important, there's no doubt about it, and how I, as a white, relate to black workers is important, but my position as an intellectual is actually a more interesting contradiction that has to be resolved. It wouldn't make any difference if my name was Sox Quthole, who's my sidekick in the union, if you like, but also an intellectual. His role is as fraught with complexity and angst as mine is, and I think that a great problem that I have with many white intellectuals — and it arises partly as a result of the sort of guilt that we experience — is that they do not do that which they are best qualified to do, and that is to be intellectuals.

They are only too willing to toe a line, because they don't feel that it's legitimate for them, as whites, to say anything in black organizations, in black South Africa. You can't assert yourself. To my mind, that's absolutely reactionary, and there's a lot of that sort of stuff that goes around in white left-wing politics in South Africa. Some white intellectuals are embarrassed at their ability to understand, to articulate, and they don't do that which they are best qualified to do. They think that the only work that is valuable is organizing.

My ability to be able to write and articulate the way I do has been a function of the kind of privileges that have been granted to me because I'm a white South African, and I still think that my primary way of paying back some of this is to use that, is to say, 'Look, I've great respect for your organization, but I think you're heading in the wrong direction. I may be right or I may be wrong in my assessment, but nevertheless this is what I think, based on sort of ten years of reading Althusser⁸ and Lenin and bloody newspapers.' I think that part of the guilt of being a white South African is that the minute you get involved in realpolitik, you feel that you can't say anything because you haven't really experienced it, and you are, after all, part of the oppressors. I don't buy that.”

DAVE LEWIS, GWU General-Secretary from 1980 to 1986

an intellectual. His role is so fraught with complexity and angst as mine is and I think that a great problem that I have with many white intellectuals - is that, and it arises partly as a result of the sort of guilt that we experience, - is that they do not do that which they are best qualified to do and that is to be intellectuals. Be people who work in organisations like the UDF, be people who work on community newspapers like Grass Roots, be people who work in unions like the General Workers



STRIKING BLACK WORKERS IN MPOPHOMENI, NATAL BEING BRIEFED BY A WHITE OFFICIAL OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF METALWORKERS OF SOUTH AFRICA (NUMSA).
(PHOTOGRAPHER: CEDRIC NUNN)

NOTES:

¹An even earlier signal came from Namibia in 1971-72, when 20,000 migrant workers staged a strike; it was crushed by the South African army, at a cost of six lives and hundreds of arrests.

²Finally brought under union control in 1976, when it became a sub-committee of the umbrella body of the new independent unions, the IIE's most lasting success was its founding of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, a journal that (like *Work in Progress and Social Review*, also inspired by white intellectuals) played an important role in both academic and popular political circles.

³It was Turner's role as a political catalyst for young whites that many believe led to his assassination by unknown gunmen in 1978, shortly before his banning order was due to expire. Veteran unionist Harriet Bolton of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union initially approached Turner with the idea of encouraging white students to assist with the organization of African workers.

⁴Elijah Loza was another of the former SACTU figures who helped launch the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau.

⁵Most of those banned had been involved with TUACC, the Urban Training Project (that later led to the formation of the Council of Unions of South Africa, CUSA), the Industrial Aid Society, the incipient Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU Transvaal), and the revived Food and Canning Workers Union. Hofmeyr was among six white UCT students banned for their work with the Wages Commission.

⁶Note that this assessment was made by Dlamini in an interview in 1985, and since it is a view associated with the pre-COSATU era, before the 1985-86 uprisings, the comment has been put into the past tense to avoid the impression that this criticism of white intellectuals continues to be widely held.

⁷Ironically, many of the whites active in the unions in the 1970s shared a political perspective that was critical of the ANC and the SACP.

⁸The work of white left intellectuals in the 1970s and early 1980s was heavily influenced by the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas and others. With the increasing involvement of whites in concrete political activity, most moved away from a preoccupation with abstract theory (useful as it was in helping to characterize the structure of the state and the political economy of South Africa) towards a more flexible, pragmatic analysis of class, power and popular struggle.