

*Masters and servants:
African trade unionism in
Pietermaritzburg and the
Natal Midlands before the early 1980s*

by Christopher Merrett

MASTERS and servants: until as late as 1974 those three words defined the legal relationship between employers and black African employees in South Africa. The purpose of this article is to trace the twentieth-century development of African trade unionism in a region of South Africa not noted for industrial activity and investigate its influence and impact especially in terms of the broader political struggle.

Trade unionism on the margins

While African workers were never prohibited from forming trade unions, a succession of white minority-rule governments did their utmost to constrict, obstruct and control them. The

Colony of Natal passed a Masters and Servants Ordinance in 1850. Ostensibly, it applied to all employees. But it was clearly targeted primarily at African workers and while it rendered all strikes illegal, its provisions rarely applied to white employees. The first organised industrial action by African workers in Natal occurred at the Durban docks in 1895, the year after the Masters and Native Servants Act had been passed by a Natal government that had been awarded a measure of autonomy in 1893 and become a flagrant promoter of white capital.¹

A strike by Indian workers in Pietermaritzburg in 1913 originated in the passive resistance struggle against the £3 poll tax designed to encourage

repatriation of formerly indentured workers. Industrial action began on 22 November after a gathering at the temple. Pickets appeared in town and arrests were made at the railway workshop and Armitage's brickworks. Magistrate B.C. Clarence tried a conciliatory approach but fines, imprisonment and two deportations ensued. After five days the strike was effectively over, although workers from Wartburg and New Hanover were intercepted marching on Pietermaritzburg in search of a 'great leader'. The hub of the strike at the temple was the setting for the final meeting on 6 December, addressed by the local socialist L.H. Greene who called for a united front against capitalism.²

Immediately after World War I, Pietermaritzburg had a taste of global labour unrest. In 1920, 150 Africans downed tools for two days over an unsuccessful wage claim; in 1921, 255 Indians in the footwear industry were out for seventeen days demanding that five colleagues who refused to join their union be dismissed. This was also unsuccessful, although an offensive managerial notice was removed. Other post-war strikes (7, 18 and 64 days) involved painters and construction workers and it is likely that some of the strikers were from the coloured community that provided a significant proportion of the city's artisans.³ From 1923, Indians were members of the Pietermaritzburg Municipal Workers Union, but this organisation was apparently defunct by 1930.⁴

During the 1920s the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) under the leadership of A.W.G. Champion was active in the Natal Midlands, particularly Estcourt, Umvoti and Weenen magistracies, although it was motivated

by land hunger and a 'mass movement of the dispossessed more than a [trade] union'. Most protestors were farm labour tenants.⁵ However, the ICU had a presence in most Natal towns and unrest involving its followers reached a peak in 1927–8, including desecration of graves at Greytown. The resultant white backlash involved an attempt to burn down the Pietermaritzburg ICU hall, which Clements Kadalie apparently abandoned in the face of the mob. Rural areas were under extreme economic and climatic stress with a pre-colonial economy assaulted by a new capitalist order backed by restrictive legislation. Pan-Zulu, proto-nationalist sentiment and millenarian religion were added to this volatile situation. The ICU fell apart over ideological disagreement and mismanagement.⁶

From the mid-1930s until the 1940s, 27 unions under the auspices of the Communist Party of South Africa operated in Natal on behalf of African and Indian workers. While legal, they were excluded from statutory rights; and the extent of their operation in the Pietermaritzburg area is obscure. The Natal Liquor and Catering Trade Employees Union had a multiracial membership in 1941 and a uniform wage for qualified hotel staff. Indian workers also benefited from union-negotiated wage rates in the furniture and printing industries. On the other hand, Indians were excluded from union membership in the building industry.⁷ Eighty-five strikes involving black workers took place in Natal from 1930 to 1950, but only a few of them appear to have affected the Midlands.⁸ The 163 members of the Leather Workers Union involved in a three-day strike at a footwear factory in Pietermaritzburg in January 1936 included over 100 black workers and all 35 strikers in a one-day

dispute at Henley Dam in June 1939 were black. Strikes during World War II were met by regulations gazetted in 1942 and 1944 as war measures, but only after black workers in the construction industry in Pietermaritzburg and at a food canning factory at Estcourt had walked off the job in 1942 in protest at price inflation.⁹ In the aftermath of World War II there was a small surge of strikes in the Midlands: the power station at Colenso (150 workers in January 1947), a milk products factory at Estcourt (140 strikers in August 1947) and a food processing factory in the same town (74 workers in March 1948).¹⁰

The Masters and Servants Act was aptly named, and its message very clear: African workers were essentially servants, subject to the whim of white masters. Described by Colin Bundy as feudal and punitive, the Act confused production and service. For instance, white employers were able to determine the rules so that workers could be forced to make tea and wash cars under constant *baasskap* and the threat of arbitrary dismissal. The Act criminalised contract breaking, treating strikers as deserters, and was repealed only in October 1974.¹¹ However, while the Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA) of 1924 required registration of unions and excluded Africans from the definition of employee, unions were simply described as associations of persons.¹² Nor did the ICA make African unions illegal and as long as they had applied for registration they were legitimate. Importantly, in terms of the Wage Act of 1925 an unregistered association of African employees could request an investigation leading to a gazetted, binding determination, although it had no right of representation. On the other hand the Native Administration

Act (1927, particularly its hostility clause) and amendments allowed for the suppression of African trade union meetings.¹³ Africans aspiring to exercise trade union rights clearly occupied a highly ambiguous space.

Howard Ringrose classified Natal's trade unions in the crucial year of 1948. Craft unions, represented for example by the Pietermaritzburg Tramway and Motor Employees Union, remained strong and by definition excluded Africans. General unions, such as the African General Labourers Union spanning a number of trades or industries, were disallowed by the ICA, but operated among workers excluded by race from registered unions. Some industrial unions, such as the South African Typographical Union (SATU), had parallel structures for African workers that provided for negotiation rights. The last were the most durable structures, although their effectiveness is debatable.

In 1946, Ringrose estimated there were a dozen African trade unions in Natal, but the fact that they were unaccounted for nationally by the Council for Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU founded in 1942) suggests that they were relatively weak.¹⁴ The Natal Federation of African Trade Unions (NFATU) had been established in 1943 by Jacob Nyawose with a membership of ten unions most notably representing commercial and distributive workers, iron, steel and metal workers, and hotel, flats and tea room workers. NFATU's ideology was anti-Indian, anti-communist and assertive of African rights. By 1944, according to Harry Gwala, five of the unions were active in Pietermaritzburg with the Commercial and Distributive Workers Union present in Ladysmith. However, NFATU had ceased to exist by 1948, its 'unions little

more than paper organizations'.¹⁵

In the early 1950s the African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union of South Africa had a branch in Pietermaritzburg, but as Ringrose points out it led a 'very precarious existence'. Subscriptions from poorly paid workers were difficult to extract and office premises hard to secure. Most unions survived as local organisations and there were far too many of them to be influential. Some were fictitious, consisting of opportunists who operated from borrowed addresses under grand names, charging a fee to write letters for aggrieved African workers that had scant chance of any outcome.¹⁶

The 1951 report of the Industrial Legislation (Botha) Commission set up earlier by the Smuts government, recommended recognition and control of African unions under separate legislation. This would replace the existing situation 'unrecognized officially by the Government and ignored by most employers'. The national union federation, the South African Trades and Labour Council (SATLC), was severely divided over the issue of African unions, but in any case its local branch in Pietermaritzburg was discontinued in 1947.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Federated Chambers of Industry advocated relaxation of influx control and 'full, statutory recognition of African trade unions', preferring to deal with organised labour.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the National Party government feared the political potential of African unions and opted for severe control. The Native Labour Act (1953) redefined employee in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA, 1953) by excluding Africans.¹⁹ Although their unions were not prohibited, they were de-legitimised by a three-tier structure of elected works councils, regional

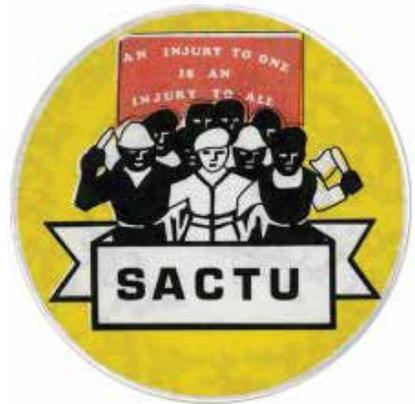
native labour commissions and a Native Labour Board. Works councils were so distrusted that only 24 statutory bodies were to be set up by 1969 while from 1955 the Wage Board was no longer obliged to follow up complaints by African workers. An amendment to the ICA (1956) prohibited mixed, registered unions, requiring them to have separate branches and meetings; and a further amendment (1959) disallowed the collection of union dues from Africans: by an 'avalanche of legislation [the State] politically disorganis[ed] the working class'.²⁰

On 26 June 1950 a work stayaway called by the African National Congress (ANC) was well supported throughout Natal, but this tactic was then abandoned in favour of passive resistance.²¹ The Howick Rubber Workers Union (HRWU) was founded in 1951 and registered in 1952, shortly before the National Party version of labour relations was imposed. It was affiliated to the SATLC with David Sewdan as its chairperson and Harry Gwala its secretary. In November 1951 a dispute was declared on behalf of its multiracial membership – 153 Indian, 32 coloured and two African – and application made for a conciliation board. This was rejected, as was a request for arbitration in 1952, although by then the HRWU represented 730 workers. The reactionary response of the employer, Sarmcol, was to invite unhappy employees to leave and it tried to set up a company union. After another unsuccessful application for a conciliation board, inconclusive negotiations took place, and an agreement was established on wages and benefits.²²

Apartheid South Africa presented black workers with two options: parallel unions overseen by their white

counterparts affiliated to the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUC-SA, founded in 1954); or independent unions.²³ The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), part of the Congress movement, accommodated the latter, 33 of them at its founding in March 1955. Some of them operated in the Natal Midlands including the now 750-strong HRWU represented at the inaugural meeting by M. Pillay; together with two of its most notable individual unionists, Harry Gwala and Moses Mabhida, both of them communists.²⁴ Mabhida, active among Pietermaritzburg distributive workers in the early 1950s when working for a co-operative, was the assistant secretary of the Pietermaritzburg ANC branch and ordered by the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953 to concentrate on union work. He was moved to Durban in 1954 to organise railway workers.²⁵

Gwala had been organising among Pietermaritzburg distributive, trade, building, chemical, and brick and tile workers since the mid-1940s. After a Durban interlude in 1948 with textile workers, he returned the following year and was involved with Howick rubber and Pietermaritzburg municipal employees. In the mid-1950s bus and laundry workers were being organised, with difficulty according to Mabhida because many of them were rural migrants. There is a certain Pimpernel quality to Gwala's life story, which is difficult to pin down, and he is generally described as elusive. It is believed, for example, that he organised the Pietermaritzburg SACTU local branch after its provisional establishment in 1956, although he was a listed person from 1952 under the Suppression of Communism Act.



From 1954 to 1958 Gwala worked at Edendale Hospital from which he was dismissed for distributing SACTU pamphlets. He had been able to resume organising at Sarmcol and among bakery workers, but by the late 1950s Gwala was excluded from Sarmcol and had to hold meetings under nearby trees. The plant was considered significant enough to be monitored carefully by the police Special Branch (SB) and visited by Mabhida and Oliver Tambo. Gwala was remembered by legions of workers as a crucial activist, but precise details are sparse. The SACTU local branch was functioning in 1960, but suffered a setback with Gwala's detention under the State of Emergency. He was subsequently rebanned in 1961 and 1962 and on 11 June 1964 was sentenced to eight years in prison for Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) activity. Moses Bhengu took over, but he in turn was banned. The collapse of the local branch in 1962 is attributed to this banning, leading to financial assistance from Durban. Locals at Estcourt and Ladysmith presumably suffered the same fate. Felix Ngcobo attempted to keep the Rubber and Cable Workers Union (RCWU) alive in the face of police intimidation. Others involved with SACTU in

Pietermaritzburg were Anthony Xaba, William Khanyile and Joel Kunene.²⁶

SACTU, particularly strong in the metal and related industries, had considerable influence in the Pietermaritzburg region. By the late 1950s Sarmcol employees at Howick were members of the RCWU, apparently simply known as 'Gwala's union'. Some of their reputed militancy was rhetorical, such as the production of stickers reading 'Rubber burns'.²⁷ In 1960 there were 1 200 members at Sarmcol, rising to 1 500 in 1962, and during the national stay-at-home called by the All-In Conference of 29–31 March 1961 the factory was closed for three days with all its workers absent.²⁸ The works committee was rejected but increases of 75c to R1.50 per week were awarded. Rosenthal records that the RCWU unsuccessfully campaigned for recognition by Sarmcol in mid-1962 and in August of that year the Wages Board started an investigation. Delay was in the spirit of the times and it was not until February 1965 that it approved a new wage scale and a pension fund for African workers.²⁹ Other sectors affected by the 1961 stayaway were transport and the municipality where absenteeism was as high as 70%, but SACTU failed to capitalise on this support. Unions active in the Pietermaritzburg area at this point were the Cement, Quarry and Lime Workers Union, the Distributive and Allied Workers Union, the Laundry Workers Union, the Municipal Workers Union, the Railway Workers Union and the General Workers Union.³⁰

SACTU later attracted much criticism from within the labour movement for allowing its campaigns, such as demands for a Pound-a-Day (a three-day stayaway, 14–16 April 1958, well-organised in Pietermaritzburg) and work overalls,

to be turned into political crusades such as the anti-pass campaign and bus and potato boycotts. Workers were signed up in large numbers without sufficient organisational backing, unions failed to deliver, and membership faltered.³¹ By 1966 it was inoperative as a union federation, many of its members recruited by MK and living in exile, [and] its surviving internal supporters subject to 'relentless persecution'.³²

TUCSA had emerged from the remnants of the SATLC, which had imploded in 1947 over its non-racial constitution. It was to employ liberal rhetoric and exercise tactical expediency in countering SACTU and the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA) before the mid-1960s; trying to stem the exodus of right-wing unions and protect the position of white, coloured and Indian workers. This was one of the reasons it championed higher wages for Africans, the 'rate for the job' being a means to protect differentials at a time of job fragmentation. In 1962 it opened its membership to Africans, only to close it again in 1969.³³ David Lewis characterises TUCSA as politically centrist with a tendency to token opposition and legal compliance, pragmatism and paternalism.³⁴

In the early 1970s the industrial make-up of Pietermaritzburg was 30% metal and engineering, 25% leather and footwear (its factories dominated by TUCSA-affiliated unions) and 20% timber, wood and paper. The remainder presumably included textiles since 23 factories employing 10 000 workers were recorded in central Natal attracted by cheap, quiescent, high turnover labour that required little training and a large local market. Allan Hirsch cites the textile industry as a classic apartheid

example of capital's manipulation of race, deskilling and migrant labour that involved a visceral antipathy to trade unions.³⁵

The Durban (and Pietermaritzburg) moment, 1973³⁶

Internal anti-apartheid activity, black trade unionism included, reached its nadir in the mid- to late-1960s. By now SACTU had minimal effective presence within the country, although its past record was not forgotten and remained influential: Mabhida was well remembered and had considerable residual support.³⁷ An unlikely influence on the revival of unionism emerged from radical white university students. Spurned by the Black Consciousness movement's South African Students Organisation (SASO), influenced by new, fiercely anti-Leninist trends in Western Marxism and in some cases spurred by Christian belief, in the absence of any appropriate left-wing political structure they committed themselves to labour issues, promotion of workplace democracy and opposition to exploitative, racial capitalism.

There was also the influence of University of Natal (Durban) political philosopher Richard Turner, who promoted the concept of participative democracy in all institutions as an extension of a Sartrean view of society – a function of individual, ethical choices. He believed in the possibility of an alternative society and saw the factory floor as the place where Africans wielded considerable potential power.³⁸ Turner was banned in February 1973 and assassinated on 8 January 1978.

Sakhela Buhlungu puts the number of white union activists at about 60 and their ideology as workerism – grass-roots democracy from the shop floor.

The analytical, advisory, media and organisational skills and knowledge they brought to the labour movement were considerable and largely accepted by black workers, although there was some recurrent resentment and occasional use of the term 'intellectual' in a pejorative sense. After their role in campus-based wages commissions (the first was set up in Durban in March 1971 and the second probably in Pietermaritzburg) some former white students were appointed to paid positions in emergent unions. The precise influence of wages commissions is debatable, but Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton argue that 'A large part of the groundwork for the formation of worker organizations in Natal ... came from [them]'. And one of workerism's most important influences was to entrench the principle of non-racialism.³⁹

There were other powerful factors in play: memories of SACTU's campaigns to provide historical continuity; black theology (some unionists had church leadership roles) and black consciousness (Strini Moodley worked briefly for Harriet Bolton of the Garment Workers Industrial Union, GWIU); church activism around labour issues such as the Urban Training Project (UTP) and involvement of the Young Christian Workers (YCW, Roman Catholic); the influence of a handful of TUCSA dissidents; Zulu ethnic nationalism; as well as traditional inputs from praise singers and the long-standing communal practices of burial societies and *stokvels*.⁴⁰

Black factory workers, in the view of Buhlungu, showed 'courage and heroism ... [against] enormous odds'. Ultimately, there was an element of anti-apartheid protest about union activism, an expression of lived experience.⁴¹ A contemporary survey identified

worker realisation that problems were 'socially and politically determined'.⁴² The research of student activists publicised the shocking conditions suffered by workers; in particular declining real wages, excessive hours (a 46-hour week in the textile industry), unacceptable behaviour from supervisors (particularly in spoken communication), dehumanising conditions, and little prospect of advancement regardless of performance. Wages commissions also popularised the concept of the poverty datum line (PDL), which was to dominate union wage demands and media coverage of them in the 1970s. But workers had a low opinion of existing trade unions. An interview with the veteran Durban GIU official, Harriet Bolton, revealed the ambiguous position of TUCSA especially its paternalism, self-interested reform image and the fact that affiliation had been accepted by only a handful of small African unions. Bolton called on them to deregister.⁴³ In 1969 TUCSA, under pressure from government and most craft unions and reputedly threatened by the SB, had expelled its African unions, although it reversed this decision in 1973.⁴⁴

There is no doubt that the Durban strikes were a key moment in South African history: 'that January [1973] morning changed the factory world';⁴⁵ and '[w]ithin a decade, South Africa's trade unions had significantly altered the balance of power between government and opposition.'⁴⁶ So, arguably, they changed the political world, too: 'Not until ... the resurgence of the independent trade union movement, did the movement for liberation turn the tide and gain the upper hand against the National Party regime.'⁴⁷ Although 'a definitive moment in [South African] labor history',⁴⁸ they were technically

not strikes, but work stoppages with workers remaining on site for tactical, legal reasons.

They have also been portrayed as spontaneous and unexpected, although this was largely a perception held by government and capital. There had, after all, been precursors: stoppages at Isipingo and Clairwood in June 1971 and the dock strikes by Durban stevedores of 1972. David Hemson points out that management had been warned and the resultant confusion was a consequence of a lack of effective trade union representation.⁴⁹ An atmosphere of spontaneity was created by a lack of structures and designated leaders, piecemeal, organic and ad hoc developments, all in part a means to evade victimisation.

Most Natal workers regarded themselves as Zulu and an element of such consciousness was evident in the cry 'Usuthu!' and the involvement of paramount chief Goodwill Zwelithini. Significant numbers of workers subsequently identified with Inkatha when it was relaunched in 1975, possibly in part because the KwaZulu bantustan government had shown some sympathy for the strikes. Tom Lodge highlights a collective realisation of worker power, a 'new consciousness and confidence among African workers' amid the breakdown of job reservation and the increasing importance of the black semi-skilled workforce.⁵⁰ But why Durban? This question has yet to be satisfactorily answered.

The Natal Employers Association adopted a more severe anti-worker stance than that evident among the media, public or even the State (including the SB who surprisingly denied the involvement of agitators), and questioned the PDL wage of R19.30 per week. The

growing exception was a small number of managers from multi-national companies, perhaps better informed by coverage such as Adam Raphael's reports in the British newspaper the *Guardian*.⁵¹ By comparison, there were surprisingly high levels of support for black workers among whites in general – 60% of English- and 45% of Afrikaans-speakers according to a survey by Lawrence Schlemmer – and good press coverage reinforcing general opinion that worker conditions were intolerable. The security forces were notably restrained until municipal workers broadened the reach of the strike.⁵² Between management and workers, however, there existed in many firms an atmosphere of mutual contempt. Employers persisted in their belief in unsupported and discredited works committees that were tightly controlled and unable to deal with wages.⁵³ However, the demand for labour meant that African workers were no longer as expendable as they had been. The largely symbolic Black Labour Relations Regulation Act (1973) extended very limited rights to strike and access to industrial councils.⁵⁴

The Natal Midlands was on the fringes of the Durban moment, but three strikes were related to it. On 8 February 1973 one hundred workers came out at Goodhope Pipe Factory and 320 at Ferralloys, Cato Ridge. Four days later 80 workers downed tools at Alex Carriers over a wage claim and the police were called.⁵⁵ In Pietermaritzburg, 24% of workers were earning R10 or less per week, compared with 20% in the Durban-Pinetown region and a national average of 31.6%.⁵⁶ Harry Gwala, released from Robben Island in 1972 and running a laundry business, 'played a leading role in mobilising resources and recruiting activists into the emerging

unions', but he was banned again for five years.⁵⁷

As in Durban, one of the catalysts of industrial action was the Students Wages Commission based on the local campus of the University of Natal and founded in 1972 as a branch of NUSWEL, the welfare arm of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Jointly funded by NUSAS and the local Student Representative Council (SRC), it had 30 members with a hard core of twelve, and was initially chaired by Mark du Bois.⁵⁸ Its activities started with concern about the remuneration and general conditions of the 354 unskilled workers employed by the university: in January 1972 it was calculated that it would take seven years to reach the PDL income (for a 5.5 person family) of R71 per month. Pietermaritzburg students had resolved at a mass meeting to increase fees by R10 per annum to supplement the wages of workers. The latter were encouraged to form an association and their rights were enumerated in a pamphlet. The problems, it was concluded, were caused by outsourcing, and the campus vice-principal was called upon to handle all dismissals.⁵⁹

Looking further afield, the Pietermaritzburg Wages Commission exposed the scandal of the wattle farms of the Natal Midlands mist belt where workers received wages of R3.17 per week that could sink as low as R2.06. Rations and housing were also provided, but often inadequately. Two particular examples were the Saligna Forestry and Development Company at Eston owned by Courtaulds and Midland Wattle Estates, owned by NTE a subsidiary of Slater Walker. The involvement of British holding companies led to overseas media coverage, a British Parliamentary inquiry and resultant improvements.

Submissions were also made to wage boards. In April 1973 unskilled labour weekly wage rates for Pietermaritzburg for men started at R12 and rose to R14 by the third year of employment. For women they ranged from R9.60 to R11.20. Many of these workers were supporting rural families.⁶⁰

The relevant SRC portfolio for 1972–1973 was held by Mike Murphy with Carol Adams as the Pietermaritzburg Wages Commission secretary. John Morrison and John Aitchison helped to produce *Isisebenzi* (The Worker), which had a print run of 8 000 copies. There is evidence that the Pietermaritzburg Wages Commission was one of the more efficient and productive.⁶¹ These commissions were short-lived, partly because their most dedicated and enthusiastic members moved into the emerging trade unions and a number attracted the attention of the SB: from the Pietermaritzburg group, Jeanette Cunningham-Brown (later Murphy), by then a Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) local organiser, was banned in February 1974 along with Moses Mbanjwa and Moses Ndlovu.⁶²

The local Wages Commission became involved in the General Workers Factory Benefit Fund (GWFBF), founded in Durban on 9 September 1972 at the suggestion of Harriet Bolton to provide social security for workers in the clothing and furniture industries of Durban and Pietermaritzburg: medical aid, funeral benefits and legal advice. This laid the foundation for emerging trade unions. In Pietermaritzburg the GWFBF operated at Scottish Cables, Alcan and Sarmcol and by the end of 1973 had 10 000 members, sufficient to think in terms of unionism. However, on 25 May 1974 the SB raided GWFBF offices in both Durban and

Pietermaritzburg alleging that it was an unregistered friendly society. Records were confiscated, never to be returned.⁶³

The wages commissions contributed to a growing awareness of economic oppression and ‘student influence [was] considerable’ in the new wave of industrial activism. The risks for students were great given the lurking and malign presence of the Schlebusch Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations and a police attempt to tie them directly to the 1973 strikes.⁶⁴ In Durban, where academic activists were involved in the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE, founded in May 1973), the need for worker education to counter managerial indifference and exploitation was also seen as an opportunity to challenge the business-orientated University of Natal to become more relevant to society as a whole. A number of Pietermaritzburg unionists were enrolled for IIE courses. The influential *South African Labour Bulletin* was its publishing arm and would survive the IIE’s demise in 1976.⁶⁵

Industrial action in the 1970s

The strikes of the 1970s were generally of short duration. Workers lacked the resources to stay out for long and disputes largely related to wages.⁶⁶ They were also illegal, but this was a diminishing deterrent. Democratic practice among workers was crucial: management found it difficult to drive a wedge between workers and elected, accountable leaders who could not easily be vilified as ‘agitators’. The church played an important role and early union meetings were held at Edendale’s Lay Ecumenical Centre. MAWU was founded on 28 April 1973 in Pietermaritzburg as a direct consequence of the Durban strikes, emerging from roots in

the GWFBF. Its benefit cards were soon exchanged for union membership: the Pietermaritzburg branch of MAWU was established on 9 June 1973 and within a year it had 1 444 members and two full-time organisers. Surveys indicated that the township grapevine and factory gate enrolment were the main recruitment drivers together with clandestine plant-by-plant activity.⁶⁷

Enrolment of members at Sarmcol (Howick) and Prestige Engineering (Pietermaritzburg) was regarded as particularly noteworthy as these firms were 'previously thought to be impenetrable'. The attraction was plant-level bargaining that extracted wage increases three times greater than those accepted by industrial councils.⁶⁸ The South African Boilermakers Society (SABS), under its general secretary Tom Murray, offered to assist MAWU in a remarkable sign of changed attitude by at least one craft union. It had been recruiting coloured workers at Alcan's Pietermaritzburg plant while MAWU was signing up Africans. Alcan's exemption from the metal industries council agreement made possible a bargaining forum that included Africans. SABS pushed for a house agreement under the auspices of the council that would be legally binding. Although this led nowhere, SABS support 'enabled MAWU to remain a presence at Alcan'. MAWU was also assisted by the secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, although not by the union itself.⁶⁹ Generally, management continued to favour TUCSA-affiliated parallel unions run on top-down principles and regarded shop floor democracy and plant-level bargaining as potential threats.⁷⁰

The Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC) was

founded in January 1974 at MAWU's Pietermaritzburg office in response to a need for collective union action. Initially, it comprised MAWU and the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), representing the two sectors that dominated the Durban strikes, and was later joined by the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).⁷¹ It was seen in some quarters as apolitical, economistic and workerist, a promoter of narrow industrial unionism. This characterisation became rooted as one side of a schism with resultant antagonism as TUACC influence spread to Johannesburg in conjunction with the Industrial Aid Society (IAS). The divide was centred on organisational method; the role of industrial education; the depth of factory and shop steward organisation and mandates required for unionisation; and the very nature of worker politics.⁷²

One of TUACC's challenges was to handle the tensions between the independent unions and the KwaZulu government, especially given the strained relationship between Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Barney Dladla, Minister of Labour, who was regarded as close to the workers and later served TUACC. There was press speculation that he would lead an opposition labour party. His break with Buthelezi duly came in 1974, the latter having called for legal recognition of black unions while opposed to strikes.⁷³ Dladla 'probably represented the last chances of a self-consciously pro-worker political direction from the KwaZulu authorities, and later the Inkatha movement' although he was not 'an unambiguous spokesman for worker interests'.⁷⁴ From outside the country the Stalinist SACP opportunistically questioned the

legitimacy of any trade union activity since South Africa was a ‘fascist state’.⁷⁵

The Pietermaritzburg TUACC office was in Thomas Street and its dominant personality was John Makhathini, a senior operator at Scottish Cables; a main recruiting ground for MAWU together with Sarmcol and Huletts. By 1976 he was a full-time organiser. In the TUACC office he built a strong team that included Jay Naidoo, Petros Ngcobo and Rob and Lyn Lambert. Makhathini had originally been aligned with Inkatha, but as an adaptable bridge builder he was a typical foundation member of the emerging union movement.⁷⁶ Apart from ex-Wages Commission students and TUCSA liberals common to emerging unions, the Pietermaritzburg set-up also featured the Black Sash whose new advice office took on a large volume of union work. The internal politics of Sash in the Natal Midlands meant that it was one of the last regions to establish an advice office (on 20 February 1975), but it was the only one to operate in such close collaboration with the emerging unions, described by volunteer Nalini Naidoo as a ‘wonderful relationship ... symbiotic’. Workers joining the union could immediately be referred for assistance, mainly with correspondence, and the empowering experience of dealing with grievances was significant. Naidoo sums up: ‘FOSATU [Federation of South African Trade Unions] ... owes a debt of gratitude to the Black Sash’. With the bannings of 1976, the advice office took on some union administrative activity and the relationship lasted until June 1980. Feeling that it was doing too much union-related work now that African trade unionism had been

recognised in legislation, the advice office then moved.⁷⁷

The Conac Engineering dispute, at a Swiss-owned plant in Pietermaritzburg in October 1975, is indicative of this period. MAWU members, protesting about weekend overtime, found the liaison committee powerless in the face of management, the departments of Labour and Bantu Administration, and the police. Overtime in excess of ten hours per week was in breach of the Industrial Council agreement, but this did not prevent dismissal of seven workers for their refusal to work more. It transpired that up to 38 hours had been recorded. Management also disbanded the liaison committee and decreed that the new one should not meet workers. An apparent climbdown by the company was followed by an illegal lockout and 64 more workers were fired. MAWU’s attempts to get the Department of Labour involved proved fruitless and union officials were branded as agitators. Department interaction with workers, who refused to acknowledge dismissal or collect their pay, was shadowed by the police. The Industrial Council was also obstructive, refusing to disclose, on spurious grounds of confidentiality, whether Conac held an overtime exemption. The workers involved were



threatened with removal under the pass laws. This dispute 'ended in total defeat for the workers' in spite of Conac's illegal activity, the Department of Labour disclaiming interest because MAWU was unregistered. This scenario was to be 'repeated ... throughout the decade.' It was not until the early 1980s that the emerging unions were able to insist upon 'the rule of law in the factories'.⁷⁸

In August 1976 there was an apparent strike of municipal dustmen, three of whom were charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act, but no prosecution was pursued.⁷⁹ Amid labour unrest following the Soweto Uprising of June 1976 a number of SACTU-linked activists were detained and the following year convicted in the Pietermaritzburg ANC trial, in some cases sentenced to life imprisonment: they included Gwala (who had already served a term on Robben Island), Anthony Xaba, John Nene, Matthews Meyiwa, Zakhele Mdlalose and Azariah Ndebele.⁸⁰ However, the fact that the convictions were for recruiting for MK and sending people abroad for military training shows how far SACTU had moved away from trade union activity. One of the bannings of white intellectuals was that of Charles Simkins, an Economics lecturer on the University of Natal's Pietermaritzburg campus and a researcher for TUACC. In the bizarre fashion of apartheid South Africa, the week before his banning he was offered a job by the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council.⁸¹

There is about the history of the emerging unions an aura of heroism and pre-ordained triumph. Neither was evident at the time. Indeed, failure was anticipated; another unsuccessful attempt to launch African trade unionism. Strikes by Africans were still illegal, as were picketing and strike

pay while rights in the workplace remained minimal and the powers of the police were considerable.⁸² The period 1975–1977 was one of repression and general quiescence on the labour front. Management hostility remained a deterrent to union membership. Bantu labour officers proved ineffective, especially since some were reputedly undercover SB officers; all the more so when the Department of Labour, management and the police worked in concert, although this was not always the case.⁸³ This atmosphere of repression created added distance between the non-racial unions and Indian members of TUCSA affiliates.⁸⁴

However, it is significant that no trade union, not even the black consciousness aligned Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU), was proscribed in the great crackdown of October 1977, in part because it was the government's intention to institutionalise industrial conflict.⁸⁵ In November 1976 MAWU organisers were retrenched and with the remaining two banned, full-time staff were reduced to zero. But in the background there was among African workers a growing sense, in Steven Friedman's words, that 'labour relations [are] about power'; and of rights that posed a challenge to management, public and private sector. Union democracy had obtained a crucial toehold.⁸⁶ On 7 February 1979, 80 drivers from the Pietermaritzburg municipal transport department struck after a dismissal and riot and SB officers were reportedly present at the negotiations, which were also about wages. It was reported that drivers' supporters had threatened people walking to work.⁸⁷

The occasional buccaneering episode gave hope to the emerging unions. In Pietermaritzburg in the late 1970s the

TUCSA-affiliated National Union of Leather Workers (NULW) had 4 000 members spread across twenty tanning, leather and footwear factories. It ran a benefit fund, which dispensed funds for sick leave, but an elected official, A.C. Naicker of Austin Shoes, suspected misappropriation. His call for an investigation resulted in hostility from Puckree Gooriah, the NULW secretary, and Naicker's dismissal. He was blacklisted and then arrested for fundraising, at which point he approached FOSATU. Further investigation revealed collusion between factory and union and the fact that the NULW was illegally running a friendly society. A long battle to establish worker control through contested meetings and a court case culminated in a mass meeting at the Royal Showgrounds. Chaired by Brian Law it was called to elect a committee. The NULW was soundly defeated, but the triumph was short-lived. The South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) was not yet registered, so factory management and the NULW were able to block collection of worker contributions and the benefit fund folded. It was, nevertheless, a moral victory.⁸⁸

Following response to criticism of conditions in foreign-owned factories, and introduction in the United States of the Sullivan manifesto in 1977, there was a 'contagious rash of codes'.⁸⁹ They were voluntary and difficult to monitor and, even where approved in principle, were not always honoured in practice. While Sullivan was largely concerned with desegregation, the European Economic Union code (also 1977) was particularly significant as it endorsed trade unionism. While the codes needed negotiation and worker input, both of which they conspicuously lacked, they

represented growing foreign scrutiny that influenced various government commissions and their thinking about the extension of rights to a permanent, but limited, African urban work force.⁹⁰

This was the context in which the Wiehahn Commission on African trade unionism sat in 1979, its recommendations designed to extend full union rights while tightly managing change. The resultant legislation initially omitted migrant workers, which made co-operation from the emergent unions impossible.⁹¹ That this was another watershed moment was testimony to the fact that for political and economic reasons black worker rights were no longer so marginal that they could be hampered by other considerations. Indeed, employers who expected business as usual after the Wiehahn reforms were in for a rude awakening from militancy that produced a rash of legal and illegal strikes.⁹² This was the very antithesis of Wiehahn's aim of insulating the economy from political conflict.⁹³

Birth of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU)

Emerging unions with their distinctive ideology of worker control and factory floor democracy affiliated to FOSATU in April 1979 at Hammanskraal in the Transvaal. Four of the thirteen founding unions were from TUACC in Natal and its first general secretary was Alec Erwin, a University of Natal Economics lecturer.⁹⁴ Its declared principles were non-racialism; worker control and leadership; factory floor strength and the shop steward system; broad-based, autonomous industrial unions; and tight financial control. It also proved to be pragmatic, accepting registration and involvement in community issues as long as its principles were not

infringed.⁹⁵ This proved a successful approach at a time when the State was seeking change in its relationship with African workers.

FOSATU was part of the system, but potentially distant from it should its principles be infringed; a particularly powerful position. Its pragmatism put aside ‘old shibboleths’, the ‘disastrous fetishism of illegality’ and the attitude that legal means were necessarily reactionary. Gradually, FOSATU accepted registration, industrial councils and the Industrial Court as means to win space and advance workers’ interests as long as basic beliefs, such as non-racialism, were not compromised. Indeed, it soon became evident that registration, albeit a Byzantine process, was a way to curb state power rather than ignoring it in syndicalist wishful thinking. Denial of registration to independent African unions had been an historical burden, so it was perverse to reject it when finally offered. In practice it legitimised unions, curbed managerial antipathy and allowed for stop order payments. It also quickly marginalised TUCSA’s parallel unions.⁹⁶ MAWU registered in April 1983, for example, after some delay, its membership now 30 000. That same year it joined the Industrial Council although for three years it refused to sign the annual agreement.⁹⁷ It had become ‘the most robust and politically militant FOSATU union.’⁹⁸ These were the industrial, non-racial, democratic shop floor-based unions that dominated labour activity in Pietermaritzburg and surrounds.

The credo of FOSATU was famously encapsulated in the address at its second congress at Hammanskraal on 10 April 1982 by general secretary Joe Foster. He argued that trade unionism was insufficient and a workers’ movement was

needed as part of the broad struggle.⁹⁹ As Friedman put it, an independent worker politics would override the ‘romanticism of the community’ and avoid decisions ‘taken around someone’s kitchen table’.¹⁰⁰ But this idea was quickly overwhelmed by events and the lure of populist politics as township insurgency and school boycotts increasingly affected the family life of unionists.¹⁰¹ In the words of Georgina Jaffee and Karen Jochelson, ‘increasing politicisation of economic demands’ created a ‘social movement unionism’.¹⁰² As far as it could, FOSATU took union tactics into townships like Imbali and Ashdown and tried to operate on its own terms.¹⁰³

Recognising the distinctive regional politics of Natal, FOSATU was wary of alienating workers who were also members of Inkatha, although it had disciplined pro-Inkatha union officials in the early 1980s.¹⁰⁴ In 1981 the Inkatha central committee criticised white FOSATU activists in Durban and Pietermaritzburg for exploiting African workers for political ends.¹⁰⁵ Predictably, FOSATU was also attacked by the vanguardist SACP as economistic and workerist, premised on the false belief (and certainly not one held by FOSATU) that political struggle grows from the point of production and the workplace is a main source of struggle.¹⁰⁶ FOSATU’s main rival, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), developed out of the black consciousness influenced UTP in Johannesburg in 1980. It had long advocated use of the government’s preferred system: fully elected works councils; or liaison committees on which workers could create a caucus.¹⁰⁷ Regarded as conservative in union matters, CUSA’s main preoccupation was exclusion of whites from

positions of influence. Its main strength continued to lie in the Transvaal, especially in the transport, chemicals and food industries.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, a range of community unions had little workplace strength, no shop stewards and few recognition agreements, but specialised in political rhetoric.

Government had taken the initiative to recognise and control the emergent unions: to establish a 'system of industrial legality' in which wage bargaining through industrial councils, strikes and use of the Industrial Court eventually became part of normality. By 1986 the abnormalities of job reservation and the pass laws were history. From 1982 onwards the Industrial Court assumed a right of interim reinstatement in dismissal and retrenchment complaints and started to build jurisprudence around unfair labour practice and employer responsibility based on objective and verifiable procedures that strengthened the power of strikes. It was another significant shift on the labour front, but political rights lagged far behind and this situation dragged unions into a broader role in which struggles over bus fares and rent increases were central.¹⁰⁹ A younger generation was increasingly embroiled in school boycotts.

By 1984, FOSATU consisted of 27 000 members in nine unions, seven of them active in Natal. Doug Hindson argued that FOSATU 'tends to operate in some respects like one large union' and pointed out that its industrial unions were the most successful in achieving worker unity across race, language and origin.¹¹⁰ It also successfully opposed government policy on pension preservation, forcing a retreat in 1981 and demonstrating that decisions could no longer simply be forced upon workers.¹¹¹ CUSA, a looser federation, had

twelve affiliates (ten in Natal, of which the Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union had a presence in Pietermaritzburg) with 10 000 members. Of the independent unions, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA with 5 000 Natal members) organised in national chain stores such as Checkers, Woolworths and OK Bazaars and at its 1984 conference in Pietermaritzburg started to open up membership to all black workers, a process finalised the following year. Organised by particularly astute officials, CCAWUSA used conciliation board machinery in 1983 to win a substantial pay rise at OK Bazaars and establish maternity agreements with a number of companies.¹¹² The BAWU, a federation with Black Consciousness origins, had members in the Natal Midlands region as did the General Workers Union (GWU). The Media Workers Association's Natal branch also had Black Consciousness leanings and 300 members. The activities of other independent unions and federations and of community unions are undocumented, presumably because they were not well represented.¹¹³

Overview

Prior to World War II, African trade unionism in the Pietermaritzburg region was severely constrained by government restrictions and a lack of numbers: the city lacked manufacturing activity and potential for collective action lay largely within the service industries. Employment opportunities were enjoyed by Indian and coloured workers while Africans were seen as a health hazard to be removed as far from the city's boundary as possible. The exception was the township of Sobantu, which accommodated Africans with

permanent urban residential rights often employed in white-collar jobs. Union activity as a whole was weak in the Pietermaritzburg region as a result of a limited industrial base. In spite of the existence of various loopholes there was no consistent effort by African trade unions to exploit them. Membership of unions seems in effect to have been as much a political statement as workplace mobilisation. Yet shortly after World War II both a government commission and organised business favoured limited union rights for Africans on the pragmatic grounds that dealing with established, representative organisations would reduce potential instability.

But in 1948 an extreme right-wing government took power in Pretoria. For the next 40 years apartheid laws would influence workplace relations and all other aspects of South African lives. Ironically, there was an upsurge of labour activity especially at the rubber factory in Howick driven by ANC-backed unregistered, independent unions and organisers some of whom had been members of the now-banned Communist Party of South Africa. From 1955, SACTU-affiliated unions, in spite of increasingly harsh legislation, had a significant impact on the area but failed to establish a strong platform for unionism because they were diverted by broader political objectives. Many of their leaders ended up in MK calling into question their commitment to workplace struggle. Lack of basic organisation was one characteristic of SACTU affiliates. Ongoing loyalty to individual leaders aside, the SACTU legacy was minimal even for the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) founded in December 1985.

The overall importance of the student wages commissions of the early

1970s remains debatable. But they had a significant role in the emergence of a new wave of independent unions that had a decisive impact on unionism and ultimately the political future of South Africa. And one of the most active commissions was based in Pietermaritzburg. In particular, it drew international attention to the gross exploitation of African workers. Furthermore, Wages Commission members promoted GWFBF membership so successfully that MAWU was founded in Pietermaritzburg in April 1973 and its local branch had within a year begun recruiting successfully in what had been regarded as infertile ground. MAWU offices hosted the umbrella body TUACC and Pietermaritzburg became a key centre for a workerist approach to trade unionism. The close involvement of the Black Sash Advice Office with TUACC, MAWU and the other emergent unions was both unique and symbolic of the continuation of a strong Pietermaritzburg tradition of non-racialism. This remained true of the working culture developed by FOSATU after it succeeded TUACC in April 1979.

The city became a stronghold for FOSATU's principled but pragmatic approach to trade unionism. FOSATU remains one of the few, and certainly the most effective, examples of independent trade unionism in South African history, rejecting political affiliation and carefully balancing shop floor democracy with labour law requirements and opportunities. However, the development of an independent worker politics remained a distant objective overwhelmed by the socio-political problems thrown up by protest in Pietermaritzburg's townships; while the increasing aggressive politics of Inkatha constantly posed a dilemma.

NOTES

- 1 Ringrose, Howard G., *Trade Unions in Natal* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 5, 7.
- 2 Desai, Ashwin and Vahed, Goolam, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860–1914* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2010), pp. 411–14.
- 3 Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, pp. 14–15, 16.
- 4 Padayachee, Vishnu, Vawda, Shahid and Tichmann, Paul, *Indian Workers and Trade Unions in Durban, 1930–1950* (Durban, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Durban-Westville, 1985), p. 201.
- 5 Baskin, Jeremy, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1991), p. 7; Bradford, Helen, ‘Strikes in the Natal Midlands: Landlords, labour tenants and the I.C.U.’, *Africa Perspective*, 22 (1983), pp. 3, 4, 12.
- 6 Bradford, Helen, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924–1930* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 132, 195, 207, 211; Friedman, Steven, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970–1984* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), pp. 14–16.
- 7 Burrows, H.R. (ed.), *Indian Life and Labour in Natal* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1943), pp. 15–16.
- 8 Padayachee, Vawda and Tichmann, *Indian Workers*, p. 83. For a comparative overview of black trade unions in the Transvaal and the Cape see Roux, Edward, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man’s Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2nd ed., 1964), pp. 326–42.
- 9 Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, pp. 24, 28, 30.
- 10 Padayachee, Vawda and Tichmann, *Indian Workers*, p. 87; Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, p. 32. Further afield in Natal there was also industrial action involving black workers at Ladysmith and Vryheid.
- 11 Von Holdt, Karl, *Transition From Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2003), pp. 33, 56; Bundy, Colin, ‘The abolition of the Masters and Servants Act’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 2(1), 1975, p. 46.
- 12 This was rectified in an amendment to the ICA in 1937 (Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, p. 26).
- 13 Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, pp. 17, 19, 22. The hostility clause made it an offence to ‘promote any feeling of hostility between Natives and Europeans’ and was loosely interpreted.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 38, 39, 48, 51, 52, 55, 57, 60–1. SATU also had a relatively accommodating attitude to Indian and coloured (including Mauritian and St Helena) membership. Other relatively flexible industrial unions in Natal were the Motor Industry Employees Union, the National Union of Commercial Travellers and the Amalgamated Society of Bricklayers. The Building Workers Industrial Union had one branch open to Indian workers.
- 15 Hirson, Baruch, ‘A trade union organizer in Durban: M.B. Yengwa, 1943–44’, *The Societies of South Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 16 (1990), p. 41.
- 16 Ringrose, *Trade Unions*, pp. 56–7, 58–60, 68, 79–80.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 67. SATLC’s heritage has been described as an amalgam of British craft unionism, radical East European Jewish activism and poor white Afrikaner anti-imperialism (Lewis, Jon, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924–55: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 179). It seems to have found no room for effective African unionism.
- 18 O’Meara, Dan, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983), p. 230.
- 19 De Villiers, Richard, ‘The Wiehahn Commission’, *Work in Progress*, 8 (1979), p. 7.
- 20 Joakimidis, Costas and Sitas, Ari, ‘A study of strikes in the 1970s: Part one’, *Work in Progress*, 6 (1978), p. 109.
- 21 Webster, Eddie, ‘Stay-aways and the black working class: Evaluating a strategy’, *Labour, Capital and Society*, 14(1), 1981, p. 14.
- 22 Bonnin, Deborah, ‘Class consciousness and conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940–1987: The case of the B.T.R. Sarmcol workers’ (M.Soc.Sci., University of Natal, Durban, 1987), pp. 141, 142, 144; Rosenthal, Eric, *The Sarmcol Story* (Howick, Sarmcol, 1981), pp. 160–1.
- 23 For the history of TUCSA’s attitude to black unions see Ensor, Linda, ‘Tucsa’s relationship with African trade unions: An attempt at control, 1954–1962’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 3(4), 1977, pp. 26–46.
- 24 Luckhardt, Ken and Wall, Brenda, *Organize or Starve!: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 245 (this is one of few sources on unions in the 1950s, but not entirely reliable); Bonnin, ‘Class, consciousness and conflict’, p. 145.

- 25 Kiloh, Margaret with Sibeko, Archie, *A Fighting Union: An Oral History of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, 1936–1988* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 2000), pp. 47–8; Moses Mbheki Mncane Mabhida was born on 14 March 1923 at Thornville. A school friend of Gwala, he joined the CPSA in 1942 and worked as a waiter, on the railway and in shops. He left South Africa in 1960, became effective second-in-command of MK and succeeded Moses Kotane in 1981 as the general secretary of the SACP (Lodge, Tom, ‘Moses Mabhida 1923–1986’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11(6), 1986, pp. 119–20).
- 26 Bonnin, ‘Class, consciousness and conflict’, pp. 138, 145, 147, 148, 150, 165–6; Feit, Edward, *Workers Without Weapons: The South African Congress of Trade Unions and the Organisation of the African Workers* (Hamden, Archon, 1975), pp. 54, 56.
- 27 Bonnin, ‘Class, consciousness and conflict’, p. 146; Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, p. 255.
- 28 Webster, ‘Stay-aways’, p. 38.
- 29 Rosenthal, *Sarmcol Story*, p. 169.
- 30 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!*, p. 255; Bonnin, ‘Class, consciousness and conflict’, pp. 146, 164.
- 31 Webster, Eddie, ‘Strikes in South Africa’, *Work in Progress*, 10 (1979), p. 38; Bonnin, ‘Class, consciousness and conflict’, pp. 145, 152–9.
- 32 Lewis, David, ‘Black workers and trade unions’, in Karis, Thomas G. and Gerhart, Gail M., *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990: Volume 5, Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013), p. 198. For a particularly damning assessment of SACTU’s failings and MK’s imperatives see Hepple, B. *Young Man with a Red Tie: A Memoir of Mandela and the Failed Revolution, 1960–1963* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013), pp. 108, 112.
- 33 Emdon, Erica, ‘Co-optation and control: TUCSA and the African unions in the sixties’, *Africa Perspective*, 25 (1984), pp. 41, 42, 45–7, 51, 52, 53.
- 34 Lewis, ‘Black workers’, pp. 199–200.
- 35 Hirsch, Allan, ‘An introduction to textile worker organisation in Natal’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 4(8), 1979, pp. 6, 8, 10, 37.
- 36 For general coverage of the Durban strikes see Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes, 1973* (Durban, Institute for Industrial Education, 1974; reprinted by Ravan Press, 1976); Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 37–68; Merrett, Christopher, ‘Durban’s crucial labour moment’, *Witness*, 18 March 2013.
- 37 Maré, Gerhard and Hamilton, Georgina, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the Politics of Loyal Resistance* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 77.
- 38 Webster, Eddie, ‘The impact of intellectuals on the labour movement’, *Transformation*, 18 (1992), p. 89; Nash, Andrew, ‘The moment of Western Marxism in South Africa’, in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F. (eds), *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the ‘New South Africa’* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003), pp. 97–9; Turner, Richard, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980).
- 39 Buhlungu, Sakhela, ‘Rebels without a cause of their own: The contradictory location of white officials in black unions in South Africa, 1973–94’, *Current Sociology*, 54(3), 2006, pp. 429–47; Buhlungu, Sakhela, *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), pp. 36, 39–41; Maré and Hamilton, *Appetite for Power*, p. 120.
- 40 Buhlungu, *Paradox of Victory*, pp. 24–5, 27, 28, 31–2.
- 41 Ibid., pp. 21, 35.
- 42 Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 118.
- 43 Hemson, David, ‘Textile workers want a living wage’, *Reality*, 4(3), 1972, p. 13; Murphy, Mike, ‘What the workers think’, *Reality*, 4(5), 1972, pp. 5, 6; Hemson, David, ‘Labour aristocrats and African workers’, *Reality*, 4(5), 1972, pp. 7–9.
- 44 Baskin, *Striking Back*, p. 17; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 73–4, 79–80, 87–8. The firing of Bolton is also attributed to the SB.
- 45 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 40. For insider accounts of the Durban Moment by Halton Cheadle and Dan O’Meara see Keniston, Billy, *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013), pp. 119–25.
- 46 Lodge, Tom, ‘Resistance and reform, 1975–1994’, in Ross, Robert, Kelk Mager, Anne and Nasson, Bill (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 2, 1885–1994* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 409.
- 47 Couper, Scott Everett, ‘“An embarrassment to the Congresses?”: The silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the production of ANC history’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35(2), 2009, p. 341.
- 48 Lewis, ‘Black workers’, p. 195.

- 49 Hemson, David, 'Usuthu!', *Reality*, 5(1), 1973, p. 6.
- 50 Lodge, 'Resistance and reform', pp. 410, 412, 416.
- 51 Lewis, 'Black workers', p. 212.
- 52 Brown, Julian, 'The Durban strikes of 1973: Political identities and the management of protest', in Beinart, William and Dawson, Marcelle C. (eds), *Popular Politics and Resistance Movements in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2010), pp. 31–51. The police played a relatively restrained role, perhaps realising that they could not take on the workforces of entire factories, although their presence was used to intimidate.
- 53 Hemson, 'Usuthu!', p. 8; Feit, *Workers Without Weapons*, pp. 178–9.
- 54 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 53.
- 55 Joakimidis, Costas and Sitas, Ari, 'A study of strikes in the 1970s: Part two', *Work in Progress*, 7 (1979), p. 31.
- 56 Hemson, 'Usuthu!', p. 7. In Durban the average weekly wage was R13 (Baskin, *Striking Back*, p. 17).
- 57 Buhlungu, *Paradox of Victory*, p. 46; Bonnin, 'Class, consciousness and conflict', p. 173.
- 58 Du Bois, Mark, 'The role of the wages commissions', *Reality*, 5(4), 1973, p. 4.
- 59 Jen Curtis (NUSAS), untitled and undated document summarising the work of university wages commissions, in UKZN Archives S 2/7/1–3 (SRC Correspondence, 1969–1971).
- 60 Du Bois, 'The role of the wages commissions', pp. 4, 5, 7.
- 61 'Report by John Frankish, chairman, NUSAS Wages Commission, University of Cape Town, June 29, 1973', in Karis, Thomas G. and Gerhart, Gail M., *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990: Volume 5, Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013), p. 616.
- 62 Forrest, Kally, *Metal That Will Not Bend: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980–1995* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011), p. 15; Bonnin, 'Class, consciousness and conflict', p. 183. The bannings were described as a 'rash of madness' ('The government and the black worker' [editorial], *Reality*, 6(1), 1974, p. 2). The editorial went on to ask: does South Africa want poverty?
- 63 Coan, Stephen, 'John Morrison (1946–2014)', *Natalia*, 44 (2014), pp. 89–90; Du Bois, 'The role of the wages commissions', p. 6; Bonnin, 'Class, consciousness and conflict', p. 175.
- 64 'Student and worker' [editorial], *Reality*, 5(4), 1973, pp. 2–3.
- 65 Fisher, Foszia, 'The Institution [sic] for Industrial Education', *Reality*, 6(1), 1974, p. 19; Maree, Johann, 'The Institute for Industrial Education and worker education', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8(9), 1984, pp. 77–91.
- 66 Joakimidis and Sitas, 'A study of strikes in the 1970s: Part two', pp. 32, 33.
- 67 Buhlungu, *Paradox of Victory*, pp. 28, 50; Webster, Eddie, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 131–3; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 99; Ensor, Linda, 'A look at the open trade unions', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 1(3), 1974, pp. 46–8; Hirsch, 'An introduction to textile worker organisation', p. 37. Alpheus Mthethwa of the GWFBF was the first MAWU secretary.
- 68 Sitas, Ari, 'MAWU: Rapid growth in Natal', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8(8)9(1) 1983, p. 1. Ten years later MAWU would reverse this attitude in the belief that an industry-wide approach was necessary to guard workers' interests (Webster, Eddie, 'MAWU and the industrial council: A comment', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8(5), 1983, pp. 14–19).
- 69 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 109; Feit, *Workers Without Weapons*, p. 194. Murray had been critical of negotiations that depressed African wages while leaving employers to fragment jobs (Emdon, 'Co-optation and control', p. 58).
- 70 Cooper, Carole, 'The established trade union movement', *South African Review*, 1 (1983), p. 209; Benjamin, Paul, 'Trade unions and the Industrial Court', *South African Review*, 4 (1987), p. 254. However, the Barlow group favoured plant-level bargaining as local conditions varied so greatly (Leger, Jean and Webster, Eddie, 'Introduction: Labour at the crossroads', *South African Review*, 5 (1989), p. 253).
- 71 NUTW was the first independent African union to gain recognition, at Smith and Nephew, Pinetown in July 1974 (Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 94).
- 72 For a succinct explanation of workerism and populism in trade union politics see Naidoo, Beverley, *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2012), pp. 82–3; Moss, Glenn, *The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2014), pp. 151, 183.
- 73 Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, p. 138; Baskin, *Striking Back*, p. 329; 'Trade unions and KwaZulu politics', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 1(3), 1974, pp. 3–4.

- 74 Maré and Hamilton, *Appetite for Power*, p. 123. Dladla was a complex man of many parts having belonged to the ANC and the PAC, and worked for the African Chamber of Commerce and as a trader in Estcourt. By 1970 he was second-in-command to Mangosuthu Buthelezi in the KwaZulu Territorial Authority. Not only did he differ from Buthelezi over the role of trade unions, but he reputedly received funds from the exiled SACTU. His popularity was interpreted as a threat to Buthelezi and he was dismissed in August 1974. He died of lung cancer in 1977.
- 75 Bell, Terry, 'Afterword', in Cajee, Amin, *Fordsburg Fighter: The Journey of an MK Volunteer* (N.p., Face2Face, 2016), p. 177.
- 76 Schreiner, Geoff, 'A "salt of the earth" comrade', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 20(2), 1996, pp. 8, 9. Makhathini was born in Melmoth in 1936 as John Dumisani Khumalo and after Standard 6 moved to Pietermaritzburg where he took the name of the family with whom he stayed.
- 77 Kleinenberg, Mary and Merrett, Christopher, *Standing on Street Corners: A History of the Natal Midlands Region of the Black Sash* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2015), pp. 175, 177, 185. A number of union branches in other cities also started as advice offices at which the incremental process of winning worker rights could be pursued (Baskin, *Striking Back*, p. 21).
- 78 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 101–3, 294. The confidentiality claim was based on a provision of the Bantu Labour Relations Act (1974) designed to protect certain company financial information.
- 79 *Natal Witness*, 27 August 1976.
- 80 *Race Relations Survey*, 1977, pp. 133–4.
- 81 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 139.
- 82 McShane, Denis, Plaut, Martin and Ward, David, *Power!: Black Workers, Their Unions and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Nottingham, Spokesman, 1984), pp. 48, 58.
- 83 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 89, 278.
- 84 Copelyn, Johnny, *Maverick Insider: A Struggle for Union Independence in a Time of National Liberation* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2016), p. 76.
- 85 Lodge, 'Resistance and reform', p. 426.
- 86 Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, p. 147; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 216.
- 87 'Labour resistance', *Work in Progress*, 7 (1979), p. 53.
- 88 Copelyn, *Maverick Insider*, pp. 77–84, 90, 92, 94.
- 89 'Codes of conduct', *Work in Progress*, 6 (1978), p. 87.
- 90 This was the objective of the Rieker Commission (Claassens, Aninka, 'The Rieker Commission and unemployment: The KwaZulu case', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5(4), 1979, p. 64).
- 91 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 126, 132, 153–8.
- 92 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–7, 224.
- 93 Lewis, 'Black workers', p. 216.
- 94 See Bonner, Phil, 'Focus on FOSATU', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5(1), 1979, pp. 5–24 for the federation's origins. There is divergent opinion about the number of founding unions: other sources state only twelve.
- 95 Passmore, John, 'FOSATU: Perspective on a non-racial trade union', *Reality*, 13(5), 1982, p. 12; Friedman, Steven, 'Emerging unions', *Reality*, 15(5), 1983, pp. 5, 6, 7.
- 96 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 169, 229–30, 247; Innes, Duncan, 'Trade unions and the challenge to state power', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8(2), 1982, pp. 60–71.
- 97 Fine, Bob, De Clerq, Francine and Innes, Duncan, 'Trade unions and the state in South Africa: The question of legality', *Capital and Class*, 15 (1981), pp. 107–11; Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, pp. 227, 233, 241; Lewis, Jon, 'MAWU and the industrial council', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11(1), 1985, pp. 17–21.
- 98 Lewis, 'Black workers', p. 222.
- 99 His speech was entitled 'The workers' struggle: where does FOSATU stand?' and it is reproduced in abridged form in Karis, Thomas G. and Gerhart, Gail M., *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990: Volume 6 Challenge and Victory, 1980–1990* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2013), pp. 299–302. Also *South African Labour Bulletin*, 7(8), 1982, pp. 67–86.
- 100 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 434.
- 101 Fine, Robert with Davis, Dennis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1990), p. 283; Swilling, Mark, 'Stayaways, urban protest and the state', *South African Review*, 3 (1986), pp. 25, 26.
- 102 Jaffee, Georgina and Jochelson, Karen, 'The fight to save jobs: Union initiatives on retrenchment and unemployment', *South African Review*, 3 (1986), p. 52.
- 103 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 438.
- 104 Baskin, *Striking Back*, p. 330; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 430–1.

- 105 Maré and Hamilton, *Appetite for Power*, p. 125.
- 106 A Reader, 'Role of trade unions in the South African revolution', *African Communist*, 82 (1980), pp. 81, 88.
- 107 Lowry, Donovan, *20 Years in the Labour Movement: The Urban Training Project and Change in South Africa, 1971–1991* (Johannesburg, Wadmore, 1999), p. 60. These were the two types of committee promoted by the Bantu Labour Relations Regulations Amendment Act of 1974 as a reaction to the Durban strikes.
- 108 Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: Volume 6*, p. 61; Lewis, 'Black workers', p. 222.
- 109 Webster, Eddie, 'Labour: Introduction', *South African Review*, 4 (1987), pp. 215–18; Benjamin, 'Trade unions', pp. 255, 256, 257, 261; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 320; Lewis, 'Black workers', p. 220.
- 110 Hindson, Doug, 'Union unity', *South African Review*, 2 (1984), pp. 101, 103.
- 111 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp. 260, 262. For the significance of the pensions issue see McShane, Plaut and Ward, *Power!*, pp. 61–2.
- 112 Mashinini, Emma, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography* (London, Women's Press, 1989), p. 39.
- 113 'The independent trade union movement in Natal', *Reality*, 16(6), November 1984, pp. 27, 29; Hindson, 'Union unity', p. 101.