

# A HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA



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## **A History of Trade Unionism in South Africa**

The different periods of South Africa's modern capitalist history shaped workers' organisation. This booklet reflects on the resistance workers posed to racial capitalism and how this spear of the liberation movement proved decisive in the struggle against apartheid.

This booklet also aims to enable readers to draw valuable lessons of the struggles of the past. It is hoped that through collective study and organising, leaders at all levels of the movement can apply these lessons in a process of addressing the current political and organisational weaknesses of our trade union movement and the working class generally.

Aluta Continua! The struggle continues.



# **A HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **South Africa's Industrial Revolution and the making of the Working Class**

The different periods of South Africa's modern capitalist history shaped workers' organisation. This happened over four periods:

- from mid-19th Century British colonial rule under which capitalist relations began to emerge;
- to the setting up of white rule with the Act of Union in 1910, which brought in the strategy of Segregation;
- to the Apartheid era of 1948 onwards;
- and then the reforms to apartheid as South Africa became a monopoly capitalist country.

Throughout these periods, mining played a key role and the search for cheap labour for the mining capitalists shaped the form of capitalism and the history of racial oppression of the black majority.

The discovery of minerals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards – diamonds near Kimberley in 1867 and gold in 1886 near Johannesburg – drastically

changed the economic and political structure of South Africa. Before then South Africa was populated by various tribal societies with European settler colonial occupation in the Cape and Natal. Subsistence farming was the dominant economic activity of both black and white people and this required land with a reliance on cattle.

**In the Cape** the main source of cheap labour was descendants of slaves, mainly from Malaya and the indigenous Khoi population.

South Africa's valuable mineral resources attracted foreign capital and large-scale immigration. Discoveries of these valuable minerals and their abundance were much more than in anywhere else in the world at the time. Due to this, more foreign capital got invested in South Africa than the whole of the rest of the continent combined. But diamond, and especially gold mining in South Africa, required lots of expensive machinery and an abundance of labour in order to extract it from the ground.



The racism of minework reserved better wages and positions of authority for Whites. The profitability of mines depended on cheap Black labour, and keeping it that way. Image source: Gold and Workers 1886 - 1924

## **Land Dispossession of black people – The creation of cheap black labour and its control**

In the 1870's and 1880's, the British colonialists started a process of conquering African countries and tribes in Southern Africa and forcibly took their land away from them. They then imposed cash taxation on African people for living and moving on this land. This period until the creation of a Union of South Africa in 1910 saw 'wars of dispossession' replaced by 'laws of dispossession'. At the insistence of mining companies, local governments passed laws that severely limited the right of black people to own mining claims or to trade their products.

In this way the government supported the mine bosses by ensuring that workers could not bargain for better wages and work in the mines on a voluntary basis. They were now effectively forced to work for very low wages and on the employers' terms.

Black workers ended up doing the hard manual labour while white workers got the skilled and supervisory jobs. Black workers were also forbidden by law from living wherever they wanted and were forced to stay on the outskirts of segregated towns or in mining compounds.

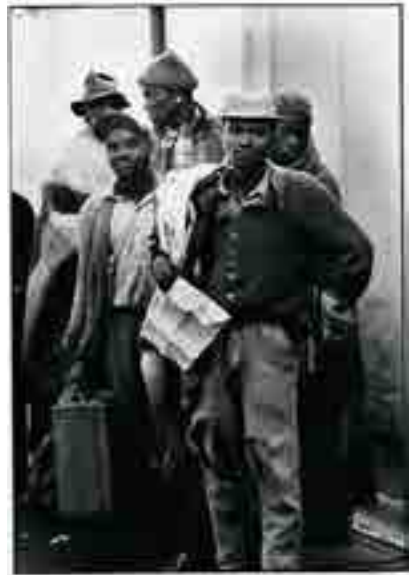
Later the 'Land Act of 1913' in South Africa was to become the cornerstone of that legalised dispossession, prescribing that 'African' people could occupy and own land only in the 'reserve' areas which made up a mere 13% of all land in South Africa.

The purpose of these laws of dispossession and control was threefold, to:

- Force black people who derived their living from the land into the capitalist cash economy and wage slavery and;
- Ensure that white farmers and landlords had control over greater areas of the most arable land in the country and;
- Ensure greater control over black people by regulating their movement to and from urban areas so as not to pose any threat to their oppressors and exploiters.



Just like in Kimberley two decades before, the Witwatersrand became covered by small claims with hundreds of mining prospectors. But due to the depth and low yield of the gold containing ore it required huge capital (money) to pay for expensive machinery and lots of labour to mine it successfully. Only big local and international capitalists like Cecil John Rhodes and Barney Barnato were able to invest and profit from mining. The power of the mining companies became so great that within 10 years, the racist mining magnate, Cecil John Rhodes became prime minister of the Cape Colony.



This laid the basis of South Africa's political economy up to today – white monopoly capital and cheap black labour.

Men newly recruited to work in the mines await processing and assignment (1960-66).

Photo: Ernest Cole Family Trust

Mining capitalists earned super-profits by using a system of employing black migrant male workers from the Reserves (later Homelands or Bantustans), having them living in policed single-mens' compounds segregated on the basis of tribe and forced to carry passes in the cities while their homesteads and children were sustained by African women in the Reserves (later Homelands or Bantustans). This was the basis of the system of cheap labour of racial capitalism.

It is this that laid the basis for the struggle between labour and capital and the development of workers' organisations, especially the trade unions in South Africa with an integrated black labour market extending through the whole of Southern Africa.

In response workers built trade unions – which took on different forms and were composed of different sections of the working class – white and black, men and women, urban industrialised workers and commuter-migrant workers.



In the British colony of Natal, indentured Indian labourers were brought in on 5-year contracts to work on the sugar plantations. Their working conditions were harsh with long working hours in the humid climate. Harsh punishment was meted out on those who could not keep up with the workload. After freeing themselves from these contracts, many of them ended up as small holders, market gardeners, fishermen, domestic servants, waiters or coal miners.

### *Other laws of taxation and control*

- This was then followed by the 'Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923' which allowed local white authorities to regulate and control the so-called influx of Africans from the reserves into the urban centres. This Act was further tightened by the 'Black Urban Areas Consolidation Act of 1945'. Further, there was the 'Native Trust and Land Act of 1936' which declared rural areas settled by the Africans in reserves as trust land, giving most authority to traditional leaders. Other apartheid land laws were also passed such as 'The Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946' and the 'Coloured Persons Settlement Act of 1946' which denied Indian and Coloured people land and settlement rights.
- All of this legislation was then consolidated in 'The Group Areas Act of 1950' which solidified South Africa's racial geography and control in both rural and urban land areas. But the new National Party government was not done. It soon passed 'The Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act of 1951' that criminalised blacks who came to settle in cities and towns where the vast majority of land was designated as whites-only residential and business areas.
- Soon thereafter the 'Bantu Authorities Act of 1951' was passed which introduced the tribal, regional and territorial authorities system as a forerunner to the formal establishment of the Bantustans. And then the 'Black Resettlement Act of 1954' legalised forced removals of black residents from designated white areas in towns and cities (Phala, 2013).

## The first unions for black workers

After the discovery of diamonds and gold ushered in the mining revolution in South Africa from the 1880s, and the Anglo-Boer war ended in the defeat of the Boers in 1902, the British empire still transferred political authority to the white minority. The black working class was largely commuter, migrant and male whereas white workers had already been fully part of a settled and urban industrial working class, close to their places of work. Some of these white workers came from experiences of struggles and trade unions in the Britain, while others were from the defeated Boers who had known the violence of British colonialism. Many of them became mine workers albeit with higher skill levels and pay than their black counterparts. Many Afrikaner women were employed in the garment industry and as shop workers serving the mines.

In 1917, workers and peasants in the Soviet Union carried out the most important revolution in the history of our struggle for socialism. Here in South Africa at that time, very few black workers were organised. There were trade unions, but most of their members were white workers. There was a political party that said that it was socialist – the Labour Party – but it collaborated with the bosses and their political parties, and only allowed white members.

But the politics of the Russian Revolution reached South Africa and entered into the hearts of a few socialists. At that time, they came together in an organisation called the International Socialist League. Later, with others, they formed the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Many of them were middle class whites. Others were officials in the white trade unions. Slowly, they began to take the idea of the Russian Revolution to black workers. They found workers with many needs, many problems, and people who were already in struggle.

The first trade union organisation for African workers was called the Industrial Workers of Africa. You could put all the members of that organisation into one room. But even from that time, thousands of workers who were not in organisations were already struggling against the bosses and their government. Already they were burning passes, and

boycotting against high prices, and striking for wage increases. Even if they did not have the ideal of socialism in their heads, they were engaged in struggle.

At that time, it was not just the organisation of workers that was young. Industry in South Africa was also young. As capitalist industry developed, the power and wealth of the bosses grew. But the same process saw the size and strength of the working class grow as well. And inside the working class, the number of black workers, and their importance for capitalist production, also increased.



White workers rally in support of arrested leaders of the 'Rand Rebellion', 1922.  
Image source: Museum Africa

## **The 1922 white mineworkers' strike**

At the centre of the growing capitalist economy in South Africa was the gold mining industry. It was also the heart of militant worker struggle in the first two decades of the century. But white and black workers did not fight side by side, and the strikes by white mineworkers in 1907, 1913 and 1922, were directed largely against the increasing numbers of black workers coming onto the mines. The mining bosses were determined to undermine the job colour bar that protected white jobs, so that they could employ black workers at lower wages. The white miners resisted this.

In 1921, when mining profits were falling, the bosses came with a plan to retrench many semi-skilled white miners and replace them with black workers. 24,000 white miners embarked on a militant strike which grew into the Rand Revolt, under the slogan “*Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa!*” The government, led by Smuts, crushed the revolt with violence and the mining bosses were able to attack the jobs of white workers.

In the election of 1924, whites voted Smuts out of government, and elected the Pact government of the Nationalist and Labour parties. It was this government which passed the Industrial Conciliation Act which gave rights and privileges to white workers and drew their unions into legal industrial relations machinery in order to make strike action more difficult. This was the end of the chapter of white worker militancy and the entrenchment of a racial divide in the working class with white workers supporting the bosses and the white government against the black working class and black people.

The 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act was also a first step towards “institutionalising” labour relations, a first step that was succeeded by many others, including; the apartheid state’s adoption of the 1979 Wiehahn reforms and its 1988 Labour Relations Amendment Act, and in the post-Apartheid South Africa’s consensus seeking 1995 Labour Relations Act.

## **The ICU-mass organisation**

But it was not only the white mineworkers who were organising in the 1920s. Struggle and organisation spread across the country like a veld fire. Another organisation was formed – the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). At the same time, the small ANC became more militant, and the CPSA began to work more with black workers.

The ICU was not just an organisation for workers. Inside the ICU were teachers, churchmen, and peasants who were being thrown off the land. There were chiefs and even businessmen. They were all together in one organisation, fighting against racial oppression. But they were not always

Image source: zabalaza.net



### Preamble to the ICU Constitution of 1925

A struggle over wages, conditions of the workers of South Africa (1924) the workers through their industrial organisations have been the struggle over the control of production, distribution and control of the workers for the benefit of all, instead of for the profit of a few. Their aim is to give the workers control. The [idea of] [industrial] [organisation] [and] [the] [principle] [has] [every] [year] [according] [to] [the] [state], [to] [every] [year] [according] [to] [the] [state]. This is the aim for which the ICU always stands with all other oppressed workers throughout the world.

The ICU executive in 1925. Left to right standing are Thomas Mkhonto, James G. Dlamini and John Dlamini. Seated are Dennis Makhosini and George Chabane.

all fighting for the same thing. Inside the ICU the workers were not strongly organised to speak with their own voice, there was little worker democracy and no workers control. Leaders began to compete with one another, and the ICU split into many different pieces. As that happened at the end of the 1920s, the state attacked.

## Capitalist crisis and state attacks

During the 1920s, the international capitalist system was experiencing a crisis and the state could not tolerate a movement of struggle that was growing. So it attacked the movement – with murder, vigilantes, arrests, banishments. But the truth is that it attacked an organisation that was already weak from its own internal problems.

This was a time of bitter struggle. Some turned to the Communist Party. Ten thousand joined the trade unions in a federation called the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) and then the African Federation of Trade Unions (AFTU) that was led by members of the Communist Party. Inside the Communist Party, there were some who stuck to the politics of the 1917 revolution. But others started to follow the politics and undemocratic methods of Stalinism. Stalinist politics and methods led to many expulsions and divisions within workers' organisations.



James Sofasonke Mpanza, the 'Father of Soweto' (right) outside his house in Orlando East in the early 1960s. During the War years, Mpanza led the occupation of vacant land in the burgeoning township of Soweto and the establishment of the informal settlement, Masekeng ('The Place of Sacks'). Image source: Learn and Teach magazine

## **The growth of industry meant the growing strength and organisation of the working class**

The state attacks were successful and the bosses went into the 1930s feeling strong and confident. Industry and profits grew. But the strength and determination of the working class also grew. The government and the rich farmers were successful in forcing thousands of people off the land and keeping the system of migrant labour going. But those people came to the towns looking for jobs and houses and all the things that urban workers also needed. There, in the growing towns, they were not on their own. They found hundreds and thousands of workers just like themselves. So they turned to one another for strength and support and organisations began to grow again. The number of strikes increased.

White women workers continued to be dominant in shops and in the garment and textile industries. But they grew militant as wages were kept low and some Communist Party activists championed their cause. The Garment Workers' Union of mostly Afrikaner women, was to be such a militant union that Afrikaner nationalism and the church were called upon to keep these women in 'their place'.

By the end of the 1930s there were two groups of unions:

- the Co-ordination Committee (with about 4,000 members);
- the Joint Committee (with about 20,000 members)

But again, there were leaders who would not work with others in the struggle who had different politics from theirs. And again, it was the bosses who were the ones to benefit.

## The War, the ANC, and new mass organisation

In 1939, the South African government took the country into the inter-imperialist Second World War. The War was to significantly change the class composition of South Africa. The South African bourgeoisie began to redirect mining profits into investment in manufacture and industrialisation as the war took its toll on the imperial powers and the gold price boomed.



Image source: SAHA

White workers were conscripted into the army at a time when the demand for labour increased as South African capital expanded. As a result the capitalists called upon the Smuts government to relax the pass laws and allow African migrants to settle in the cities. With this urban black townships mushroomed. A particular feature of this relaxation was the mass movement of black women to the cities. Whilst many of them lived with male partners, they also became the backbone of urban township life – from beer-brewing to shebeen queens. Others began to replace white women in shops and in nursing.

For the first time a mass black working class and an urban consciousness was forged. The war increased the bargaining strength of black workers. Many of the white workers joined the army and blacks took their places. The government was desperate for production to continue to help in the war effort and began moves towards reform. The number of strikes began to grow.



In many ways the victory of the Nationalist Party and its policy of Apartheid immediately after the War (in 1948) was a response to these developments – specifically the need from the side of South African capital to police the urban working class to secure cheap black labour under these new conditions.

In 1941, a new union federation called the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) was formed. In the same year, the African Mine Workers Union (AMWU) was also formed. The government began to talk about reforms, even getting rid of the pass laws. Then, at the end of 1942 and 1943, workers built the biggest strike wave there had ever been in the history of South Africa. In 1943 there was a bus boycott in Alexandra township and in 1944 there was a massive struggle of squatters for land and houses in the urban areas near Johannesburg.



A “communist” meeting in Johannesburg, 1950, as reported by American Life magazine photographer. This photographic documentary exposed an international readership to the newly formalised system of Apartheid. Photo: Margaret Bourke-White

The government responded by introducing a new law which made all strikes illegal. The talk about reforms disappeared, and the government and the bosses demanded that the leaders of the workers' organisations impose discipline. At this time, after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the Communist Party was also supporting the war. But more and more workers decided that the issues right in front of them were more important than supporting the war effort. So they took action. Often, that action did not have the support of the union leadership. And often, one group of workers taking action was isolated from another.

In 1944, the AMWU held a conference, and one delegate after another demanded strike action. But the leadership convinced the workers to wait. In 1946, after the end of the war, workers would wait no longer. They built the biggest strike ever – and the same government that spoke about change and reform and co-operation during the war, broke the strike with guns and bayonets. With the policy of cooperation with the government, and then the defeat of the miners' strike, CNETU began to crumble as a fighting force. In 1945, it had 158,000 members. A few years later it did not exist any longer.

In 1948, white voters elected a Nationalist government. They took over from a government which had already declared all strikes illegal and had broken the miners' strike through violence and intimidation, and when union organisation of black workers had already been weakened.

One of the first tasks which that government set itself was to tighten its influence over the white workers. For a long time, Nationalist politicians from the middle class and capitalists had their eyes on the white workers, especially the Afrikaans speaking white workers. They wanted their support and their strength. It was not so hard to deepen racism and tie the white workers to the bosses and their political parties with promises. These things had already been happening for years, with the help of the Labour Party and conservative white trade union leaders. More and more white workers began to see their future with the Nationalists. Many of them were Afrikaners who were driven off the land by the same capitalist crisis that drove black people off the land at the beginning of the 1930s.

The new Nationalist government took action against the few union leaders who were trying to bring progressive politics to the white workers. They took action to outlaw united organisation between black and white workers. More and more white workers turned to the promises coming from the new Nationalist government and put their hopes in an alliance with the bosses against black workers.

Amongst black workers, the anger began to grow. They were now facing the apartheid government. They had to go home from exploitation at work to townships that were getting more and more crowded, without proper housing, or electricity, or child-care or schools. They had to face a government which was trying to increase its control over black workers through the Group Areas Act and forced removals.

So, in the 1950s, there was mass organisation and mass action again. The ANC launched the Defiance Campaign. For a generation, workers had already been defying the pass laws. Now they turned to the ANC. For the first time in its history, workers made the ANC a real mass organisation.

A particularly important development in this decade was the Apartheid government responding to the mass movement of black women to the cities by extending the pass laws to women. Remember historically African women were confined to the Reserves while the male migrants worked on the mines and carried passes to control their movement.

This extension of the pass laws to women was to provoke one of the iconic moments of the 1950s struggles – the 1956 Women’s March to the Union Buildings in Pretoria.



Image source: SAHA

Later, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed. Still there were many questions confronting workers in struggle:

- How could workers defend themselves against the attacks from the bosses and the government?
- What was the best way forward in the struggle for the day-to-day needs of the working class?
- How could the Nationalist government be defeated?
- Could there be an alliance between workers and the bosses who exploited them but who said they opposed the Nationalist government?
- What link should there be between the unions and the ANC?
- What was the link between the struggle against apartheid and the struggle for socialism? What politics could best take workers forward?



## **Struggle and repression in the 1950s and 1960s**

In the 1940s and the 1950s workers grew more and more confident to fight against their poverty and oppression. At this time workers and all the oppressed built their organisations like the ANC, PAC and SACTU. Through these organisations workers built unity and mass action. There was the Defiance Campaign, the Freedom Charter Campaign, and the Pound a Day Campaign. There were strikes and protests and national stayaways.

In 1960 the government responded with force. Protesters were shot dead at Sharpeville, leaders were arrested, and the ANC and PAC were banned. But this did not stop the struggle. In the following year the Congress Alliance called for a three-day stayaway against this repression. It was the biggest stayaway at that time, but it was also the last national strike for many years.

After 1961, the Congress movement decided that its non-violent strategy was not enough to win power in South Africa. The sabotage campaign, and later the armed struggle, began. Many SACTU organisers became involved in this underground struggle. Many others were detained and jailed and went into exile. Workers could no longer participate in the organisations that they had built. The confidence of workers to struggle was still there and it carried on for two years after 1961. But when their organisations went underground it was much harder for ordinary workers to fight.

The 1960s was also a time when South African capitalism accelerated its development to an industrialised economy. All South Africa's gold giants – led by Anglo American – not only branched out into manufacture, but even into banking and finance. The centralisation and concentration of capital reached such proportions that by the 1980s five giants owned more than 85% of the shares traded on the JSE.

With the growth of manufacture came the increased need for settled urban labour and even skilled black labour. Meanwhile the Bantustan system which had justified keeping migrant workers' wages low – because they apparently compensated by having women subsidising them in the Homelands – had been breaking down throughout the 1950s and now migrant workers' remittances were actually sustaining the Homelands.

The settlement of women as part of an urban township life was becoming the new reality for the apartheid regime.

Also for the first time in South Africa's history the regime had to address the issue of mass schooling of black youth – the issue of education had largely been left to missionary education of a small middle class for most of the 20th century. The introduction of Bantu education as mass public education was to become a powder-keg for later struggles in the 1970s – which would impact on the labour movement.

But during the 1960s workers became less confident to struggle. They no longer had fighting unions. There was no mass action and mass organisation. But workers did not forget what they had done in the

past. They carried their history with them. So even if the bosses and the government felt strong in the 1960s, even if they increased their attacks on workers in a thousand different ways, even if they made bigger profits than ever before, workers were not defeated. The day of new mass action and new mass organisation was coming.

## The rebirth of organisation and struggle in the 1970s



BTR workers on strike for basic union rights, Durban 1973. Photo: Paul Weinberg

The first big sign that workers were once again ready to struggle came when 60,000 workers in Durban, Pietermaritzburg and parts of Johannesburg went on strike for higher wages. The strikes in 1973 were the beginning of a new determination of workers to struggle. An international crisis in capitalism saw bosses profits drop everywhere. And when bosses profits drop, the burden is always passed on to workers. For years and years workers in South Africa had laboured for low wages. But in the early 1970s price increases pushed the value of workers' wages even lower. Workers were confident once again to express their anger. This was the time when workers came out of the darkness of the 1960's and began to build their movement of struggle once again.



Workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile factory, Durban, sparked a wave of strikes, including these municipal workers. By February 1973, 30,000 South African workers were on strike demanding increased wages and better working conditions. Image source: UCT Library

Workers rebuilt unions in different ways. Some joined industry-based unions like MAWU, NUTW, CWIU, CCAWUSA and SFAWU. Others joined the general unions like SAAWU and GAWU. Different approaches to organising workers also carried different politics. Many union activists carried with them the SACTU tradition of political unionism. They brought an important pressure on the newly emerging union organisations to develop links beyond the factory floor. Others, critical of this approach and keeping their distance from politics, emphasised the importance of building strong workplace structures that could withstand state repression. They stressed the importance of building democratic worker control of the trade unions, of building shop steward structures in the factories, and fighting for recognition from employers.

The bosses and the government did not just sit back and let this happen. They attacked workers' organisations. They met workers' action with violence and dismissals and they detained and banned leaders. The bosses and government promoted and formed liaison committees and works councils (which they appointed) at the workplace, to undermine the emerging independent unions. At that time the law said that workers could not have non-racial trade unions. Black workers were not included in how the law defined "employees". But this did not stop workers. Worker struggle forced the government to reform the law and to recognise the right of black workers to build trade unions. In 1979, based on the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations, the government reformed the Labour Relations Act, allowing non-racial unions to be recognised on condition that they registered with the Minister of Manpower.



*Extracts from Building Tomorrow Today by Steven Friedman*

*p.87. “But, although the years immediately after 1973 were harsh, they were not wasted. The unions won few new factories which would remain organised or improvements for their members, but they did gain two weapons which were to prove even more valuable: a strategy – tight factory organisation – and a tool to implement it – the formal recognition agreement.”*

*p.93. “MAWU noted this change .... 1975. It said a decline in worker militancy and the need to train unionists had led to it to abandon mass organising and to devote its resources to a few “carefully selected factories”. Union officials would concentrate chiefly on training shop steward committees who would take over the job of recruiting, organising and collecting dues. Stewards from various factories were meeting regularly and training was being integrated with organising work.”*

A debate ensued during the early 1980s regarding whether progressive unions should register or not. Some unions felt that registering would threaten their independence and allow the apartheid government to control them. Others thought that the threat of control by the government was not so serious, and that the new law provided much-needed legal space for unions to organise, be recognised, and make gains for their members. Most unions, especially from CUSA and FOSATU, opted for the latter position.

The new laws gave workers the confidence to build bigger organisations and actions. Organisation started again on the mines. Unions came together in the federations, FOSATU, CUSA, and AZACTU. There were important strikes, like the meatworkers’ strike and at Fattis and Monis, and the strikes in the car factories of the Eastern Cape. Working class communities, assisted by unions like SAAWU and GAWU, also built powerful struggles around housing and education.

The 1976 student uprising signalled the seismic shift in consciousness that Apartheid could be beat. The unions failed to mobilise in support of the uprising, an alliance that would be realised in the 1980s.



## Going to war against the apartheid state in the 1980s

One of the biggest questions of that time was how to build trade union struggle together with community struggle and political struggle. There were different answers and different strategies coming from different organisations. The politics of banned organisations like the ANC was alive in the hearts of many. Some unions joined the United Democratic Front (UDF). Some unions had Black Consciousness politics. Some unions said they must stay independent of community and political organisations.

Sometimes the different strategies gave rise to division and conflict. In 1976 the youth fought against the government without building unity with workers. But the movement learned from that problem, and built a powerful united front of struggle in the Vaal Stay-away in 1984. Even with the division and conflict that grew out of political differences, this period saw a blossoming of different forms of working class organisations in the workplace and in the community: industrial unions, general unions, industrial locals, community-based locals. A variety of structures that drew together organised workers, youth, women, and civic activists made up a rich tradition of creative organisation.

The economic downturn of the early 1980s caused the number of strikes to increase significantly as workers tried hard to defend their jobs. In

1981 more than 300 strikes were recorded, a significant feat at the time considering the prevailing tough economic conditions and the employers' offensive against organised workers. The East Rand was at the centre of this strike wave; more than 50 strikes involving nearly 25,000 workers took place in the region in only five months. FOSATU affiliates were in the forefront of these shop floor struggles. In 1982 FOSATU unions organised 145 strikes, involving about 90,000 workers, compared to 13 strikes organised by CUSA which involved only 10,000 workers.

FOSATU placed great emphasis on building strong and democratic workplace organisations, based on the principle of workers' democracy. Shop stewards were the pivotal activists in this new form of unions. They were directly elected by and therefore accountable to workers. FOSATU also focused much of its attention on defending the position of workers at the point of production. Some FOSATU activists feared that becoming involved in community politics would endanger workplace organisation. Others were suspicious of interference by any outside political organisation, including the liberation movements or community political organisations.

To some extent, this view was influenced by a socialist current within the unions which viewed the existing liberation organisations as nationalists and not especially interested in developing a working-class programme and leadership in the struggle against apartheid. Thus in April 1982 the Secretary General of FOSATU, Joe Foster, delivered a speech in which he set out the federation's objective of creating an independent political organisation for workers, a workers' party.

Abafana bo moya performing at the Metal Allied Workers Union annual general meeting, Curries Fountain, Durban November 1986. Photo: Rafs Mayet



FOSATU certainly did not abstain from links with community organisations. However, at first it did not actively encourage its affiliates to become involved in community or political struggles.

## Workers and Students unite in Community Struggle



UDF rally in Johannesburg, 19 August 1984. Photo: G de Vlieg

Eventually the mounting struggles in the townships, especially their occupation by security forces, pushed the unions in the direction of greater involvement in township politics. The establishment of community-based shop steward councils on the East Rand was a further indication of the growing links between factories and communities. Students also regularly asked unions for co-operation. They became the critical point of connection between workers and the community, particularly in 1984.

It was really in 1984 and 1985 that workers and the youth went to war against the government. Workers took important steps to build their organised unity. From 1981 unions were involved in unity talks. This led to the launch of Cosatu in 1985 and, shortly afterwards, to the formation of Nactu. The second half of the 1980s saw some of the biggest struggles of workers in our history. There was the OK Bazaars workers' strike for a living wage in 1986. There were mass campaigns organized and led by Cosatu for a Living Wage, a Worker's LRA, and the Workers Charter. There was the famous victory of parental rights – including Paternal

Leave – won in 1989 through the struggle of mostly women workers at OK Bazaars and Pick ‘n Pay. Unions built strong links with youth organisations, civics, women’s organisations, and political organisations. After heated debates and at times divisions within Cosatu, one union after another adopted the Freedom Charter as a political programme that could point the way in the struggle for socialism.

## **Labour and civics allied in the UDF**

A key moment in the mobilisation against apartheid was the launch of the United Democratic Front on 20 August 1983. The UDF was explicitly Charterist and united nearly 600 organisations under its banner. The front was created to oppose elections to the Tricameral Parliament in coloured and Indian areas, but it was soon transformed into the leading liberation movement in the country.

Most unions decided not to affiliate to the UDF, in order to safeguard their independence. A handful of unions, like the South African Allied Workers Union, did join the UDF. Nonetheless, a relatively close relationship developed between the UDF and FOSATU, although it was often strained by political and strategic differences. FOSATU threw its weight behind the Tricameral Parliament boycott campaign.



Mourners carry a United Democratic Front banner during a mass funeral for 18 people killed during unrest in Duncan Village near East London. Photo: William F. Campbell

The successful boycott of the Black Local Authority Elections, the mounting student boycotts, the strike wave of the early 1980s, the launch of the UDF and the proliferation of local community organisations signified a critical change in the national political situation. The political pressure that was building from the late 1970s eventually exploded into a mass rebellion in the PWV (now Gauteng).

The regional insurrection started in the Vaal townships in response to the Lekoa Town Council's announcement of a rent increase of R5.90 despite overwhelming evidence that residents could not even afford the existing rents. The Vaal Civic Association led the protests against the Town Council throughout August. On September 2 it was decided that residents should refuse to pay their rents. The stayaway the following day was supported by up to 60% of the workforce. The police reacted viciously to the demonstrations in the townships that day. Scores were injured, and 31 were killed. The fires of resistance quickly engulfed other townships in the PWV. In Soweto, the Release Mandela Committee called for a stayaway in solidarity with Vaal residents. The action was not well organised, however, and only 30-65% of workers heeded the call.



Students marching to a cemetery with grave flowers, Wattville, present-day Gauteng, September 1984. Image source: SAHA

From this point on, the centre of the struggle shifted to the East Rand. In October COSAS in KwaThema mobilised parents to support student demands. At a meeting held on 14 October and attended by 4,000 people, a parent-student committee was established to lead the struggle.

Significantly, leading trade unionists, including Chris Dlamini (the president of FOSATU), sat on the committee. After failing to get a positive response from the government, the committee called for a stayaway. The local stayaway of 22 October was a resounding success, as more than 80% of workers stayed at home.



Factory-based struggles and worker militancy were also on the increase. In the first ten months of 1984 almost 120,000 workers were involved in 309 strikes (more than double the number of workers involved during the same period in 1983). The relationship between unions and communities was further cemented by the Simba Quix boycott campaign that was launched in August 1984. The scene was set for a major demonstration of union-community power. The showdown with the state came to a head in November 1984. The initiative came from COSAS, which called on unions to support its struggle.

The FOSATU Central Committee met on October 19-21. It resolved to support the students in their demands and also mandated the representatives from the Transvaal to represent FOSATU on the Stayaway Co-ordinating Committee. Seven union representatives were nominated, including Moses Mayekiso, Chris Dlamini and Bangilizwe Solo. The Transvaal Regional Stayaway Committee was formally constituted on 27 October and comprised 37 organisations. The four-member co-ordinating committee was made up of Moses Mayekiso, Themba Nontlane, Oupa Monareng and Thami Mali. It was decided to call a regional stayaway on 5 and 6 November. Numerous meetings were held in factories, schools, townships and hostels. More than 400,000 pamphlets were distributed. In addition to supporting students' grievances, the Stayaway Committee called for the withdrawal of the army from the townships and for a suspension of rent and bus fare increases.



The regional general strike was a phenomenal success. More than 800,000 workers and 400,000 students stayed at home. Support for the action was particularly good on the East Rand and in the Vaal because of the strength of the unions in those regions.

Similar united struggles between workers and students were experienced in the Western Cape townships after 1980 with major struggles for quality education led by the high school students' Committee of '81, the Fattis and Monis boycott campaign and the Leyland strike of 1981.

## What happened after the uprising?

The state responded to the PWV uprising with even more repression. In October thousands of troops poured into the Vaal townships during "Operation Palmiet". From this time onwards, the occupation of townships by the security forces became a common feature of the country's landscape. Scores of union and student activists were arrested. On 21 March 1985, the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre, the police killed more than 20 people in Uitenhage's Langa township. The Langa massacre reflected the growing brutality of the security forces in their attempts to quell mass movement against apartheid. In July the state went a step further by declaring a State of Emergency in 36 magisterial districts in the PWV and Eastern Cape. In August it banned COSAS.

Cyril Ramaphosa, the first General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers with Chairperson of Anglo American, Harry Oppenheimer. Photo: Gille de Vlieg



The state's clampdown merely added fuel to the flames of resistance. The success of the November stayaway spurred other regions into action. Scores of local authority councillors were forced to resign, rendering ineffective the government's experiment of shifting the political responsibility for unpopular policies onto conservative local politicians. Rent boycotts became extremely common, and consumer boycotts were launched in the Eastern Cape. From the perspective of the authorities, the townships had become ungovernable.

Communities across the country set up street committees or organs of "people's power" to run the townships. By the end of 1985 virtually every urban township had become part of the insurrection. Increasingly, smaller towns and rural areas were drawn into the mass movement. School boycotts continued unabated and youth organisations were also increasingly drawn into direct confrontations with the armed forces.

Perhaps the most significant event of 1985 was the launch of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which grew mainly out of FOSATU. COSATU was by far the largest and most powerful union movement in the history of the country. It immediately stamped its authority on the liberation struggle by simultaneously tackling key workplace issues and challenging the state. It called massive general strikes over the following few years, involving millions of workers. By the mid-1980s it had become apparent that the end of apartheid was in sight.



## Into the 1990s – victories and weaknesses

Even at the time when the organisation and struggle of workers was at its height in the 1980s, there were also big problems. The defeat of the miners' strike in 1987, the attacks on Cosatu, and all the repression during the states of emergency, took strength out of the movement. However, these struggles were not wasted and, together with international pressure, forced the hand of the government. They laid the basis for the biggest victory of the 1980s, when the Nationalist government unbanned our organisations, released our leaders, and admitted that the days of apartheid were over. This was the fruit of our struggle.



But bosses and their governments never just roll over and die. They had come to the point where they had to make serious choices to protect their interests, especially in a situation of political and economic crisis. They were prepared to throw apartheid away so that they could defend capitalism. They were looking for a strategy that would shift the power back into their hands. They saw a chance when socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe collapsed, leaving capitalism with the confidence to establish a new world order.

It was through a negotiated settlement that we held our first democratic elections and elected the ANC into government with a huge majority. The period since 1994 has seen a political transformation that we never dreamed could happen in our lifetime. The development of a political democracy was a huge victory for the struggle of workers and all the oppressed.

But even with this victory, big problems have developed so that today workers are less confident and less in control of their organisations and their struggle than they were twenty years ago. There are many reasons for this, including:

- the ongoing decline in the living standards of workers;
- the adoption of neo-liberal capitalist politics by the ANC in government which encourage privatisation, deregulation, flexibility – and a range of other policies which divide and threaten the livelihood and security of workers;
- the development of mass unemployment and forms of informalisation of work – as a direct result of the ANC’s neo-liberal policies – have meant that the working class is very different today than at the height of the labour movement in the 1980s;
- the development of an individualistic and competitive culture which undermines workers’ traditions of collectivism;
- a growing tendency for the ANC government to blame workers for having “unrealistic expectations” – while all around them workers see corruption and continuing vast inequalities in wealth;
- the development of corporatism which seeks to develop consensus and joint responsibility between unions, business and government at all levels of industrial relations and economic policy;
- the weakness and confusion of socialist politics and the lack of a clear political leadership within workers’ organisations;
- The decline of “workers control” and the democratic culture within our unions along with the growth of a trade union bureaucracy – the domination of the union by a few leaders and top officials;
- The continued culture of male domination and the failure to centre women’s struggles – as a direct result of racial capitalism’s centring itself on the triple oppression of black working class women – continues to frustrate attempts at reviving militant trade unionism;
- The growing culture of corruption and mismanagement of our trade unions, similar to those in government.

If our own history has taught us one thing, it is that our traditions and spirit of struggles do not die easily. Workers carried their experiences of the first 50 years of the Twentieth Century through the repressive darkness of the 1960s, and used these as a foundation for building a powerful working class movement of struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. Even with the expulsion of NUMSA from Cosatu and divisions within the trade union movement with the formation of yet another trade union federation, SAFTU, and when we feel confused about our direction and about what has happened to the politics of our organisations – with our rich history, we can feel confident that as workers we have the ability to change things for the better.



**WITHOUT ORGANISATION,  
THE WORKING CLASS IS NOTHING  
VI Lenin**