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**“Works Committees and the Struggle for Industrial Citizenship in
South Africa, 1973-1979”**

**Paper presented at Labour Histories from the Global South:
International Seminar,**

**Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil,
25th to 28th October 2010**

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Florida International University, Miami**

“South Africa does not have a labour problem. It has an employer problem.”

-Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes, 1973: “Human Beings With Souls”*

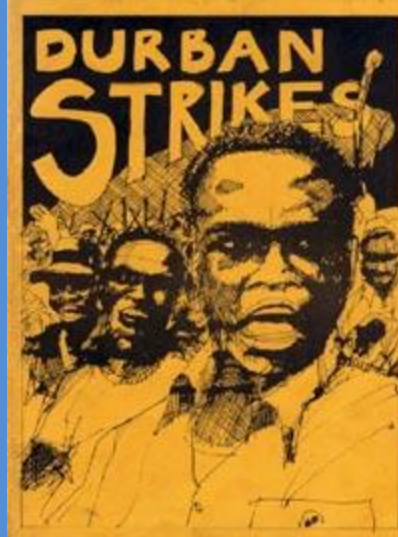
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In January & February, 1973, tens of thousands of African workers in the industrial suburbs of Durban, South Africa, engaged in mass strikes. They did so without unions, without leaders, and without apparent direction. These strikes inaugurated a distinctive working-class dimension to the anti-apartheid movement.



The central grievance in the 1973 strikes were African wages that proved too low for black workers to survive.



“The beginnings of most of the strikes are shrouded in mystery,” concluded the most sympathetic contemporaneous study of the upheaval, *The Durban Strikes, 1973* “What is clear is that there was no organised body such as a trade union which called for a strike to occur at a particular time over particular demands.”

THE DURBAN STRIKES 1973

(“Haraman brings with Souls”)

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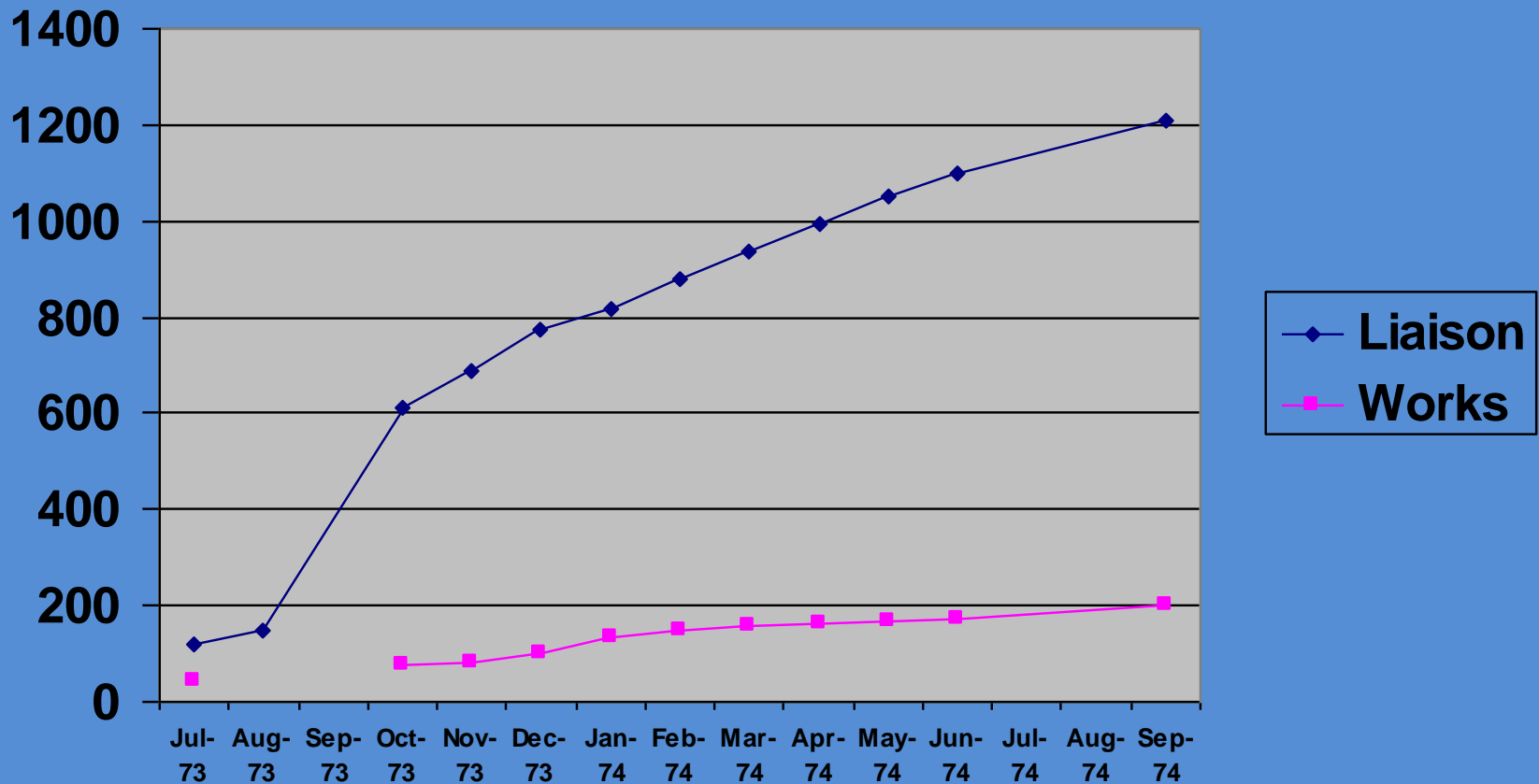
BLACK WORKERS'
COMMON STRUGGLE



By the Black Workers
Organizing Committee

25¢

Influenced by the Black Power movement, radical black workers in the U.S. paid close attention to what was going on in the factories of Durban. This pamphlet appeared in May 1973.



Liaison & Works Committees

- In the months after the strikes, employers rushed to set up state-sanctioned workplace committees to prevent unionization of African workers. As the graph indicates, they much preferred the employer-dominated liaison committee structure, with their “anti-polarisation nature...with benefits such as better guidance by management.”

**Minister of Labour,
Marais Viljoen reassured
his Afrikaner nationalist
constituency that the
new works committee
legislation introduced in
parliament in the wake
of the strikes “is not the
first step on the road to
recognized African trade
unions.”**



Source: "Works Committees That Really Work," *People and Profits* 1(August 1973): 12-16, 21, p. 16

PEPPERCORN BY WALTER PICHLER

... AND I'VE ALSO TALKED THE BOSS INTO GIVING YOU MORE SAY IN COMPANY MATTERS.



WOULD YOU LIKE YELLOW PLIERS, OR WOULD YOU PREFER BLUE ONES?



Even the business press in S. Africa recognized the potential limitations of the committee system.

Skeptical African workers asked of the works committees:

“Is it feasible for a man with whom we are quarrelling to give you a gun in order that you might shoot him?.... We would rather suffer struggling for trade union recognition.....These institutions are just imposed upon us.”

Others, however, saw an opening that would allow the creation of workers’ power on the shop floor.

KNOW THIS

1. Make your Works Committee work for you; if you haven't got one, form one.
2. The workers strength lies in unity, join together in the goal of obtaining for yourself and your family a basic living.
3. Finally, any worker is invited to send in articles for publication to:- Wages Commission, c/o S.R.C.,
University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Radical white students at the University of Natal urges Black workers to take advantage of the rights granted them by the new works committee structure.

**“a workers’
movement only has
strength if it has
support at the grass-
roots level....Works
committees can be
important stepping
stones in building up
an African trade
union.” --J. Maree**

**NATIONAL UNION
OF
TEXTILE WORKERS**

Igama Gardener T. Gladile

Idiphathiment: Workshop

~~Inombolo~~

Frametex

IFemu

Electrician Male

Umsebenzi

77633

Inombolo ye G.F.W.B.F.

I/9/73

Usuku oqale ngalo

Gardener T. Gladile, a charter member of the textile workers union in the months after the strikes, later led a works committee in the Frametex plant, and eventually emerged as a shop steward and shop-floor leader in the union. Notice that his union card is in Zulu and English.

After a few years, many employers came to see the dangers posed by the committee system.

In their submission to the 1977 Wiehahn Commission, charged with reforming SA labor laws, the Transvaal Chamber of Industries complained that:

“Works Committees, particularly in their legally protected form, in an establishment, are in effect entrenched groups even more powerful than Trade Unions and that they could be very dangerous indeed from the employers point of view.”

WIEHAHN COMMISSION 28

PROCES OF SPEECH BY HUBERT VAN HEERDEN, HONORARY PRESIDENT (CONTINUED)

"30 years of discriminatory legislation is about to be rolled back. 30 years in which the black worker, subject about with legal restrictions, was reduced to a senseless, witless, rightsless, temporary cog in South Africa's economic machine." (Sunday Times - 6/16/78)

Response to the Wiehahn Commission has generally been favourable among employers, opposition politicians and business people. Certainly, a superficial reading could lead one to think that the structures which control and control black work-ers today are being dismantled. I will seek to show, however, how these structures are in fact being extended.

Why was such a commission necessary in the first place? Firstly, South Africa is facing an industrial revolution crisis. The white has a highly skilled black workers from an effective participation in his industrial relations system. This formal expertise has not prevented black workers from organizing themselves into trade unions to represent and protect themselves. The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union to the I.C.W.U., I.C.W.U. to the I.C.W.U. and I.C.W.U. to the I.C.W.U. I.C.W.U. to the I.C.W.U. and I.C.W.U. to the I.C.W.U. have represented between 50 000 and 100 000 work-ers. The government established work committees on the other hand, but had actually only 24 being established in over 10 years.

Secondly, this failure has been accompanied by a growth in numbers of African (African), clerical, white-collar technical and non-manual labourers, from 8,000 in the workforce in 1960 to 12,000 in 1977. Africa in this category rose from 14,211 to 24,000 and 24,000 from 14,211 to 24,000. At the same time, whites in this category rose only 2,000. The black workers have risen in importance and bargaining power, necessitating a new deal. This deal involves the exclusive access to privileged as well as the removal of technological and legislative shackles blocking blacks to their upward mobility and expansion.

Thirdly, we have the (white international) pressure on South Africa which can only be resisted if we are seen to "liberalize".

Wiehahn then set out to resolve these problems, but all he's managed to do is reveal them.

The Black Worker's Struggle

Central to the report, this involves the incorporation of a security of the black population into institutions which cannot challenge the status quo. The formal representatives, bodies such as the I.C.W.U. and the I.C.W.U. would still be examples of this strategy. In addition, by giving certain sections of the black population access to urban residential rights, franchise rights, council voting rights, trading licenses and bank loans, it is hoped that they will put their joy (and) before politics and thus a buffer between the bitterness of the mass of black workers and the security of the state elite.

Incorporation of Trade Unions into the Structure defined by the State

The I.C.W.U. is a structure for white and black workers under the direction of employers, already under extensive provision for control of white, coloured and Indian workers. Under this it provides for the annual auditing of financial affairs and the submission of annual reports to the Dept. and control of qualifications and membership and a prohibition on affiliation to any political party. Wiehahn pur-poses to incorporate African workers into the all-encompassing system of control and discipline, rendering African unions accountable to the state as regards all aspects of their activities. The report recommends registration of unions, the industrial



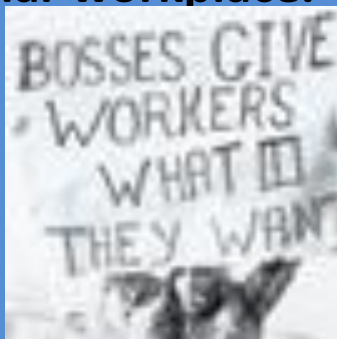
**Prof. Rick Turner, banned in 1973,
assassinated in 1977.**

Turner inspired a generation of white radical students at the University of Natal to throw themselves into defense of the grassroots African trade union born by the spontaneous strikes of 1973.

In these strikes, Turner and his comrades saw the possibility of a new, democratic South Africa, guided by the aspirations of the African working class.

By 1979, African workers had the power to build a new democratic trade union movement, under the umbrella of the Federation of South African Trade Unions.

Building on the legacy of the works committees, FOSATU organizers emphasized the “shopfloor organization of workers around a shopfloor union committee in each factory,” insisting that shop stewards would “be involved in negotiating all changes, grievances, and dismissals” in a particular workplace.



By the mid-1980s, the trade unions had become central players in opposition to the apartheid state.

With the fall of apartheid and the election of the ANC to power in the 1990s, COSATU (FOSATU's successor) became part of South Africa's governing coalition.

Still, many workers and unionists felt that the shop-floor struggle inaugurated in 1973 had been subordinated to the nationalist struggle for freedom.

These tensions still dominate the governing alliance in SA, made up of the ANC, COSATU, and the SA Communist Party.

