
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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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.

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

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.”
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.
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.”
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.
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
Gardener T. Gladile, a charter member of the textile workers union in the months after the strikes, later served as 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.”
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.