



**Building Trade Union
Democracy as Prefigurative
Politics in South Africa**

Nicole Ulrich

**A Southern African
Labour Pamphlet**



Zabalaza Books
www.zabalazabooks.net
"Knowledge is the key to be free!"

The logo for Zabalaza Books features a stylized white figure with arms raised, holding a flag that is split into red and black sections. The figure is positioned in front of a large, dark, brush-stroke-like background.

Building Trade Union Democracy as Prefigurative Politics in South Africa

Nicole Ulrich

This pamphlet is an extract from the book *Strategy: Debating Politics Within and at a Distance from the State* - Eds. John Reynolds & Lucien van der Walt published by the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

It is available for free download from:

https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/nalsu/documents2019/VMWS_-_Politics_within_and_at_a_distance_from_the_state_3.0_-_12_FEB.pdf

Front cover graphic: Workers meet during the Firestone Strike, August 1983. Photo by Paul Weinberg, Taffy Adler Papers

Source: *The future is in the hands of the workers': A History of FOSATU* by Michelle Friedman

★ www.zabalazabooks.net ★



Footnotes:

1. Baskin, J. 1991. *Striking Back: A history of COSATU*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
2. Foster, J. 1982. "The Workers' Struggle: Where does FOSATU stand?" reprinted in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol 9 (24): 99-114. See Byrne, S. and N. Ulrich. 2016. "Prefiguring Democratic Revolution? 'Workers' control' and 'workerist' traditions of radical South African labour, 1970-1985." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol 34 (3): 368-387.
3. Byrne, S., N. Ulrich and L. van der Walt. 2017. "Red, Black and Gold: FOSATU, South African 'workerism', 'syndicalism' and the nation." In Webster, E. and K. Pampallis. (eds.). *Hidden Voices: The unresolved national question in left thinking in South Africa under apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
4. COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions). 1985. Minutes of COSATU Inaugural Congress held at the University of Natal from 29 November-1 December 1985, AH2373, Congress Of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) Papers, 1984-1997, 5.1, annexure I: 5. Held at Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand.
5. Byrne *et al*, "Red, Black and Gold."

★ First Zabalaza Books edition, March 2020 ★

was not even addressed openly. A heavy stress on practical issues and a dismissal of what were labelled by some as “armchair theorising” meant that theoretical reflection was neglected; meanwhile the “workerists” did not organise within FOSATU as a coherent political group, which created more problems.

That said, these ideas are worth revisiting – to understand where we come from, and to judge where we are now. There are no easy answers.



Introduction

In examining the possibilities for politics within and at a distance from the state, it is important to revisit the democratic traditions of the working class, which are often learned through struggles and strikes – and which were exemplified by the new unions of the 1970s and 1980s. Not much of this alternative tradition of democracy outside the state has been captured in official histories, which present the attainment of democracy in terms of the formation of a parliamentary government in 1994.

There is a larger problem here of how the working-class heritage – the intellectual and organisational and political traditions of labour and the left – has been side-lined in media, textbooks, monuments and narratives; this also involves a narrowing of our political imagination, with our view of “democracy” itself narrowed dramatically. There has been a focus on elections and political parties and electoral politics. This reflects and reinforces a view that assumes a separation of the political – basically left to the state and the parties – and the economic – issues like wage negotiations are left to unions, and union involvement in politics is increasingly reduced to lobbying political parties.

One effect is that unions – which have almost four million members, considerably more than the audited membership of the big three parties combined – are presented as bit players, with the drama centred on the parties and the politicians. The other effect is that we tend not to learn from, and remember, the rich political traditions of the working class, both in communities and in trade unions.

There are many examples, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, of unions and other forces developing radically democratic, bottom-up movements, outside of the state. For example, the most radical and innovative strands of the anti-apartheid coalition, the United Democratic Front, developed into systems of direct self-government – “people’s power” – in places

like Cradock and Alexandra. The Young Christian Workers' movement, which was actively involved in the new unions of the 1970s, stressed the importance of a strong moral code and an accountable organising style, on the basis of See-Judge-Act.

In both cases, bottom-up democracy at a distance from the state was not just a *method* of organising for other goals – ending apartheid, improving wages etc. – but an *aim* of empowering the oppressed, giving control over daily life, and creating a new human community.

A third example is provided by the “workers’ control” and “workerist” traditions of the new unions, which I will explore below. Let me stress here that all of these examples had serious limitations, and, in revisiting them, I am not suggesting that they were perfect and can be mechanically applied. We do need to learn the lessons of their failings, but, at the same time, we also need to learn from their successes. This, I think, provides a powerful way of engaging contemporary challenges. We do not have to reinvent the wheel.

Focus: the “Workers’ Control” and “Workerist” Traditions from the 1970s

An important example of imaginations of an alternative society and different practices was the “workers’ control” tradition of the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC), which was formed in 1973 to unite some of the new unions.

There was a long history of unions in South Africa—unions were started more than 150 years ago – and of black-based unions, but black workers were victims of both class exploitation and racist oppression. With colonial capitalism and apartheid, there was systematic, institutional and legal discrimination against black workers, especially black Africans. For example, the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act, which for the first time provided real union rights in South Africa, excluded black Africans. The 1951 revision of this law banned “mixed” unions and laid the ground for making black African strikes illegal across the board.

Generally, before the 1970s, unions in South Africa were racially fragmented, mainly based among whites, coloureds and Indians, organisationally weak and based among a small part of the workforce.

the idea that a gradual series of ongoing reforms within and through the capitalist state could cumulatively change society.

One child of this approach was the “radical reform” of the 1990s COSATU unions, which is discussed in **Chapter 4.3**. (See the book *Strategy: Debating Politics Within and at a Distance from the State* - Eds. John Reynolds & Lucien van der Walt)

Decline: why so Fragile?

What happened to these traditions? At one level, they left a real imprint on COSATU. For example, COSATU adopted the principles of a tight federation, workers’ control, and unions playing a political role. We can even see some of the roots of “radical reform” thinking in FOSATU.

In the early period of COSATU, too, the “workerist” stress on remaining political but outside of party alliances also stayed in place. The first COSATU congress in fact resolved in 1985 that the new federation would play an active political role, but **“not affiliate to any political tendency or organisation.”**⁴

However, within two years the federation had openly aligned with ANC, and even in 1985, its leadership included many ANC supporters, while the name “Congress” itself identified the federation with ANC and SACTU. In 1990, it formally allied with the ANC and SACP, which persists to this day, a decision backed even by former “workerist” unions, like the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

We can blame repression, but the “workerists” also had significant political weaknesses. They did not have a strategy linking their immediate struggles to the longer-term socialist transformation that they sought. Their ideas were not always clear, and this led to some serious misjudgements.⁵

There was an ongoing, unresolved tension between more social democratic and more quasysindicalist strands within “workerism.” The first-named was expressed in the idea of ongoing reforms leading to socialism through the state (see above); the second-named pushed for more complete autonomy from the state, and more direct efforts by the workers themselves to take direct power in factories and townships. This tension between a social democratic focus on tactical use of the state, and quasi-sindicalist emphasis on autonomous counter-power,

- It stressed building a working-class counter-culture – including education, history, songs, poetry and theatre – to develop a radical socialist and class consciousness.

At a Distance from the State?

What this meant was that unions would be political, but autonomous of parties. Politics would involve debate and learning through practice and struggle. Workers would make their own political decisions, rather than just carry out decisions taken somewhere else, which would be undemocratic, and which could lead unions into battles they did not need and could not win.

So, the new unions of TUACC and FOSATU aimed at reforms in the workplace that would:

- Win tangible improvements for members.
- Build confidence.
- Take place bottom-up: winnable demands and measurable day-to-day victories within a few targeted workplaces were to be won in ways that strengthened workplace organisation and rank-and-file participation.

At the same time, the TUACC and FOSATU unions accepted **tactical engagement** with the state and law. While the apartheid state was obviously oppressive, they argued that democratic organisations such as unions could pressure the state to make concessions, without being co-opted. They could even use state systems – such as labour law, industrial councils, and courts – so long as checks-and-balances were in place and this did not change the unions’ focus on struggle. For example, in the so-called “registration debate,” FOSATU chose to register with the state for the purposes of using labour laws, but refused to register until certain demands were met – the removal of restrictions on migrant workers, for example – and so long as the unions did not become part of the state.

Rather than building completely outside and against the state in pursuit of the new society, some workerists clearly envisaged some social change occurring from **within** the institutions of the state, through participation and engagement in these structures. In this, they helped lay the basis for

The 1960s were noted as a “decade of darkness,” in the words of Baskin,¹ with union decline and the apartheid state crushing opposition.

The “Workers Control” Tradition and the TUACC

This changed in the 1970s with the rise of new unions, which changed the landscape forever. The new unions were not just a revival of the old, and were not just considerably larger – the biggest black-based union federation in the mid-1950s, the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was less than 60,000 in total, the new unions reached one million in the mid-1980s – but also involved new modes of organisation.

First, there was a mass strike wave in 1973-1974. Running alongside this was a new worker-focused infrastructure: the Urban Training Project, the Industrial Aid Society, the Western Cape Province Workers Advice Bureau, and the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund. This last-named was not an NGO, but a worker-run, worker-funded funeral scheme that also funded worker education and the new unions.

Then there were new unions, some founded in 1973, joined by some of the established mainly Coloured unions, especially in the Cape. Then there were new federations, notably the TUACC.

TUACC’s critical contributions to the movement were the ideas, first, of “building tomorrow today,” meaning that how we organise today shapes the future we can win (so, for a democratic future, build a democratic workers movement); and, second, a stress on “workers’ control,” which meant strong, non-racial, independent, democratic shop-floor-based unions centred on assemblies and shop stewards. What this also meant is that unions should not be controlled by political parties or by the government.

We can summarise this as follows:

- Coherent organisational strategy: unions would build factory-to-factory, targeting winnable battles.
- A “tight federation”: this meant joint policies and shared resources across the federation.

- “Open” unions: the TUACC unions rejected apartheid laws that racially segregated unions, and racist measures; it redefined unions to lay the basis for (prefigure) a non-racial, common future. In the Eastern Cape, this included bridging the divide between black African and Coloured workers, for example.
- Industrial unions: unite workers across industry and South Africa, regardless of skill, job, colour, belief or gender or language.
- Shop-floor democracy: this meant democracy from the bottom-up, with ordinary workers in control of all parts of the unions, based on elected and recallable representatives that dominate decision-making at all levels of the union, and no voting rights for hired officials, who also would get standard workers’ wages.
- Prioritising worker education: unions would control their education programmes, stressing the value of both technical skills – like negotiating – and of a broader understanding of society – allowing people to understand the problems, and decide on solutions.

The “Workerist” Tradition of FOSATU

This “workers’ control” idea, created in great part from below by TUACC workers, was expanded in the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which was formed 1979 in large part by TUACC. In FOSATU, the idea of “workers’ control” developed into a project to build a larger “working class movement” at the centre of the struggle. According to its general-secretary Joe Foster in a famed

1981 speech that movement would: ²

- Challenge apartheid and capitalism at the same time, rather than defer socialism to a later stage, after majority rule.
- Challenge apartheid and capitalism with a single movement, where unions would undertake both political and economic struggles, rather than outsource one to a party.
- Build class consciousness, rejecting nationalist multi-class alliances – FOSATU looked north, and saw a pattern of nationalist

parties like ZANU in Zimbabwe suppressing or capturing unions after majority rule.

- The larger “working class movement” would include community-based struggles, co-operatives and a socialist media.

Meanwhile, FOSATU retained key TUACC positions, like control via assemblies and shop-stewards, a tight federation, non-racialism, and struggle.

This FOSATU approach was labelled “workerism” by its critics, and was rejected by the ANC and SACP, who were then labelled the “populists” by their critics. The workerist-populist debate would continue in the early years of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), formed 1985 at the initiative of FOSATU and uniting many unions, including from outside FOSATU, into a giant.

So, for “workerism,” unions were to be the centre of a larger “working-class” movement that would challenge both apartheid and capitalism, and lay the basis for a radically democratic South Africa.

The ideas were as follows: ³

- Workers’ control of unions would be expanded into workers’ (and working class) control more widely, including the economy and production, and democratising society.
- Workers’ control over “reproduction” would also be attempted – i.e. organising in the neighbourhoods – which was expressed in activities of FOSATU veterans like Moses Mayekiso. Mayekiso organised street and block committees in Alexandra township, modelled on the unions’ assemblies and shop-steward structure.
- A “working class movement” that could fight for **both** socialism and national liberation on its own terms – a worker-led national liberation – that rejected the idea that nationalism is the only form of national liberation. It rejected the idea that there was a separation between class struggle and the struggle against apartheid, since the working class needed to make national liberation serve its own interests.
- It was socialist (anti-capitalist and anti-apartheid), but sceptical of the ANC and SACP.