



**RADICAL SA LABOUR**  
PAMPHLET SERIES



# Prefiguring Democratic Revolution?

'Workers' Control' and 'Workerist'  
Traditions of Radical South African  
Labour, 1970-1985

Sian Byrne and Nicole Ulrich



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*"Knowledge is the key to be free!"*



Notes:

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## Notes:



*Front cover: Municipal workers marching through the city centre, escorted by a municipal traffic policeman, Durban, 1973*



Sian Byrne & Nicole Ulrich, Prefiguring Democratic Revolution? 'Workers' Control' and 'Workerist' Traditions of Radical South African Labour, 1970–1985, first published in the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2016



★ First Zabalaza Books edition, March 2021 ★

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During the 1970s and early 1980s, sections of the trade union movement questioned the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party’s (SACP’s) narrow vision of freedom, which was based on the capture of the colonial state by a nationalist elite. Located within a distinct political current that prioritised participatory/ direct-democracy and egalitarianism workers were regarded as the locus of transformative power in society, and their organisations were viewed as prefiguring a radically democratic future. This article examines the very different kind of radical anti-colonial engagement offered by ‘workers’ control’ in the 1970s and ‘workerism’ in the early 1980s that was developed by the Trade Union Advisory Co-ordinating Council (TUACC) and the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), respectively. Keen to draw lessons for the trade union movement today, this article outlines the key characteristics and limits of these traditions that facilitated their decline in the post-apartheid context.

*Workers obviously have political interests, but these are best catered for by workers organisations. What they should not allow is to let themselves be controlled by non-worker political parties ... or they will find their interests disregarded and their organisation and power gradually cut away. (Bonner 1979)*

South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement was more complex than is often acknowledged. From within its ranks emerged distinct political currents that questioned the nationalist and militarist traditions of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) – operating instead on the basis of mutual aid and self-reliance, bottom-up democratic practice and egalitarian structures in which ‘the people’, ‘workers’ or ‘the community’ were regarded as the locus of transformative power in society, and in which their organisations were viewed as prefiguring a radically democratic future.

From a historical perspective, these traditions – of ‘people’s power’ and ‘workers’ control’ – demonstrate the possibility of very different kinds of

anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, ones that embraced a broader vision of political freedom, beyond the franchise and far beyond the simple capture of a colonial or apartheid state by a nationalist party or elite. These were associated with sections of, for example, the United Democratic Front (Neocosmos 1996; Suttner 2004), and the independent trade union movement. A powerful battering ram against apartheid, this radical, democratic form of politics has proven remarkably fragile in the face of the parliamentary political settlement of 1994, quickly giving way to state and party-centred politics, a preoccupation with elections, and political machines based on patronage.

This article critically assesses aspects of this alternative democratic mobilisation, focusing on its expression in the non-racial labour movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. The specific focus is on the 'workers' control' tradition developed by the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC), formed 1974, and the 'workerist' tradition associated within the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), formed in 1979, which incorporated but transcended TUACC's 'workers' control' tradition.

TUACC's 'workers' control' stressed building strong, non-racial, independent, democratic shop-floor-based unions centred on assemblies and shop stewards. The term 'workerist' came to prominence in heated 1980s polemics between FOSATU on one side, and ANC and SACP 'populists' on the other: it was used by opponents to caricature FOSATU positions. Despite this, it is possible to discern a distinct 'workerist' tradition. 'Workerism' rejected narrow economism, the SACP's 'two-stage' approach ('national democracy' or majority rule first, socialism later), and the ANC's multi-class nationalism. It wanted strong, democratic, industrial, unions at the point of production, autonomous of political parties. These unions were envisaged as the centre of a larger 'working-class' movement that could challenge both apartheid and capitalism, and lay the basis for a radically democratic South Africa.

Drawing heavily from interviews with key TUACC and FOSATU activists, and primary documents, this article stresses the positive lessons to be drawn for today's oppositional movements, including the practices of accountability, democratic participation, radical workers' education, and non-racial, class-based, anti-racist politics. To serve as a useable labour history, the limitations of 'workers' control' and 'workerism' are also examined. This article will show that the radical promise of both traditions was undermined by tensions between reformist and radical strands, by

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weaknesses and inconsistencies in tactics, strategy and vision, nebulous long-term thinking, and by ambiguities in analyses.

## Exclusion, Segregation and Dependence

The new unions that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s had to contend with a legacy of institutional and legal discrimination against black workers, especially black African workers; a large, entrenched, white-dominated union movement fractured along racial lines, centred on the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA formed 1954); and a history of undemocratic and precarious workplace organisation. The 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA), the cornerstone of South Africa's modern industrial relations system, had entrenched the rightlessness of African workers (as workers) by excluding 'pass-bearing Natives' from the definition of 'employee' (Lever 1977; Davies 1978). African men were excluded from unions registered with the state under the ICA, the statutory industrial relations machinery, and denied the same rights established for Indian, Coloured and white workers. Unions for African workers were not banned, but employers were not compelled to negotiate with them. Strikes by African workers were effectively illegal.

In 1951 the ICA was brought in line with apartheid policy (Horner 1976). Racially mixed unions, consisting of Coloureds, Indians and whites – possible in terms of the 1924 ICA – were now actively discouraged. An entirely separate industrial relations system was established for African workers, all of whom (including women) were now excluded from being 'employees'. If African workers sought workplace representation, they were pressured to use statutory 'works committees'.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part, workers in South Africa organised along racial lines. Registered unions centred on formations like TUCSA focused on white, and to a lesser extent, Coloured and Indian workers. Some of these rights-bearing registered trade unions set up 'parallel' African unions and (as rights-bearing unions) negotiated on behalf of African workers. However, a strand of more left-wing unions sought to overcome legal and racial barriers by exploiting a legal loophole and admitted African women – who did not carry passes – as full members.

In spite of these barriers, African workers experimented with a range of union forms: these included the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of Africa in the 1910s; the syndicalist-influenced, but eclectic Industrial and Workers' Commercial Union (ICU) in the 1920s–1930s; unions linked to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, reformed underground as the SACP in 1953) like the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) and the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) in the 1920s and 1940s respectively; 'parallel' African unions (discussed above); and the 'political unionism' of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Forming unions was not the only way in which workers resisted. They also developed other modes of (often clandestine) organisation, autonomous from managerial control and influence, and based on established social networks and collective modes of engagement that were often profoundly democratic in nature. For instance, in his study of Durban dockworkers, Hemson (1979) noted that during a wildcat strike in 1969, workers refused to elect representatives, confronted management *en masse*, and shouted their demands in unison. This form of collective action did not point to the absence of collective organisation, but was, on the contrary, orchestrated by networks of workers that aimed to 'build up demands of the workers through discussion' and ensure leaders were not separated from other workers (Hemson 1979).

Unions would, on occasion, also draw on these traditions and modes to mobilise workers during strikes. However, these workers' democratic traditions were, at times, at odds with unions' organisational practices. Historically, unions organising African workers struggled to build durable organisational structures with transparent financial controls; many tended to be controlled in a top-down manner by charismatic leaders or bureaucrats, the ICU being a case in point; or were subjected to undue influence by political parties, with SACTU a case in point.

In all cases, African-based unions were engaged in larger struggles around civic, political and social rights. Given the country's history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid, it was difficult to separate political issues from narrower bread-and-butter demands. For instance, the ICU, which claimed over 100,000 members at its height, fought against the 'dipping' of Africans in Durban and the evictions of black tenant farmers (Bonner 1978; Bradford 1988; Van der Walt 2007). In the 1940s, many CNETU militants were committed CPSA members, and the federation sought to push the political boundaries of the time.

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This political orientation continued into the 1950s. According to Cherry (1992) and Lambert (1988), SACTU unions could draw strength from their political alliance with the ANC. Yet their structures were often fairly weak, and rank-and-file members struggled to set political agendas outside the ANC (and SACP) framework, in which unions were often viewed as party auxiliaries. The CPSA was banned in 1950, and the ANC in 1960. SACTU remained legal but suffered police harassment and employer antagonism, and increasingly focused on aiding the ANC/SACP guerrilla campaign that started in 1961, rather than union work.

TUACC and FOSATU unions, emerging in the 1970s, drew inspiration from earlier, but were also critical of what they saw as their predecessors' errors. They were determined to end patterns of racial fragmentation, organisational instability, union oligarchy and party control. From the outset, the new unions aimed to establish robust, self-directed, non-racial structures based on participatory/direct-democracy rooted in the shop floor.

## A New Unionism

After the banning of the ANC, SACTU was at its nadir, and other efforts to organise African workers in the 1960s faltered. The revival of black trade unionism was marked by the 1973 strike-wave that started in Natal. The strikes were triggered by migrant workers who downed tools at the Coronation Brick Company in January. By the end of March, the strikes had spread to Pietermaritzburg and Port Shepstone, and an estimated 160 strikes had taken place at 146 establishments, involving over 60,000 workers (IIE 1974).

Workers struck and protested at the factories, rather than staying at home in the township ghettos, as had been SACTU's style in the 1950s (IIE 1974). Thousands marched in the streets. The collective, and mass character of the strikes – all the more remarkable given the extremely repressive era of high apartheid in which they took place – emboldened workers and gave a glimpse of their potential power. Leading unionist, Alpheus Mthethwa, remembered: 'I had never been involved in such a situation. It was like seeing the beginning of a revolution' (2003). He recalled: 'there was a wind of change ... people in the industry were beginning to say 'No!'".

In this climate, workers flocked to join the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF). This was formed in Durban in June 1972, drawing in SACTU activists, university-based radicals, and registered trade unions, like the Textile Workers Industrial Union (Ulrich 2007). The GFWBF had, from the outset, a commitment to broad-based and democratic participation, with regular meetings held to discuss workers' grievances, and decisions made collectively. David Hemson, who went on to play a prominent role in the workers' movement before being 'banned' from political activity in 1974, recalled:

*Initially the meetings took the form of 'hearings' at which workers told officials more about the labour process ... With time the meetings evolved into a type of executive committee of a trade union as a chairperson was elected with a committee ... the meetings were strongly democratic, with the elected leadership cautiously putting forward their views and attempting to reach consensus.* (Hemson 2003)

The GFWBF was not a union, but a benefit society. Members were expected to make regular financial contributions. This meant the GFWBF also provided a source of income for a complaints service, and educational seminars (Maree 1986). Thus, unlike many community movements today, which are dependent on international donors or NGO funds, the GFWBF was able to set its own agenda through democratic meetings, and to raise its own funds from worker-members. Such financial independence was a core factor enabling an emerging practice of 'workers' control'. The GFWBF set up Metal Allied Workers Union (MAWU), the Furniture and Timber Workers Union (FTWU), the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and, later, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The new unions, the GFWBF and the newly established Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) were united under TUACC.

Several key principles of 'workers' control' of unions were put in place from the outset. First, TUACC was to 'evolve a common and broad based approach to the building of the unions' (TUACC 1974a). It was envisaged as a 'tight federation', which meant that unions developed joint policies and shared resources across the federation (Maree 1986; TUACC 1974a). It is this commitment to developing a common programme that would subsequently allow 'workers' control' to develop as a coherent

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**Nicole Ulrich** is a labour historian based at Rhodes University, South Africa, interested in the organisation, political ideas and identities of the labouring classes in Southern Africa. In addition to the radically democratic forms of organisation that emerged among organised workers in the 1970s, she researches the solidarities and broader transnational connections forged by slaves, Khoesan servants, sailors and soldiers in the early colonial Cape. She has been involved in the Workers' Library and Museum, the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Centre for African Studies, University of Cambridge. Her work has been published, inter alia, in *African Studies*, the *International Review of Social History*, the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *New Contree* and the *South African Historical Journal*.

organisational strategy by the end of the decade. Second, TUACC only accepted affiliates that were 'open' and admitted all workers regardless of race (TUACC 1974b). In so doing, the TUACC rejected apartheid laws, and redefined unionism in South Africa to prefigure a non-racial, common future. Further, TUACC was committed to establishing democratic structures that ensured that worker leaders, elected and held accountable by members on the shop floor, dominated decision-making at every level of the organisation (TUACC 1974b). In theory, democratic structures ensured that elected worker leaders controlled the organisation, and that members controlled the leaders. Un-elected paid 'officials' were deliberately given extremely limited powers so as to remain subject to the dictates of elected and accountable worker leaders.

For TUACC, 'workers' control' was about acknowledging workers' agency, especially black workers' agency, through mass-based, bottom-up, participatory-democratic unions. It tapped into the growing confidence of workers, and the self-organised character of many strikes. 'Workers' control' was about workers taking charge of their own organisations, and setting the agenda for their own political and economic liberation. In a context of over three centuries of colonialism and national oppression, this approach was profoundly radical and political. It was explicitly viewed as a means of ensuring that workers had complete possession of the unions, which were not to be subjected to state controls, union oligarchies or party control. The stress on shop-floor democracy, as the centrepiece of unionism at every level, was, in this sense, seen as a key innovation.

## The Makers of 'Workers' Control'

TUACC unions were committed, from the start, to building a new type of unionism, but it is important to note that the meaning and functioning of 'workers' control' was forged through everyday struggles. Over the decade, TUACC's affiliates built unions that were both resilient and democratic, and a workers' movement that was increasingly wary of political alliances. In looking at the new unions of the 1970s, like those affiliated to TUACC, the literature has tended to focus on the influence of white, university-educated activists ('white intellectuals') and to debate the extent to which these activists promoted or limited democratic practice

(Buhlungu 2006a, 2006b; Maree 2006a, 2006b). However, the literature's emphasis on this small group has, ironically, elided the central role of workers, worker leaders, and black political activists in determining union policy and practice, and in the making of the 'workers' control'.

TUACC unions mainly organised unskilled migrant men (under threat from economic restructuring) and semi-skilled urban-based women in manufacturing (a product of rapid industrialisation) (Webster 1979). Due to the lack of formal schooling among migrant members, there were few worker leaders able to administer unions and challenge management directly. Some had gained organisational experience (through participating in political parties and migrant associations), but most lacked the organisational skills needed for formal organisations and unions (including letter writing, minute taking, etc.) (Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich 2006). They were also hampered by their inability to communicate fluently in English, the main language of business, and lacked the confidence to negotiate with management (Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich 2006).

Strikingly, then, it was semi-skilled women who were more educated than their migrant men counterparts, who provided the fledging union movement with a crucial layer of worker leaders. According to Hemson (2003), it was women workers in textiles who spearheaded much of the industrial action, and maintained the momentum of the 1973 strikes. The reach of this female leadership was not restricted to National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), nor to the umbrella structures of TUACC, but extended into predominantly male, migrant unions such as MAWU. It is this leadership that deserves closer attention.

## Bottom-Up Democracy and Resilience

TUACC affiliates wanted to establish unions that challenged the power of employers and the state at the workplace, and that dealt directly with employers. They were overtly critical of the apartheid state and of the existing industrial relations framework. Besides the rigid racial policies that shaped society and the workplace, TUACC activists rejected the labour law, specifically designed to undermine non-racial unionisation (Maree 1986; Friedman 1987). However, sustained organisation proved difficult, and TUACC had to devise practical strategies and tactics to

## Notes:

1. Works committees were extremely limited, but were the only recognised structures that included representatives selected by African workers.
2. Gramsci (1968, 30) described them as 'roughly equivalent to the shop steward committees set up in Britain during the First World War'.
3. Pat Horn remarked (retrospectively), that hearing about anarcho-syndicalism years later in Brazil 'reminded me of our syndicalism of the early days', but that it was 'regarded as a circumstantial thing', and that she 'never read any syndicalist authors' (Horn interview 2010).
4. For example, Pillay (2006, 171) suggests that 'populists' prioritised anti-apartheid struggle (ignoring capitalism), while 'workerists' prioritised anti-capitalist struggle (ignoring apartheid).
5. Joe Foster, FOSATU General-Secretary, speculated that this could comprise 'trade unions, co-ops, political parties and newspapers' (1982c, 6).

with the ANC and SACP that has dominated COSATU since the 1990s. Within this context, a politics that identified ordinary workers or people as agents of change, quickly gave way to electoral and party politics after the first democratic election.

survive. In 1973 the NUTW secured a historic recognition agreement with the British multinational, Smith and Nephew (Maree 1986). In essence, Smith and Nephew accepted the NUTW as a legitimate representative of workers, agreeing to negotiate directly with the union at plant level and giving the union factory access to organise workers and conduct shop steward elections. This allowed NUTW to bypass the ICA's statutory industrial machinery, and establish union rights directly.

A novel trade union tactic had emerged. Other TUACC affiliates quickly recognised the overwhelming benefits of such agreements, and the demand for employer recognition of unions became a key focus. It was, however an uphill battle: most employers and managers rejected any meaningful negotiations with African workers. Some were guided by a sense of racial paternalism, even calling on experts to decipher 'Bantu' customs and provide materials and education on 'cultural distance' in the workplace (SALB Comment 1977). Such employers maintained that African workers were too unsophisticated for 'responsible' unionism. They were suspicious of independent worker initiatives and industrial action was usually attributed to outside agitators and subversives.

Victimisation of union members, lockouts, widespread dismissal and the arrest and prosecution of strikers were commonly used by employers against autonomous worker organisation (Maree 1986; Ulrich 2007). The apartheid government also disrupted the day-to-day operation of the open unions, through persistent harassment and repression: for example, pass book raids were held outside union offices to intimidate workers, and a number of unionists were 'banned' in 1974, 1975 and 1976 (Maree 1986; Ulrich 2007).

TUACC unionists feared that the new unions would not survive and decided to rationalise resources by focusing on those companies (mainly foreign-owned) that might be willing to recognise unions with African members (Maree 1986; Ulrich 2007). Building democracy on the shop floor remained central, and core responsibilities were devolved from organisers to shop stewards, who were expected to recruit, organise and collect subscriptions (MAWU 1975).

Extensive programmes of worker education became central: worker education was placed under union control and made to fit union needs (Ulrich 2007). Experienced worker leaders dismissed from employment due to union activity were sometimes absorbed into the TUACC as paid organisers: notable examples included Petrus Mashishi and Moses

Mayikeso, and organisers who understood the intricacies of union work became responsible for educating and supporting shop stewards (Bonner 2003).

The focus on shop stewards deepened democracy. For instance, in 1975 the CWIU set up general Saturday forums across unions, called 'locals', to assist with the development of new worker leaders (1975). The TGWU and the NUTW started calling for 'councils' to unite shop stewards across factories (1975). While local organisation deepened, TUACC also moved into other provinces. With the assistance of the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) in Johannesburg, MAWU started to organise beyond Natal, the TUACC heartland, and in June 1978, TUACC was reconstituted as a national body (Ulrich 2007). The TUACC's commitment to national organisation was expressed in the principle 'One Union, One Industry, One Country', and its central role in driving unity talks that eventuated in FOSATU in 1979.

## Pitfalls of Political Alliances

TUACC activists and members were motivated by broader political concerns: some supported 'Congress'; others drew from the New Left. However, they all agreed that the new union movement should avoid the kind of repression that SACTU had endured in the 1960s, when the apartheid state clamped down on the ANC. This led to a distancing from parties, less due to principles than pragmatic concerns with attracting workers regardless of political affiliation, and securing the survival of a still very vulnerable workers movement. It was only later that the TUACC became wary of political alliances with 'populist' and nationalist parties as such. A key focus was creating union structures that could operate openly, which, it was argued, facilitated clear lines of accountability and prevented decisions from being taken undemocratically by individuals or organisations not under the control of workers (Horn 2003).

TUACC distanced itself from banned organisations and sought alliances that could offer black workers some protection (Ulrich 2007). TUACC unions also decided to engage tactically with aspects of the existing industrial relations system and the state. Unionists argued that while the apartheid state was a repressive instrument, it also maintained the rule of law and could be forced to reform (Hemson 2003). Through strong, democratic organisations, they argued, unions could pressure the state to make concessions, without being co-opted. Unions should, they argued,

control of the unions – but it was initially fiercely contested between 'workerists' (centred on unions like MAWU/NUMSA) and 'populists' (centred on the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which were never part of FOSATU). The democratic practices and radical vision of FOSATU proved weaker than might have been expected. By the 1990s, 'workerism' as a distinct current had largely disappeared: COSATU formally allied with the ANC and SACP soon after their unbanning in 1990, and remains in this alliance, more than two decades later, despite repeatedly expressing its frustration with pro-capitalist ANC policies.

COSATU's close links to the ANC and SACP have borne out many of the 'workerists' warnings: the parties have intervened heavily in unions' affairs and many unions have become increasingly bureaucratised and distant from their worker base; the ANC has paid little heed to COSATU's policy proposals, embracing neo-liberalism, but has made use of COSATU resources at election time.

This situation has led to the fracturing of COSATU itself. NUM has suffered a series of splits, and lost majority status on the platinum mines, playing only a limited role in the mass strikes of the early 2010s. In August 2012, when police killed 44 striking miners and injured 78 at Marikana, the NUM presented the killings as a 'tragedy' rather than a 'massacre', and its leadership did not distance itself from dangerous ANC and SACP claims that rival unions were 'vigilantes' and counter-revolutionaries (e.g. Mapaila 2012). Marikana was the immediate trigger for NUMSA deciding to withdraw support from the ANC and SACP in 2013, although the massacre brought to a head the union's growing disenchantment. Following this decision, NUMSA was ousted from COSATU in 2015, costing the federation its largest manufacturing union.

We suggest that the weaknesses of workers' control and 'workerism' were due to the ambiguities and tensions in strategy and theory, exemplified by the lack of long-term perspectives and a programme. This led to key problems. For example, the tendency within FOSATU to a reformist reading of the state led to tactics that eroded genuine workers' control, a core principle. The notion, held by some, that the state was a site of class struggle led to an ongoing use of the courts, as well as (from 1979) the statutory industrial relations structures set up by the ICA. But these were institutions in which worker power and self-activity played very little role, with workers' initiative ceded to lawyers and negotiators, and the rules of engagement set by the state. The politics of using state institutions led, directly, to the politics of seeking to shape the state through the alliance

courts. Rather than building *outside* and *against* the state in pursuit of new society, it envisaged social change occurring from *within* the institutions of the state, through *participation* and *engagement* in these structures (Byrne 2012). Its assumptions were that the state could be reformed, and that a gradual series of ongoing reforms within and through the capitalist state could cumulatively change society, without a revolution.

'Workerism' contained, in other words, two somewhat different tendencies in its strategy, a quasi-syndicalist approach (similar to the early Gramsci) and a more social democratic one (similar to the Euro-communist reading of the later Gramsci – see Showstack Sassoon 1988). The latter approach, in the words of Fine (1982, 55), involved ideas that

*the apartheid state, like any capitalist state' was 'not a monolithic entity and purely functional instrument of capital, but a force which workers can affect by their struggles and one that is itself torn by the contradictions of the labour-capital relation.'*

Therefore, 'dominated classes and groups may well be able' to turn concessions 'to their advantage, exploiting the contradiction in which the state is trapped', and 'transform the character of these official institutions' (Innes 1982, 62). It is difficult to see how a growing involvement of this sort could truly be reconciled with a long-run project of workers' control of unions, the economy and the larger society.

## **Conclusion: Limitations and Erosion**

TUACC and FOSATU created a new type of unionism that identified workers and unions as the force to lead the challenge against apartheid and, in so doing, create an alternative, non-racial, deeply democratic, indeed socialist, future. They also managed to survive and grow in the repressive 1970s and early 1980s, no small achievement, and laid the basis for COSATU, which had an incredible 462,359 members at its launch (Macun and Frost 1994).

COSATU retained most of the core TUACC and FOSATU principles – industrial unionism, a 'tight' federation, non-racialism and workers'

make use of any legal advances to further their own aims. This approach differed significantly with SACTU's: now almost completely reduced to an exile body, sharing offices with the ANC and SACP, it insisted that the South African state was 'fascist' – and that therefore, armed struggle was a better option than open union activity (Hemson 2003). TUACC's 'tactical engagement' with the law included court action and the use of legally-sanctioned workplace works and liaison committees. Its pragmatism, however, also had important costs. For example, union educational courses and seminars served as one of the mechanisms through which broader political issues could be raised (Hemson 2003). Anti-capitalism and the importance of understanding class divisions within South African society emerged as a central theme in worker education (Ulrich 2007). But fear of repression led to a certain amount of political silencing within the workers' movement (Murphy 2003). Any evidence that African workers were being exposed to socialist or communist ideas could and did result in the arrest and 'banning' of unionists. This meant that political issues were not always discussed openly, and that frank debate or a clear programme for transition was hampered. In this way, the concern with survival effectively took priority over careful social analyses – for example, theorising the state – and a clear articulation between different parts of TUACC activities through a coherent approach.

One effect was that the TUACC unions did not always clearly consider the costs that certain tactics could have for a class-struggle, anti-capitalist, anti-apartheid movement. A case in point was TUACC's controversial decision to find allies among 'traditional leaders' and 'homeland' politicians: who formed an integral part of the apartheid state's apparatus. It was hoped that linkages with KwaZulu politicians would provide the fragile workers' movement with an additional layer of protection (Maree 1986; Ulrich 2007). Some within the unions were very critical of this move (Hemson 1979; Cheadle 2006). Nonetheless, the undemocratic and problematic nature of homeland structures was not discussed systematically. Instead an approach was made to KwaZulu leader, Chief Gatsha Buthelezi – at the time seen as one of 'the most outspoken of the homeland leaders in attacking the South African government': he 'warmly accepted the idea' of working with unions, and appointed his ally, Barney Dladla, a popular activist with historic links to SACTU and the Congress movement, to deal with labour (IIE 1974, 97). TUACC was not in any position to dictate the terms of this relationship, and it yielded few positive results.

TUACC was also caught off guard when Buthelezi began urging the unions to join Inkatha, a Zulu-based 'cultural' nationalist movement that was closely allied to his government and uncritical of employers (Maree 1986). As Inkatha stepped up its efforts to woo workers – specifically Zulu migrant workers, a key TUACC constituency – its differences with TUACC were brought into sharp focus. By 1978 TUACC decided not to affiliate with Inkatha, although it would not object to individual workers joining. TUACC in Natal was keen to maintain the autonomy of the new workers' movement, but also to avoid splits along party lines – as would happen if workers were to choose between Inkatha and TUACC. However, an important lesson had been learned: while the unions could enter into alliances with other formations, such relations should 'never ever exercise the slightest degree of influence on the union movement either in respect of its policies or in respect to its activities' (TUACC 1978; Maree 1986, 352).

But TUACC's updated policy effectively left the political affiliations and many of the views of workers unchallenged, and involved steering clear of controversial issues. It could be, and often was, understood to involve allowing a division of labour between unions and parties: in the absence of a clearly defined political programme, it suggested political issues could be left to nationalist organisations like the ANC and Inkatha. TUACC evolving policy on party affiliations, driven by events in Natal, was largely a defensive move designed to protect the unions from being swallowed up by a nationalist movement, and did not involve a coherent alternative conception in line with 'workers' control'.

## From 'Workers' Control' to 'Workerism'

TUACC unionists in the Transvaal province were meanwhile developing a more sophisticated position than in Natal. They became critical of union alliances with nationalist parties *in principle*, and sought instead to build a 'working class movement' that could fight for socialism *and* national liberation on its own terms (Ulrich 2007). This was a challenge to the notion that there could be a neat distinction between 'economic' and 'political' struggles, or division of labour between unions and parties: as shown below, this idea would become central to FOSATU 'workerism'.

if 'workers' control' was designed to anticipate 'generalised worker power' (Bonner 2010), how would the one actually become the other? What would a future of 'generalised worker power' actually involve, even schematically? It was always somewhat nebulous. 'Workerism' also suffered from problems of theoretical reflection and strategic coherence, and was weak on formulating clear alternatives and a coherent strategy and programme. Partly this related to isolation, the lack of access to theoretical materials and, to some extent, a reluctance to have open discussions, given the 'treasonable nature' (Barrett 2010) of 'workerist' aspirations. But there was also a conscious subordination of long-term thinking and strategising to short-term concerns: 'we just didn't spend a lot of our time trying to think through things that we saw being not practical at that time' (Fanaroff 2009). Serious reflection and rigorous discussion on larger issues were sometimes dismissed as 'armchair' politics (Fanaroff 2009).

Like TUACC, FOSATU tended to be very pragmatic and short-termist, downplaying theory as 'esoteric' (Fanaroff 2009; Webster 2010), leading to a 'loose and fuzzy' theoretical basis (Bonner 2010). A clear strategy and programme was exchanged for 'a bit of a blind faith that as long as you – as long as we all – sort of believed in the transformation at some point, that we would find the tools when the moment arrived' (Barrett 2010). There were ambiguities and tensions in 'workerist' thinking, which contributed to many 'workerists' capitulation to the ANC and SACP: 'we could see no effective means of transferring factory power into seizure of state power' (Erwin interview 2009).

## Between Prefiguration and Reformism

This ambiguity was carried into and expressed in FOSATU strategy, which vacillated between two conflicting tendencies. The first was quasi-syndicalist in character, stressing prefiguration, counter-power, counter-culture, and an ambitious project of self-management within and beyond production (Byrne 2012). This project of 'building tomorrow today' had extremely radical implications, and promoted a vision of a profoundly democratic, socialist future. But running alongside this was a second strand of thinking, more social democratic in orientation, which followed in the wake of TUACC's pragmatism, 'tactical engagement' and use of the

a 'working class movement' <sup>5</sup> that went beyond the unions, influencing workers in the material, political, ideological and cultural aspects of their lives (1982c; Webster 1985).

There were three main characteristics to this, all part of the project of expanding the frontiers of control, inside and outside of the workplace (Byrne 2012). First, FOSATU built towards the formation of a counter-culture to challenge the imposed (ruling class) culture pervasive in society, often transmitted through the bourgeois media. This entailed the construction of a specifically *working class* identity – replete with its own history, newspapers, heroes, songs, choirs, cultural days, festivals, etc. Second, FOSATU conducted extensive popular education designed to counter the state schooling system, which was structured to perpetuate class and race domination and stamp out all creative and critical faculties, especially of African workers (*FOSATU Worker News* 1985; FOSATU n.d.c). Third, FOSATU sought to foster the development of 'organic intellectuals', a politically astute and accountable cadre of worker leaders as the fulcrum of this new worker knowledge and counter-culture. This was about 'winning the kind of ideology/consciousness battle among the shop steward leadership, in the hope, with the desire that this would spread out, and that they in turn would influence or become key players or influences in the community' (Bonner 2010).

## Ambiguities and Weaknesses in the 'Workerist' Project

By the mid-1980s, FOSATU was the strongest and most militant union movement in the country, and the leading force in the unity talks that led to the formation of the even larger Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985. But 'workerism' was eventually displaced from its central position, and COSATU aligned to the ANC and SACP. By the early 1990s, many former 'workerists' were drawn into the parties, and unions once centrally identified with 'workerism', like CWIU and MAWU/NUMSA were focusing their attention on developing social democratic policies for an incoming ANC government.

This eclipse needs to be seen as partly the result of weaknesses in 'workerism' itself. The 'workerists' often did not develop a clear strategy linking current strategy and tactics to longer term 'transformation'. Future aspiration and the present mobilisation were left disconnected:

After months of TUACC-led unity talks, FOSATU was inaugurated in April 1979. It was the first truly national federation of predominantly unregistered trade unions to operate openly in South Africa since the late 1960s. It was also one of the largest, growing from 45,000 members at formation to 140,000 in 1985 (Baskin 1991; Friedman 2011), which was substantially larger than SACTU at its height, and comparable to the ICU and CNETU. FOSATU was also national and had affiliates in the major industrial centres in the Natal, Transvaal and Cape provinces. But FOSATU's real significance lay not in its size, but in its innovative ideas and organisational approach. FOSATU drew on TUACC's 'workers' control', its non-racialism, its 'One Union, One Industry, One Country' policy, and its 'tight' federation model ([n.d.] 1982). But it also expanded the Transvaal TUACC's thinking about alliances. FOSATU was more explicitly socialist (even if it was sometimes vague on what this meant), overtly sceptical of nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, and more openly 'political', rejecting the 'false dichotomy drawn between politics and economics in which politics is confined to actions directed towards the state' (Bonner 1983, 35). This set of ideas came to be known as 'workerism'. Of course, not every FOSATU member was a 'workerist', and 'populists' could be found in the federation, but 'workerism' was the main current, with a decisive imprint.

FOSATU, like TUACC, emphasised strong shop-floor-based organisation and strict limits on the power of officials, partly because genuine participatory democracy could ensure FOSATU was more than a 'paper tiger' (Barrett 2010) (since new leaders could emerge from the factories in the case that existing leaders were detained). FOSATU's constitution thus stated, 'the worker member of the unions shall control and determine the objects, direction and policies of the unions' (1982b, 12), and this was achieved through a system of mandate and recall, assemblies, shop stewards and other checks and balances. FOSATU structures at all levels were majority-worker bodies, with wide powers over senior leaders. The General-Secretary was subject to ratification by the membership, via a worker-based Central Committee (CC), which could order his/her suspension. The General-Secretary, President, Vice-President and Treasurers had to 'vacate their seats during their term if they fail[ed] to be members of an affiliate' (FOSATU [n.d.] 1982, 10), which meant they had to be union members accountable to affiliates. National Office Bearers and the CC were in turn accountable to Congresses and subject to oversight by shop steward committees, themselves accountable to workers' assemblies.

This allows us to reasonably assume that FOSATU's 'workerism' was representative of its multiracial, but largely African and Coloured mass base: it was not, as critics claimed, the project of a 'tiny white bureaucratic elite [trying] to dominate the whole federation' ('Mawu and Ummawusa' 1984, 5; see also Buhlungu 2006a, 2006b). It must also be stressed that there were many influential black 'workerists': Daniel Dube, Fred Sauls, Joe Foster, John Gomomo, and Moses Mayekiso (for example). Conversely, white intellectuals, for example the SACP's Jeremy Cronin, were key figures in the 'populist' camp. 'Workerism', then, was a *mass* current in the largely black trade union movement, and the main trend in FOSATU, the biggest black-based union federation of the time (Byrne 2012, 194–207). Attempts to dismiss 'workerism' as 'white' are, at least partly, due to efforts to 'repress uncomfortable truths in order to present a seamless picture favourable to the ANC and SACTU' (Legassick 2008, 241), and the problems posed for nationalist discourse of the reality of a large, anti-nationalist, radical current like 'workerism'.

Like TUACC, FOSATU was anti-apartheid, but its aims and strategy were more consciously political. 'Workers' control' was expanded into a larger project that centred the workers' movement (rather than parties) in the national liberation struggle. Combining anti-capitalism and anti-nationalism, FOSATU was explicitly (if unevenly) critical of the 'populist' 'Congress' and SACP tradition.

## **Ambitious Objectives**

In the shorter term, FOSATU sought to build up a strong, resilient and independent labour movement that could fight for tangible improvements for members. For this, winnable demands and measurable day-to-day victories within a few targeted workplaces, conducted in ways that strengthened workplace organisation and rank-and-file participation, were paramount (Webster 1985, 79; Byrne 2012, 192, 220; FOSATU n.d.a).

In the long term, FOSATU was centrally concerned with the national liberation of the oppressed black majority, but eschewed *nationalism* as a strategy. It envisaged a key role for itself in the breakdown and ultimate defeat of the capitalist system (despite the caricatured image the 'workerist' label implies), and in the transition to a post-apartheid order. In systematically building participatory union structures, FOSATU

nationalist) struggle was, in fact, the crux of the 'workerists' embryonic solution. 'Workerists' were sceptical of nationalism largely because it was interpreted as 'petit bourgeois politics' – 'not necessarily for worker interests' (Dube 2009; Mayekiso 2010). This position was also historically grounded, given the 'failures of African nationalism in the post-colonial context' and the way unions have been 'sort of muzzled' by nationalist and 'populist' liberation leaders and regimes (Bonner 2010). The ANC was thus viewed with a considerable amount of scepticism by association (FOSATU 1982c), and the example of the suppression of independent unions by nationalists in neighbouring, post-Independence, Zimbabwe was repeatedly noted.

FOSATU rejected all structured alliances with political parties. This was an archetypal 'workerist' attitude, and it was formally enshrined in FOSATU documents (e.g. 1982). FOSATU realised that outwardly associating with banned socialist or 'worker' parties was perilous, but there were issues at play beyond this pragmatic consideration. 'Workerists' argued that multi-class parties would lead to unions being 'hijacked by elements who will have no option but to turn against their worker supporters' once in power (FOSATU 1982c). Political parties threatened to turn the union movement into a 'transmission belt' for a party agenda, while also alienating large sections of the working class (Erwin 2009; FOSATU n.d.a, 6). Based on this analysis, 'workerists' thought in terms of combining anti-nationalism and anti-capitalism as the basis of the national liberation struggle – to be fought by a united, non-racial working class (as opposed to a multi-class nationalist/popular front) centred on autonomous unions, and infused with socialist aspirations. The building up of organs of worker power in the key industrial sectors was identified as the key to overcoming both apartheid and capitalism 'with one movement' (Erwin 2009).

## **Counter-Culture, Popular Education and Organic Intellectuals**

Linked to this, FOSATU prioritised worker education. In the short term, this equipped shop stewards and worker leaders with skills they needed to be effective. However, FOSATU provided a wider education, rooted in a broadly socialist (but anti-Soviet) perspective. This could facilitate the development of a 'working class politics' implanted in what FOSATU called

for sections of the New Left, like the younger *Lukács* and Gramsci, were influenced by anarchism and syndicalism and/or expressed similar views at certain stages (e.g. Williams 1975; Tucker 1996, 212; Levy 1999; Thorpe 2011).

Therefore, at least some of the libertarian content of 'workerism' – and in the New Left more broadly – can plausibly be said to have roots in the anarchist and syndicalist tradition. This certainly does not mean that 'workerists' self-identified with the anarchist and syndicalist traditions, because they did not; nor that 'workerism' was a type of syndicalism, for it was not. Some 'workerists' did detect 'a strong sort of syndicalist strand' in FOSATU's 'deep mistrust of party politics' and the 'idea that the trade union is a political expression in itself' (interviews with Webster 2010; Horn 2010; Bonner 2010),<sup>3</sup> but anarchist and syndicalist influences were indirect, often unrecognised. They were certainly not the *only* influences, or even necessarily the strongest influences on 'workerism'.

Much like the New Left, 'workerism' was eclectic, and, as will be noted below, marked by unresolved tensions and ambiguities. Importantly, the range of influences discussed above should not be taken to mean that South African 'workerism' was not something unique or innovative: its novelty *was* something deeply felt by its proponents, who stressed that they 'were indigenous and developing this stuff on [their] own' (Adler 2010; Bonner 2010).

## Anti-Nationalist National Liberation

'Workerism' operated in the very distinct context of apartheid South Africa – where the national question was a central feature of social contradictions and required an urgent answer and response – forcing FOSATU's 'workerists' to develop their own thinking on this problem. This is important to declare because of the frequent assertion that 'workerists' ignored race and were unconcerned with issues of national liberation (e.g. Isizwe 1986; SACP 2006; Pillay 2008),<sup>4</sup> or counter-posed national liberation and class struggle (e.g. Baskin 1991). This caricature usually stems from a conflation of national liberation with *nationalism*, and the inability (or refusal?) to envisage the possibility of national liberation without nationalism – on the basis of a working class or class-struggle programme. But national liberation via class (as opposed to

conceived a far more ambitious project of democratising production and the economy and society more generally. It aimed for 'transformation of society as a whole' (Barrett 2010), 'a just and fair society controlled by workers' where wealth would be 'democratically produced and equally distributed' (FOSATU 1982a) and where 'no group of people are going to sit in an office and issue instructions to workers' (SALB 1980, 61). The ANC was described as 'capitalist', its venerated 1955 Freedom Charter criticised as inadequate, and the SACP's two-stage theory dismissed as a 'a waste of time, a waste of energy and a waste of people's blood' (Mayekiso, in Lambert 1985).

## 'Workers' Control' as Self-Management?

Like TUACC, the term 'workers' control' for FOSATU formally had a narrow meaning, that 'shop stewards should be accountable; that they should be directly elected' (Webster 2010). But for the federation's 'workerists', the idea was expanded to signify a far larger process whereby workers would 'build up' their organisation so that they could 'control the employers' (Baskin 1982, 43), 'wrest arbitrary control from the company's management on the shop floor' (Bonner 1983, 26), and push 'back the frontiers of control' (Webster 1985, 279; FOSATU 1982c, 31; Webster 2010). Understandably, given the dangers, such positions were not always explicitly stated as those of the federation, but they were fairly common.

Further, there were ambitions to extend 'workers' control' beyond production into the 'reproductive' sphere, so that the unions' democratic practices would be 'the basis for democratic organisation both within the areas of production and of social consumption (the community)' (Erwin 1985, 55). FOSATU 'locals' drew in migrant workers (concentrated in hostels), and workers and shop stewards from different factories and FOSATU affiliates in specific areas. They fostered solidarity between workplaces, as well as engagement in black community issues like transport and housing. Locals provided a direct, 'workerist' foothold into black township neighbourhoods, and FOSATU members actively played a key role in positioning locals as linkages between workplace and township struggles, partly through their role in the formation of democratic bottom-up 'civics' (township residents' associations) and 'street committees' (Von

Holdt 1987; Jochelson 1990; Dube 2009; Fanaroff 2009; Sauls 2010; Mayekiso 2010). For example, MAWU's Mayekiso was also central to the Alexandra township uprising of 1986 where the local Civic Association briefly replaced state power with 'people's power' (Jochelson 1990).

Considering this, FOSATU's approach clearly envisaged the unions' democratic structures, premised on elections, extensive mandating, recall, etc. as prefiguring a more directly democratic future society. In fact, FOSATU leaders explicitly spoke of their strategy as one of 'building tomorrow today' (Erwin 1985, 55–56). An analysis of FOSATU's publications and educational material suggests that the federation's interest in these themes may have been drawn, to some extent, from historical examples of self-managed, prefigurative, popular movements. For example, the 1871 Paris Commune, the German Council Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, and the Russian *soviets* were all studied by FOSATU workers and shop stewards in its Advanced Course (FOSATU 1985a). This course also contained references to the anarchist Bakunin, the left Communist Luxemburg, and the Council Communists Gorter and Pannekoek. Another example is the 1986 *COSATU Workers Diary* (published just after the FOSATU period) that praised the early Russian *soviets* as the 'main organ of workers democracy', and featured the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), with its slogan 'Join the One Big Union', and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against the Soviet Union, where 'workers councils and all sorts of revolutionary committees' were established. (It should be noted here that although discussion of these movements are mostly found in records of educational material, FOSATU's education by far outstripped that of any of the other unions of its time, both in terms of scope, scale (1982a, 17; SALB 1984) and radicalism. It is therefore probable that discussions about self-management were not restricted to officials, finding expression among workers and shop stewards too.)

According to FOSATU educator Phillip Bonner (2010), the Italian factory council movement of 1920 was also deeply formative: 'something very similar to what we were doing, and ... we drew some sustenance from that and some ideas from that' (also in Motala 2010). Alongside this, inspiration and strategic guidance was drawn from the British Shop stewards Movement of the 1910s, 1920s and 1970s (FOSATU 1985b; Webster 2010).<sup>2</sup> Other reference points for self-management were the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939 (Erwin 2009; Foster 2010) – in which workers and peasants, led by the anarcho-syndicalist movement, seized direct control over rural land, cities, factories, social services and

transportation networks; Poland's *Solidarność* (Solidarity) union, as an effort by the working class to 'establish more democratic worker control over *their* socialist society' (Foster 1982, 7, emphasis original); and the Yugoslavian co-operative model of 'market socialism', which devolved substantial control over production to workers.

Examples of self-management also inspired local action, although sometimes in a more moderate form. For example, MAWU worker leaders at certain BMW satellite factories 'talked about co-determination' based on the German model, where workers would 'participate on a works council' and thus in some production decisions (Adler 2010). FOSATU also (cautiously) admired co-operative movements like Spain's Mondragon (Webster 2010; FOSATU n.d.b), and established some co-operatives of its own (FOSATU 1981) – as did the early National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) (SAWCO 1987) which was interested in 'factory occupations leading to workers' taking over and running the factories' (Webster 2010).

An important aspect of 'workerism' was that it developed themes that were similar to, and drew upon the concerns of the international New Left (Plaut 1992, 103; see also Saunders 1988; TULEC 2002; Lunn 2010) – a heterogeneous movement through which comparable ideas of workers control and self-management were resuscitated globally. Indeed, many 'workerists' themselves testify to being 'product[s] of May '68 New Left' (Webster 2010). But linking 'workerism' to the eclectic New Left means appreciating that it had multiple influences, ranging from dissident forms of Marxism to existentialism, to various libertarian socialist influences and themes (Sartre, William Morris, Council Communism, early Gramsci, anarchism and syndicalism, etc.). This is in contrast to the view that views workerism narrowly as a 'form of Marxism', even if 'distinctive' (e.g. Nash 1999).

Perhaps one of the most notable links to the New Left was that many 'workerists' claimed a strong Gramscian influence, but emphasised his 'early stuff – the factory councils' (Bonner 2010). Interestingly, many of the historical examples that FOSATU invoked, like the early British Shop Stewards Movement, the German and Italian council movements, and the Spanish Revolution, had substantial anarchist and syndicalist influences (e.g. for Italy, see Levy 1999 and Williams 1975; for syndicalist influence on Council Communist theorists in Germany, Gerber 1988). The 1920 Italian council movement was essentially 'anarcho-syndicalist' (Williams 1975, 193–134), and even some of the core Marxist references