

Red, Black and Gold: FOSATU, South African 'Workerism', 'Syndicalism' and the Nation

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Interviews:

- Philip Bonner. Interview with Sian Byrne, 18 October 2010, Johannesburg.
- Daniel Dube. Interview with Sian Byrne, 21 July 2009, Port Elizabeth. FOSATU National Executive Committee, NUMSA President.
- Alec Erwin. Interview with Sian Byrne, 23 July 2010, Cape Town. FOSATU General Secretary, FOSATU Education Secretary
- Bernie Fanaroff. Interview with Sian Byrne, 27 November 2009, Johannesburg. MAWU National Organiser, MAWU Acting General Secretary.
- Moses Mayekiso. Interview with Sian Byrne, 25 January 2010, Johannesburg. MAWU National Secretary, MAWU Treasurer, NUMSA General Secretary.
- Eddie Webster. Interview with Sian Byrne, 20 November, 2010, Johannesburg.



The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) inaugurated in 1979, the strongest working class organisation opposing apartheid in the early 1980s. FOSATU was associated with the distinct radical politics of South African ‘workerism.’ ‘Workerism’ has been widely caricatured: this pamphlet provides a recovery of its politics and history. Its emphasis on strong, industrial, autonomous unions, free of party control, its project of building a working class movement and identity, its participation in a wide range of struggles, and its left-wing, anti-capitalist and class-based (and anti-nationalist) approach to the national question is outlined. For FOSATU ‘workerism,’ ending racism required ending capitalism by a massive redistribution of power and wealth through the extension of ‘workers’ control’ of the workplace, the economy and the larger society; it required a movement separate from the nationalists, including the African National Congress (ANC), the Marxist-Leninists, including the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the multi-class, nationalist popular fronts they promoted.

However, FOSATU was not an anarcho-syndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist union movement, and should not be misrepresented as such. It had important weaknesses from which lessons should be drawn. Influenced by a range of ideas (mostly via the New Left, including some elements of anarchism and syndicalism but many others besides), its “quasi-syndicalist” themes jostled with more social-democratic approaches. Its limitations were also expressed by its lack of a clear strategy for transition to a new social order, that linked its daily practice of organising, educating and mobilising, to its long-term vision of ‘workers’ control,’ and by the failure of ‘workerists’ to constitute themselves as an organised revolutionary with shared analysis, tactics and strategy within FOSATU. This opened the door to their defeat by the ANC and SACP. The recovery of the history of FOSATU, and critical reflection on that history, uncovers an important bottom-up politics hidden by nationalist and Marxist-Leninist accounts, yields many valuable experiences and approaches that deserve emulation, but also provides some hard lessons for today’s struggles.

*You, moving forest of Africa.
 When I arrived, the children were all crying,
 These were the workers, industrial workers ...
 Escape into that forest,
 The black forest that the employers saw and ran for safety.
 The workers saw it too
 'It belongs to us,' they said,
 'Let us take refuge in it to be safe from our hunters.' Deep
 into the forest they hid themselves and when they came
 out they were free from fear ...
 Lead us FOSATU to where we are eager to go.
 Even in parliament you shall be our representative.
 Go and represent us because you are our Moses
 Through your leadership we shall reach our Canaan ...*

Alfred Qabula,
 'Praise Poem to FOSATU',
 1984

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Introduction

After months of talks between unions associated with the Trade Union Advisory Co-ordinating Council (TUACC), the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was inaugurated on 13 April 1979. FOSATU was the first federation of predominantly unregistered trade unions with a truly national reach to operate openly in South Africa since the late 1960s.²

FOSATU membership reached 140 000 in 1985 (Baskin, 1991: 49); it was ‘by far the strongest working-class organisation’ opposing apartheid in the early 1980s (Schroeder, 1988: 54). The largest strike wave since the 1940s took place in 1981, and FOSATU played an integral role (Yudelman, 1984: 271). FOSATU was also associated with the distinct radical politics of South African ‘workerism’, and had a mass base among black workers.

‘Workerism’ was widely identified as the dominant political current within FOSATU in the early 1980s (for example, Mahomed, 1984). Although workerism was not the only current in the federation, and was not restricted to FOSATU (Byrne, 2012), its core positions remain relatively unknown. This is partly because workerism was highly controversial at the time, the subject of fierce, often misleading polemics (for example, Toussaint, 1983; Comrades in Africa, 1984; Nhere, 1984; Nyawuza, 1985). Coupled with a lack of dedicated studies of FOSATU or its affiliates, this has left workerism’s actual positions largely obscured from view.

This chapter is intended to provide a recovery of the politics and history of FOSATU, as well as a detailed investigation of how workerism engaged and sought to answer the National Question in South Africa. This discussion necessarily includes critiques of misleading claims about workerism – notably accusations that it was economic, ignoring national liberation or issues beyond the workplace.

We retain the use of the term ‘workerism’, bearing in mind that FOSATU did not itself employ it and that it carries a certain historical baggage. However, it serves as well as any other term to describe the main political current within FOSATU and thus also the characteristic positions of FOSATU. Workerism, it should be stressed, was not the platform of an

organised party; it was not monolithic, and it was an evolving project. Nonetheless, it was a pervasive current, with distinct and identifiable views.

Workerism is correctly remembered for its emphasis on strong, industrial, autonomous unions, based at the point of production and outside of party tutelage. Its politics, however, was far broader, and far more radical than this might suggest. Workerism viewed bottom-up worker-run unions as the heart of a larger 'working-class movement' (Foster, 1982: 6–8) for radical change. It nurtured working-class identity, culture and history, and campaigned for significant economic and political reforms, including within working-class communities, to strengthen workers and unions against both apartheid and capitalism.

Stripped of veils of misunderstanding, workerism stands revealed as having an insightful, left-wing, anti-capitalist and class-based approach to the National Question that remains of great interest (Byrne, 2012, 2013). Workerism questioned the notion that national oppression can, or indeed should, only be fought by nationalism: it aimed to fight racial domination through a radical working-class politics.

To remove racism required abolishing capitalism, something only a movement for workers' power could achieve. Immediate struggles, including for reforms, were steps to a new South Africa that was socialist; that involved a massive redistribution of power and wealth through the extension of workers' control of the workplace, the economy and the larger society; and that ended racial inequality and oppression. This required a movement separate from the nationalists, including the African National Congress (ANC), centre of the 'Congress' movement, from the Marxist-Leninists, including the South African Communist Party (SACP); and from the multi-class, nationalist popular fronts they promoted.

Workerism was a distinctive tradition, shaped by a kaleidoscope of left ideologies and initiatives, international and local, often refracted via the global New Left. It challenged the traditions of the ANC and the SACP, as well as other nationalist and left currents. However, the workerist position lies buried under an unsatisfactory historiography which elevates the authority of the Congress movement, the SACP and nationalism.

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Beyond the 'Workerist-Populist Debate'

Much of the received wisdom about the political positions of FOSATU and workerism comes via the polemics generated by the so-called 'workerist-populist debate' of the 1980s, which pitted Congress-aligned 'populists' against FOSATU workerists.

These polemics shed more heat than light. Terms like 'workerism', 'economism' and 'syndicalism' were often used interchangeably, and workerism was described in wildly inconsistent ways. The SACP's journal, the *African Communist*, described FOSATU as having a revolutionary syndicalist programme, involving a union-led project of organising workers to directly take over 'the whole of industry and society', and as lacking any theory, strategy or left tradition (Toussaint, 1983: 40, 43, 44). 'Errors of Workerism', in the semi-official journal of the Congress-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF), *Isizwe*, simultaneously accused workerism of 'narrow' apolitical or economic unionism, of British Labour Party-type social democratic reformism, of a revolutionary syndicalist project of 'attack on the apartheid government and bourgeois rule' by unions, and of a Trotskyist drive to a 'socialist, workers' party' (*Isizwe*, 1986: 17–26).

Evidently, the populist critique of workerism was somewhat incoherent, and it relied heavily on labelling and calumny. But it had enormous power. Thirty years on, 'economistic' and 'syndicalist' remain terms of contempt in the hands of the ANC and SACP (for example, ANC Today, 2007; Semudi, 2013). The populist characterisation of workerism has meanwhile been absorbed into scholarly accounts, as a recent literature review demonstrates (Byrne, 2012). For example, the semi-official history of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), described workerism in almost exactly the same manner as did *Isizwe* (Baskin, 1991: 95–7). It cited no direct FOSATU or workerist sources to substantiate its characterisation.

A further difficulty in understanding workerism is a weak labour historiography. Until the 1970s, the key South African labour histories were produced by the left and the unions. From the 1970s, academic interest in South African labour history rose rapidly – giving rise to significant works, including unpublished work such as Johann Maree's (1986) PhD thesis. However, the field has declined sharply from the 1990s, and most current labour studies are focused on contemporary issues (see e.g. Buhlungu, 2009).

There remain enormous gaps. With no written history other than a popular commemorative volume (M. Friedman, 2011), FOSATU appears in studies mainly as part of the larger story of the rise of independent unions from the 1970s (MacShane, Plaut and Ward, 1984; Brown, 1985; S. Friedman, 1985; Kraak, 1993) or of COSATU. Most of these works are dated, published before 1994 (for an exception: Forrest, 2011).

Compounding the problems is a widespread tendency to conflate the history of black resistance in South Africa with the history of black nationalism, where the left (including the SACP) and labour (including the unions) are relegated to bit players – despite often being larger than any of the nationalist formations. In reducing South Africa's contradictions to national and racial ones, resolved through conflicts between white and black nationalists, this approach to 'the struggle' makes the implications of the country being a *capitalist* society quite secondary (Legassick, 1979); concomitantly, research on nationalists massively outstrips research on labour and the left.

FOSATU, Workers' Control and Workerism

By the early 1980s, FOSATU was the largest union centre based among black Africans, although it included significant numbers of coloureds and Indians, as well as a few whites (Malgas and Storey, 1982: 7). FOSATU had 45 000 members at its formation, 120 000 in 1984, and 140 000 in 1985 (Baskin, 1991: 49). Much of this growth centred on the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), the largest FOSATU affiliate, which became the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) in 1987.

By contrast, the ANC-aligned South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) had around 55 000 members at its height in the 1950s. FOSATU's registered contemporaries were initially larger: the Trade Union Congress of South Africa (TUCSA) claimed 299 455 members of all races in 1981, and the all-white South African Confederation of Labour (SACLA) claimed 138 864 (Imrie, 1979: 95; *The Star*, 27 January 1981: 21). However, by 1983 FOSATU was closing in on the registered union centres, and large numbers left TUCSA to join it (Botha, 1988: 689). Thus, from the time of its emergence and for a few years thereafter, FOSATU was the strongest black working-class organisation and opposition movement in the country (Schroeder, 1988: 54).

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FOSATU's significance also transcended its size. First, it exemplified a remarkable model of trade union organising, involving a relatively bottom-up structure based on assemblies, shop-stewards' committees and representative bodies all the way up to national leadership. FOSATU focused on industrial unionism, and a 'tight federation' with common campaigns and inter-union solidarity, with inter-union 'locals' bringing together unionists from different affiliates. In this system, the 'worker member of the unions shall control and determine the objects, direction and policies of the unions' (FOSATU, 1982a: 12).

This system of workers' control differentiated FOSATU from looser formations such as the 1920s Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) and, later, SACTU (Maree, 1986; Ulrich, 2007). The ICU was plagued by chronic disorganisation. Some SACTU affiliates had strong shop-steward structures, but most were loosely organised, de facto general unions. FOSATU's workers' control system was intended to ensure its resilience, as well as ensure that ordinary worker members controlled the federation and its affiliates at all levels. This minimised influence from outsiders (state officials, political parties, academics and activist coalitions), and it limited the power of insiders such as paid officials (union appointees) and full-time office-bearers (elected union leaders).

This system was also meant to ensure that any use of courts and official collective bargaining machinery did not lead to state control over the unions. It was equally an attempt to steer clear of control by political parties. Many FOSATU activists believed that the demise of SACTU was largely *because* it was subordinated to the agendas of the ANC. This, they believed, had led SACTU into a range of futile campaigns that weakened its unions (Bonner, 1979; FOSATU, 1985e: 4–5). By the time that FOSATU was formed in 1979, SACTU was no longer functioning in the country. Its entire leadership was in exile, mainly in London. FOSATU reasoned that the end of SACTU could not be attributed solely to apartheid repression, as various African unions had remained operational during the repressive 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, new unions like TUACC were able to grow rapidly in the 1970s by choosing their battles and by investing energy into building strong, democratic workplace structures that could remain operational – despite repression.

A further way in which FOSATU's significance went well beyond its rapid growth was that it gave rise to a new, innovative radical alternative political tradition: workerism. Of course it was primarily a trade union formation and organised workers regardless of their political views, and this

meant that political tendencies existed alongside each other – including Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), and various left groupings in favour of a workers' party. Workerism, however, emerged as the dominant political current within FOSATU, so much so that it was almost impossible to separate formal FOSATU positions from workerist ideas. This is not to suggest that FOSATU leaders always agreed, or that workerism itself did not contain different threads or internal tensions; but significant central tenets held it together, making it a distinct political current that had shared positions.

National Liberation, Class and Nationalism

FOSATU workerism was not against the nationalist goal of non-racial, majority rule in an undivided South Africa but it saw this goal as *inadequate* because it failed to ensure a new society in which workers controlled not just their own unions but also 'the production and distribution of wealth' and were centrally involved in 'decision making on the affairs of South Africa' (FOSATU, 1982a).

The workerist stress on workers' control was not simply about control of the unions, but about an extension of workers' power more broadly. It involved a socialist project, but one that rejected the Marxist-Leninist, pro-Soviet programme of the SACP; an anti-apartheid project, but one that opposed apartheid while rejecting the nationalist and militarist traditions of the ANC; and a national liberation project, but one that denied that nationalism was the optimal response to national oppression in South Africa, as claimed by the ANC and SACP, or their rivals, the BCM and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

Expanding workers' power across the economy and society required workers' struggles and organising for changes far beyond those of non-racial majority rule through a parliament – it was a direct challenge to capitalism. Workerists also held that apartheid itself was a product of capitalism and, therefore, that fighting apartheid required fighting capitalism. MAWU and FOSATU leader Moses Mayekiso argued:

Footnotes:

1. Red, black and gold were the colours of the FOSATU banner – a red field upon which was superimposed a gold cog and three workers' fists, each holding a different tool.
2. Like TUACC unions, before 1980 most of FOSATU's unions were 'unregistered' – not formally registered in the state-run industrial relations system which effectively excluded almost all black Africans from direct participation. Laws in the 1950s further criminalised African strike activity, and prevented Africans from forming part of the registered unions. In the 1970s, before the reforms that followed the 1979 Wiehahn Commission report, black African workers and unions had no access to statutory industrial relations machinery, or protected strike action. 'Registered' unions represented only coloured, Indian and white workers, even if some, at some periods, had unofficial 'parallel' unions for black Africans.
3. This Africanist claim was also a caricature of ANC positions, which stressed that radical economic and political changes and majority rule were central to its aim of national democracy, and which theorised South Africa as marked by 'internal' colonialism (ANC, 1969).
4. For example, 'Nyawuza' of the *African Communist* was Joe Slovo; Jeremy Cronin was the author of 'Errors of Workerism' in *Iziswe*.

Beyond these common points, and stress on prefiguration, there were a number of unresolved tensions and ambiguities in FOSATU workerism, including at the levels of longer-term strategy and social analysis that undermined its project (Byrne, 2012). One of the major issues that was not addressed was whether greater workers' control of the economy meant a left social democratic system of co-determination and corporatism, or complete worker self-management. Related to this was a larger question about how the working-class movement would relate to a new African nationalist-led government. Further, it was not entirely clear how exactly the working-class movement would carry out its socialist transition, and in doing so relate to forces like the ANC, the SACP and the BCM. Tensions between more social democratic and quasi-syndicalist strands of workerism were never resolved, and the workerist/populist clash ended in populist victory.

Workerism, as a project, declined rapidly in the later 1980s. Only fragments of its project remain in the unions. A full account of the dramatic eclipse of workerism by populism within COSATU by the start of the 1990s falls outside the scope of this chapter. However, since nationalism is only one current in national liberation struggles, and since workerism manifestly overshadowed nationalism for a large sector of the black population, the victory of nationalism cannot be viewed as inevitable or natural. Concrete political battles – and the weaknesses, ambiguities, tensions and contradictions of workerism itself – contributed to its eclipse. Obviously, nationalist currents did exist within FOSATU, but it was only in the late 1980s that Congress nationalism conquered COSATU. The influence of nationalism, or of parties like the ANC and SACP, must be explained, not assumed.

There is much to learn from workerism, which underlines the point that the hold of nationalism can be challenged, that a left project can have a great impact, and that the victory of the ANC and the SACP in the 1980s was not inevitable nor, indeed, need it be permanent. FOSATU workerism's insight is that the complete emancipation of the working class in South Africa, both in national and in class terms, requires self-activity, class-based and bottom-up mass movements, organised labour and a project of industrial democracy. This insight remains as relevant as ever. Workerism's ideas remain a jarring presence in South African resistance history, a radical challenge to the orthodoxies and hegemony of nationalism and Marxism-Leninism.

Apartheid is just an appendage, a branch of the whole thing – the tree of oppression of capitalism ... Then if you chop the branch the tree will still grow. You have to chop the stem, straight, once and for all. South Africa's economy is at an advanced stage, where the workers can take over and direct the whole thing (quoted in Lambert, 1985: 19; also see FOSATU, 1983b).

FOSATU thus rejected SACP claims that South Africa's objective conditions required postponing socialism in favour of a stage of 'national-democracy'. For workerists, 'there are not two stages, but stages, continuous ...' (Mayekiso, interview, 2010), and a 'suspicion ... that once you've had the first stage you'd never have the second stage' (Fanaroff, interview, 2009).

Workerism also avoided alliances with nationalists, not just the ANC but its rivals, the BCM and PAC, because, it insisted, African nationalist governments routinely turned against trade unions and the working class after independence – not least because they were pro-capitalist (Bonner, interview, 2010). Nationalist movements could certainly defeat oppressive regimes, but always stopped short of complete liberation for the working-class majority: this had been the case in neighbouring Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Trade Unions, 1985, also see FOSATU, 1983d).

Workerists tended to view nationalism – including the Congress, PAC Africanist and BCM varieties – as representing 'petit bourgeois politics' and 'capitalist' positions (Lambert, 1985; Dube, interview, 2009; Mayekiso, interview, 2010). While the ANC (1969) stated it would make significant economic changes in favour of the majority, its national democratic revolution – radical reform by an alliance of *all* classes and democrats – necessarily stopped short of socialism. Further, there was no reason to suppose that the ANC would be more tolerant of unions than any other independent nationalist, capitalist government.

SACP claims that the ANC had 'socialist-inclined policies' (Toussaint, 1983: 40) did not provide adequate reassurance, since the SACP's vision of socialism, the Soviet model, was itself viewed with scepticism. Workerists rejected vanguard-party control in favour of self-organised workers' organisations as the prime agent of change, and viewed socialism fundamentally in terms of industrial and political democracy (FOSATU, 1982a: 14).

For workerists, the issue was not *whether* workers had 'political' interests, but how these were best to be realised without subordination to non-working-class projects. The solution lay in workers' organisations that 'should not allow themselves be controlled by non-worker political parties' or they would find their interests 'disregarded and their organisation and power gradually cut away' (Bonner, 1979: 5).

Workerism's class line meant, first, that it shared SACTU's stress on the need for the non-racial unity of all *workers*. However, unlike SACTU, and nationalists generally, it did not wish the workers' movement to be part of a larger multi-class popular front. Working-class unity was not only one component of a larger project of building a 'national democratic' movement (which would include the 'oppressed' middle and upper-class blacks and the liberal bourgeoisie). It was a *different project for a different goal*: the building of greater *working-class* power for participatory, anti-capitalist transformation, a transformative working-class movement (Foster, 1982: 6–8).

Workerism always clung tightly to the idea of non-racialism and a unified South Africa. In the 1980s, the language of 'non-racialism' formed part of a radical oppositional project. It was used by SACTU, the UDF, the Congress movement and the SACP, as well as by FOSATU and, later, COSATU, to signal a rejection of apartheid categories and rule, a rejection of the racially exclusive organisations favoured by the BCM and PAC, and a commitment to a transformed common society. 'Non-racialism' meant that anyone committed to the struggle could participate, regardless of race. This did not mean ignoring the history of racial domination, nor the ways this could manifest in interpersonal relations. It meant, instead, waging a common struggle, centred on the black majority, for radical change.

But for workerism, non-racialism served several additional purposes. It was key to the project of working-class mobilisation, provided a concrete practice of overcoming racial divisions, and was integral to the vision of a radically changed country. Racial and ethnic categories were seen as less important than *class* position as a basis for mobilisation. Workers everywhere existed within a shared struggle, and required a common, class-based, anti-racist, oppositional popular politics, reinforced through careful education (FOSATU, 1985d).

In 1983, for example, FOSATU called for opposition to the proposed Tricameral Parliament, viewing it as 'false and meaningless' and racially

None of this is to say that South Africa did not have intense racial problems or that these did not pose real challenges in non-racial movements. The point is that a widespread socialist consciousness existed both in FOSATU and in parts of the UDF, which stressed class struggle centred on black workers as a means to a radical form of national liberation. The appeal of class, socialism and workerism reflected, at least partly, the fact that the black working class confronted not just racial oppression but class rule as well.

Conclusion: Eclipse

Bottom-up FOSATU unions were built to play a leading role in fighting both class exploitation and national oppression. A union-centred working-class movement was seen as the key site for the creation, from below, of a new nation – a nation reconstituted by the working class, where workers' control, in the broadest sense, was to be implemented.

The workerism of FOSATU engaged with political issues, while rejecting nationalist or communist tutelage. It opposed capitalism while rejecting Marxism-Leninism. It engaged in community politics while steering clear of multiclass popular fronts. And it used the courts and law while remaining committed to workers' democracy and autonomy from the state and capital. Most notably for this chapter, FOSATU workerism undertook anti-apartheid work, supporting national liberation, while rejecting nationalism in favour of a larger and more radical working-class politics.

Workerism's vision of the future was a radical one, in which the (non-racial) worker would have a direct say in the production and distribution of wealth, where the involvement of workers in 'all levels of decision-making in the production process' would be the safeguard for the needs and aspirations of 'the working people' (FOSATU, 1982a: 3, 14). This democratic and socialist system would not only overcome class division; apartheid oppression and race itself as a basis of inequality would be removed. This future was to be built in the present – by careful, methodical and democratic organisation, by winning gains through struggle, and through consistent investments in worker education as a means of building an alternative world view and developing the skills for workers' control.

The notion that black unionists supported nationalism whereas white unionists supported a non-racial class or workerist position is incorrect. White activists in FOSATU were a tiny minority; black African and coloured members and worker-leaders dominated numerically at all levels; workerism successfully generated large numbers of black worker leaders and worker-intellectuals (Forrest, 2011; Sephiri, 2001: 70). Given FOSATU's bottom-up structures, there was no bureaucratic apparatus that could be manipulated to impose the will or views of any tiny layer (Byrne, 2012: Chapter 7).

The views of the black African and coloured majority in FOSATU were, by available evidence, indistinguishable from those of the whites. For example, Mayekiso bluntly rejected the ANC's Freedom Charter as a capitalist document, the notion of 'two stages towards liberation' as a waste of time and 'our struggle as part of the struggle of all workers internationally' (in Lambert, 1985: 20). The claim that workerism was white silences tens of thousands of workerist black African and coloured voices. And the fallacy of reducing politics to race is borne out by the simple fact that many of the ANC, SACP, SACTU and populist ideologues who attacked workerism were themselves white.⁴

There is also no reason to suppose that workerism would be any more alien to black workers than nationalism. Every major black nationalist movement in South Africa was founded by university-trained intellectuals, including the ANC, BCM and PAC, and Cyril Ramaphosa and Jay Naidoo, who led the nationalist charge against workerism in COSATU, were a lawyer and an ex-medical student, respectively.

In short, a neat mapping of workerism onto whites and of nationalism onto blacks, or of 'middle class' onto whites and 'working class' onto blacks, does not correctly represent the divisions. Nor – given that workerism *did* engage in the national liberation struggle – does a reduction of national liberation to nationalism ring true, since workerism exemplified an anti-nationalist mode of national liberation politics. To claim that class politics was adopted as a means to avoid uncomfortable racial realities not only amounts to a fairly instrumentalist view of ideas, but one that manifestly fails to explain why class politics, in various forms, was embraced by hundreds of thousands of black, coloured and Indian working-class people, not only in FOSATU, but in SACTU, the SACP and COSATU as well.

divisive (FOSATU, 1983a). General secretary Joe Foster explained that the federation was 'fighting for economic and political justice for all irrespective of race' and would have nothing to do with 'racially divided puppet parliaments'. The decision by the (mainly coloured) Labour Party to participate was denounced as playing a 'dangerous game of racial politics' (FOSATU, 1983b: 1). 'Employers and the State have built up racial division for their own benefit' so 'Only a united NON-RACIAL Trade Union movement can break it down' (FOSATU, 1980b: 3). What mattered was *working-class solidarity*: 'We do not care if you are black or white, if you are with management you can never lead the workers in their struggle' (FOSATU, 1980a: 4).

This approach differentiated workerism from the exclusivist Africanist movement, embodied in the PAC, as well as from the BCM. Africanism routinely argued that black Africans, as the indigenous peoples, should dominate Asian and European aliens; all whites were cast as a ruling class of foreigners and exploiters, with different spiritual and material interests to black Africans, cast as the only real workers (Raboroko, 1960: 25–26, 27). In the 1980s, this translated into the PAC programme of race war: 'for every African being killed by the racist security forces, a white person must be killed.... One racist, one bullet' (APLA, 1987: n.p.).

The looser BCM had some overlaps with Africanism, but rarely reached its levels of overt chauvinism. It argued instead for an alliance of all racially oppressed people, not just black Africans but also coloureds and Indians (jointly, 'blacks'), and a struggle against the oppressing 'white world' (Biko, 1972).

Workerism's non-racialism also differed from that of the ANC, which advocated nationalism based on equal, individual rights regardless of origin (Adam, 1994: 17, 24), and an inclusive South Africanism, albeit qualified by a strong tendency to a somewhat different project of African hegemony (ANC, 1997). Through the non-racial, national democratic struggle, both during and after apartheid, the ANC insisted a new nation would be formed, at once unified and diverse.

For the ANC, the mobilising category was the *nation*, explicitly as a territorial, multi-class formation. Workerism, by contrast, emphasised class divisions among both black Africans and whites, rejecting elites in both camps. The mobilising category was the South African *working class*, explicitly seen as part of a global working class, with distinct interests. Embracing non-racial politics did not amount to accepting a white veto or

the perpetuation of white rule, both of which, Africanists insisted, were the necessary price of non-racial organising (Raboroko, 1960: 26–7).³ Rather, workerism stressed common class interests in a fight against apartheid and capitalism. Its non-racialism was a radical project of working-class solidarity. Class, here, was seen as a universal formation, albeit one imagined as segmented into national boundaries, so that a ‘South African working class’ existed as part of a global one.

Working Class Nation

The workerist framing of issues throughout was thus *universalist*, in the sense of stressing common class interests and rejecting essentialist notions of fundamentally different racial or national interests, outlooks, epistemologies, spiritual characteristics, or destinies: at its founding congress, ‘it was unanimously agreed that in being non-racial FOSATU was actually trying to eliminate racial conceptions’ (FOSATU, 1979: 16).

Yet, workerism was focused on local circumstances, and a unitary South Africa was always a key reference. The notion that the homelands were, or could be, independent countries was consistently rejected by FOSATU workerists, as was the notion that whites or Indians were enemy aliens. Intellectually this also meant that the framing of FOSATU’s understanding of labour history was *national* in character, in the sense that local labour history was seen in terms of the making of a *multiracial South African working class* (Bonner, 1979).

FOSATU made this viewpoint clear in a series of articles in *FOSATU Worker News* from 1983 to 1985 entitled ‘The Making of the Working Class’, which started with the founding of the Cape Colony by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. The key events in this story were not the congresses and resolutions of political parties, nor the lives and deaths of their leaders. Rather, it started with the origins of the working class through immigration and colonisation, and moved through a series of class rebellions – such as the 1799 Servant Rebellion – to strikes by white and coloured workers in the 1850s, to the rise of white labour from the 1880s, Indian workers’ strikes in the 1910s, the ICU in the 1920s, non-racial communist and industrial unions in the 1920s to 1940s, the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) in the 1940s, SACTU in the 1950s, to the new unionism of the 1970s and 1980s.

meant presenting nationalism as the essential form of national liberation. And since nationalists and communists both viewed unions essentially as adjuncts to political parties, this also meant that unions, including SACTU, were viewed as political only to the extent that they took directions from the (correct) political parties. To set up any new movements must thus only have a ‘disruptive and divisive effect’ (Toussaint, 1983: 46).

The corollary of this type of reasoning was that alternative left traditions, among them workerism, were ‘totally foreign to the reality of South African conditions’ (Toussaint, 1983: 43). Since workerism rejected the ANC and SACP, populists reasoned, it obviously ignored national liberation (Toussaint, 1983: 43).

But how, if nationalism and Marxism-Leninism were the natural politics of black workers, could a large, mostly black formation like FOSATU come to reject both? For ANC and SACP ideologues, the explanation lay in FOSATU having the wrong leadership. FOSATU-type unions, claimed SACTU, were ‘unions of black members run by one or two white organisers’ (SACTU, 1980b: 4). Workerism was then presented as the politics of the small clique of whites, mainly university-educated, who were active in TUACC and FOSATU as educators, organisers and functionaries. Such ‘forces amongst the intelligentsia’ (Nhere, 1984: 80) supposedly imposed ‘academic Marxism’, ‘very European in character’ (*Isizwe*, 1986: 15), from their ‘armchairs’ (Toussaint, 1983: 43), blocking the nationalist instincts of black members.

Echoes of these arguments also appear in academic scholarship. One position argues that FOSATU forays into mass politics were a revolt *against* workerism by black workers (von Holdt, 1987). Another presents the workerist stress on class struggle as a self-serving attempt by middle-class whites to avoid the threat of race and maintain power (Ally, 2005). A third describes the decline of workerism in terms of the ‘the labour constituency ... finding its own voice’ for the first time with the rise of nationalist black leaders in the mid-1980s (Buhlungu, 2006a,b).

But such claims face several immediate problems. There is a major difficulty with presenting SACTU as a more authentic union than FOSATU, given that it stopped being a functioning federation in the 1960s. Individual SACTU activists played an important role in the 1970s independent unions, including TUACC and MAWU, but not as a coherent bloc (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006). They were manifestly a minority, unable to win TUACC or FOSATU.

SACP: an independent capitalist republic with substantial reforms ('national democracy') as a stage towards a Marxist-Leninist state. In this sense, there was a strand of FOSATU workerism that can certainly be called 'quasi-syndicalist' (Byrne, 2012).

There were, however, no direct links between the earlier syndicalist movement and FOSATU workerism. It was mainly through the New Left that FOSATU imbibed, often indirectly, ideas from anarchists and syndicalists (Byrne, 2012: Chapters 5, 8). A notable conduit was the early Gramsci, with his 'early stuff – the factory councils' especially important (Bonner, interview, 2010; also Webster, interview, 2010). But more gradualist and reformist ideas, like social democracy and Poulantzas's Eurocommunism were also influences on workerism. It was not monolithic, and not a variant of revolutionary or anarcho-syndicalism.

Workerism as Mass Movement

Many of the critiques of FOSATU workerism rest heavily on arguments that present nationalism as the natural politics of black people. These positions can be found not just in populist polemics against FOSATU, but in scholarly works which marginalise the left in the history of South African protest and resistance (see Legassick, 1979).

Congress populist polemics, for example, set up a number of connotations that effectively presented all rivals as inauthentic. The ANC was presented as synonymous with the national liberation movement, the SACP was presented as synonymous with the working class, and SACTU was presented as synonymous with the union movement. Thus, the bearer of the national struggle was presented as the ANC, which 'carries the present political aspirations of the majority of the black working class as well as other classes of oppressed South Africans' (Toussaint, 1983: 38). As for the working class, since unions alone cannot 'pass beyond the limits of economic struggle', it needed the distilled theory 'we call Marxism-Leninism', and thus, direction by the SACP (Toussaint, 1983: 35, 40–1, 45). In line with its two-stage theory, the direction that the SACP promoted was support for ANC nationalism, as bearer of the first stage.

Since the ANC was nationalist, in the classical sense of advocating a cross-class national movement for a national state, this sort of reasoning also

This history did not shy away from outlining the role of African kings and ruling classes in the sale of slaves and servants, in collaborating with colonialism, and in supplying migrant workers to capitalists. Nor did it fail to emphasise episodes of cross-racial workers' solidarity. By stressing *both* national oppression *and* class differences, it provided a powerful counter-narrative to black and Afrikaner nationalist visions of South African history as a perpetual race struggle – and inspiration for workerists' vision of a working-class movement (Foster, 1982: 6–8) able to change the country.

This stress on class-based mobilisation as both historical reality and contemporary strategy translated into workerists being deeply sceptical of movements and structures in which workers and the working class did not play the leading role. Thus, FOSATU's involvement in larger campaigns was always coupled to doing so 'in such a way that the working-class movement is strengthened' and 'democracy is not merely spoken, but also acted upon' (FOSATU, 1982a: 4).

In so far as workerism envisaged the transformed future in terms of a new and unified South Africa, it could be read as calling, at the least, for a working-class centred nation or, at most, for a working-class nation. This would be centred, not on indigeneity, race or ethnicity, nor even on a new South African identity that downplayed class, but on the interests of the working-class majority and the extension of workers' control.

FOSATU workerism was therefore a remarkable current. Workerist thinking combined anti-nationalist, anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist imperatives to make a distinct approach to the national liberation struggle. This would centre on a united, non-racial working class exercising workers' control – as opposed to a multiclass nationalist popular front, led by non-working-class elements, and often undemocratic (Byrne, 2012: Chapter 6). This project included a fight against capitalism and for industrial democracy (FOSATU, 1982a: 14).

Workerists wanted a 'just and fair society controlled by workers' (Foster, 1982: 2), where wealth was 'democratically produced and equally distributed' (FOSATU, 1982a: 3). Liberation meant 'having a voice in the wealth that you are creating and benefiting from' (Dube, Interview, 2009), where 'no group of people are going to sit in an office and issue instructions to workers' (Sauls, 1980).

Beyond the Workplace

Workerism sought to build a strong workers movement by ensuring that black and other workers were well-organised at the point of production. However, this did not mean that workerism was economic or sectional, as its opponents claimed. FOSATU's official political positions included demands for universal suffrage, the abolition of the homeland system and the end of apartheid security legislation (FOSATU, 1982a). Nor did workerism reject struggles beyond the workplace. FOSATU (1982a) stated that it would 'support any democratic organisation involved in struggles in the community' and 'participate in campaigns directed at the establishment of a more just society'.

FOSATU did not join the UDF, which it viewed as unduly controlled by the middle class, often undemocratic, and too closely linked to Congress (Byrne, 2012: Chapter 6). However, the federation supported township-based bus, consumer and school boycotts; opposed the detention of activists and trade unionists by the apartheid government; campaigned against the 1983 white referendum, the 1984 Tricameral Parliament and the black local authorities; participated in political strikes and work stoppages; championed gender equality at the workplace; fought influx control and provided radical union-based education (FOSATU, 1982a,b, 1983a,b,c,f,g, 1984a,b,c,d,e, 1985a,b,c,d,f,g). If a national liberation struggle is a struggle to end national oppression, then FOSATU workerism was certainly part of the South African national liberation struggle of the time.

Workerism was also concerned with issues related to state power and reform, in a way that contrasted sharply with Congress positions. ANC and SACTU populists posited that reforms were impossible under apartheid: claiming the system would only tolerate 'yellow' unions, they insisted that armed struggle was essential (SACTU, 1979, 1980a, 1981). Workerists, however, argued that it *was* possible to build strong, independent trade unions under apartheid, *and* to use them to win meaningful reforms.

Their position also contrasted with a common claim on the independent left – for example, by the independent Marxist Workers' Tendency (MWT) – that apartheid was so essential to the reproduction of capitalism that apartheid could not end without the destruction of capitalism itself (for example, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, 1982). The workerists rejected this claim. While recognising that capitalism benefited from and promoted apartheid, they evidently assumed that major changes could be made,

short of socialist revolution, up to and including the installation of a post-apartheid black nationalist state.

Some workerists embraced the view, drawn from a reading of Gramsci, that the state was not 'a monolithic entity and purely functional instrument of capital, but a force which workers can affect by their struggles' (Fine, 1982: 55). This led logically to a politics of engagement, which showed there was a social democratic strand in workerism. Other workerists were more sceptical about the state but also tended to be pragmatic, and believed in using the courts and the statutory industrial relations system to win reforms.

When the apartheid state deracialised labour laws, expanding full union rights and participation in industrial councils to black African workers, the Congress movement called for a boycott. By contrast, workerists generally supported union registration in the reformed statutory industrial relations system as a means of opening up further space for union growth and influence. It was held that as long as workers' control remained central in the trade union movement, co-option into the official machinery could be avoided. Even the social democratic strand in workerism remained deeply committed to notions of workers' participation and self-management, differentiating itself from traditional Western European social democracy, which stressed labour parties and corporatism.

The building of organs of worker power was paramount (Erwin, interview, 2010). It was *possible* to have capitalism without apartheid, but it was not *desirable*, since the working class would remain oppressed and exploited. The unions should foster a larger 'working-class movement' including co-operatives, parties and newspapers 'linked to the working class' to help 'put workers in control of their own destiny' (Foster, 1982: 6–8). In townships, workers formed the majority, faced problems the middle class did not, and should bring to bear power and strategies otherwise lacking (Xipu et al., 1984: 6).

While workerism was labelled 'syndicalism' by the populists, the reality was more complex. Workerism shared with South Africa's earlier revolutionary syndicalists a stress on building an autonomous, democratic, radical workers' movement aiming at workers' control of the economy and society, and the notion of a class-based struggle against both capitalism and racism (see, for example, van der Walt, 2014). This was clearly different to the two-stage, party-led, statist strategy of the