

The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970–1980

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Introduction

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking the last cigarette. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated, leave few marks: field-patterns, acts – heads, folk-tales, broken pitchers, burial mounds, fading memory of their youthful beauty. History loves only those who dominate her. It is a relationship of mutual enslavement.¹

During the first two months of 1973 more than 150 factories in the Greater Durban area were hit by a wave of strikes involving nearly 100 000 African workers.² Not only did these largely spontaneous strikes speed up the revival of a predominantly African trade union movement, which had suffered severe setbacks at the hands of the

1 S. Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Vintage, 1995), 124.

2 Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (chapter 6 in this volume) put the number of striking workers in 1973 at 60 000 – a figure that closely resembles that of 61 410 which the Minister of Labour gave during the parliamentary debate on the strikes (*Hansard*, 11, Columns 689-695, 24 April 1973). Our figure is based on LACOM (A Project of the South African Committee on Higher Education), *Freedom From Below: The Struggle for Trade Unions in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1989), 166, who give a figure of 98 029 for striking workers in 1973. See also *Africa Contemporary Record: Annual Survey and Documents* (hereafter ACS) 1973-1974, vol. 6 (London: Rex Collings, 1974), B438-B439; *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa* (hereafter *Survey*), 1973 (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations [SAIRR], 1974), 284; Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), 327; E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 131; S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 40; J. Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991), 18; D. Lewis, 'Black Workers and Trade Unions', in T.G. Karis and G. Gerhart (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, vol. 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1997), 202; E. Webster and G. Adler, 'Introduction' to G. Adler and E. Webster (eds), *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000), 1.

apartheid regime during the 1960s, but they also ushered in a period of hope in which the democratic labour movement re-emerged and grew, forcing cracks to open in the ranks of the ruling class. This chapter explores the revival of the labour movement in South Africa in the wake of the 1973 strikes. Our analysis will show that, at least five groups were involved in the establishment of the predominantly African trade unions that emerged in the 1970s.

The first group were activists from church bodies, some of whom had previously worked with established trade unions such as the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) and who broke with tradition and began to organise black workers in the early 1970s. Working closely with religious groups such as the Catholic Church, they were able to establish the Urban Training Project (UTP) ‘as an important trade union education and training centre.’³ Among them were former members of the African Affairs Department of TUCSA: Loet Douwes-Dekker and Eric Taycke, in Johannesburg, and Harriet Bolton in Durban. Others were Emma Mashinini in Johannesburg, Joe Foster, Les Kettledas, Brian Fredericks and Fred Sauls in the Western and Eastern Cape.⁴

The second group was made up of a large number of white activists who not only participated in black trade unions that were formed in the wake of the 1973 strikes, but also served in different positions in these unions. Among them were mainly former National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) activists, including Jeanette Curtis and Gavin Anderson in Johannesburg; Halton Cheadle, David Davies, David Hemson, Alec Erwin, Pat Horn and John Copelyn in Durban; and Gordon Young, John Frankish, Paula Ensor and Robert Petersen in Cape Town.⁵ Many had embraced trade unionism as well as working class activism after their exposure to Marxism and became convinced that the national liberation movement, as represented by the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), had been vanquished by the apartheid regime during the early 1960s.⁶ Bozzoli and Delius express similar sentiments about the post-1973 period as the dawn of a new era in which class struggle would take centre stage, when they write:

When in January 1973 thousands of workers went on strike in Natal, they dented the complacency of much white South Africa and provided what appeared to be a powerful confirmation for white activists that Marxism and class analysis were now the appropriate tools for South African society ... In the early phases of this engagement, many of these white intellectuals, like a number of the revisionists in England, had a strong sense that they were

3 Sakhela Buhlungu, ‘Rebels Without a Cause of their Own: Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions, 1973-2000’, Unpublished Paper to Sociology Seminar at the University of Johannesburg, Friday, 15 March 2002, 15.

4 University of Fort Hare (hereafter UFH), ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 35, Marius and Jeanette Schoon, ‘Report on the South African Situation’, undated, 12.

5 Ibid. Also interview with Robert Petersen conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cape Town, 5 September 2003; and interview with Paula Ensor conducted by Jabulani Sithole at the University of Cape Town, 5 September 2003, SADET Oral History Project.

6 Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius (eds), ‘Introduction: Radical History and South African Society’, in *Radical History Review*, vol. 46, no 7 (January 1990), 22-3.

involved in a decisive rupture with the past. Many believed that the ANC, PAC, and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) had been defeated in the early 1960s, and that the exclusivism of black consciousness and the sorry record of independent Africa – not least in the treatment of workers – made for sometimes strident hostility to nationalism and a stark privileging of class over race.⁷

The third group we discuss is the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), mainly former South African Student Organisation (SASO) activists, whose contribution to the revival of trade unions in the 1970s is often downplayed in existing scholarship dominated by former activists in NUSAS, from whom BCM split in the late 1960s.

The fourth group consisted of SACTU leaders and activists. Internally, they consisted either of activists who had been recently released from Robben Island or of people who had kept low profiles at the height of state repression in the mid-1960s. Among them were John Nkadimeng, Phindile Mfeti, Elliot Shabangu, Mirriam Sithole, Richard Takalo, Elias (Robert) Mancini, Lawrence Ndzanga, Rita Ndzanga, Samuel Pholoto, Marius Schoon, Eli Weinberg in the Transvaal; Oscar Mpetha, Elijah Loza, Barnett Ntsodo, Alpheus Ndude and Zora Mehlomakhulu in Cape Town; Albert Dhlomo, Joseph Mdluli, Aaron Masango and Alpheus Mthethwa in Durban, plus Harry Gwala, Matthews Meyiwa, William Khanyile, Anton Xaba, John Nene, Alpheus Mdlalose and Moses Bhengu in the Pietermaritzburg-Hammarsdale-Ladysmith areas and Siphon Hina, Dennis Neer and others in Port Elizabeth and East London. In addition, SACTU leaders who went abroad during the 1960s spent the next decade lobbying the international working class movement to engage in solidarity work with South African workers. They simultaneously became heavily involved in efforts to establish and strengthen existing trade unions throughout the African continent.

The fifth was a group of young union recruits (not SACTU veterans), such as Luke ‘Storey’ Mazwembe and Wilson Sidina in Cape Town; Baba K. Makama, Lydia Kompe, Piet Pheku, Elison Mothlabe, Siphon Kubheka, Samson Ndou, Sydney Mufamadi in the Transvaal; Moses Ndlovu, John Khumalo (alias John Makhathini), Azaria Ndebele, Jabulani Gwala, Samuel Kikine, Themba Nxumalo, Magwaza Maphalala, Matthew Oliphant in Natal, Thobile Mhlahlo, Humphrey Maxegwana, Bangumzi Sifingo, Rufus Rweuxu, Sisa Njikelana and Thozamile Gqwetha in the Eastern Cape.

The 1973 strikes: chronology and context

The Durban strikes began early in January 1973, when 1 200 night-watchmen downed tools, demanding a wage increase of R10 a month. Shortly thereafter 2 000

7 Ibid. For links with the members of the Marxist Workerist Tendency of ANC, see Belinda Bozzoli, *Political Nature of a Ruling Class: Capital and Ideology in South Africa, 1890-1933* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), ix; and Nyawuza (pseudonym for Joe Slovo), ‘New “Marxist” Tendencies and the Battle of Ideas in South Africa’, *The African Communist*, no 103, Fourth Quarter 1985, 48-9.

Coronation Brick & Tile workers also went on strike on 9 January 1973, demanding a minimum wage of R30 a week.⁸ A short-lived strike broke out at A.J. Keeler Transport Company on 10 January 1973. Workers demanded a wage increase of R2 a week but management rejected their demands on the grounds that they were being paid R2 more than the government stipulated minimum wage.⁹ This strike lasted for only 45 minutes before workers resumed their shift. Another strike broke out at a tea company, T.W. Beckett & Company, where workers were demanding a wage increase of R3 a week. Management called in the police and 100 workers were dismissed when they refused to return to work; they were reinstated a week later when the employers accepted their demands. On 15 January 1973, workers at J.H. Akitt & Company also downed tools. On 22 January 1973, drivers at Motor-Via in Pinetown, near Durban, picketed for wage increases and from 22 to 24 January 1973, 275 long-distance truck drivers also joined the strike, demanding R40 a week.¹⁰

A strike involving the largest number of workers thus far broke out at the British-owned Frame Group of Companies at the New Germany industrial complex outside Pinetown where more than 7 000 workers downed tools demanding an increase in their basic wages, which stood at R6 a week at the time. Soon thereafter, the strike spread to other plants of the Frame Group in New Germany and Jacobs, south of Durban.¹¹ At the end of January 1973, more than 10 000 Durban City Corporation workers also joined the strike.¹² During the next few weeks, factories as far away as Hammarsdale, Pietermaritzburg, Tongaat and Charlestown were also hit by industrial action. By April 1973 industrial strikes had erupted at the Mandini and Richard's Bay industrial areas.¹³

The wave of strikes spread to Johannesburg and other industrial centres in the country. There were approximately 246 strikes involving African workers in various sectors of the economy during 1973.¹⁴ On 11 September 1973, the South African Police shot protesting mineworkers at Western Deep Levels Mine, killing 12 and wounding 38 others. They had gone on strike against poverty wages.¹⁵

While there is unanimity that a sharp upswing in inflation and the accompanying lack of wage increases among African workers, in particular, and the black workers, in general, were major causes of the strikes, what has remained elusive is why they first broke out in Durban. The size of Durban, one of South Africa's major industrial centres, partly explains why it became one of the main arenas of industrial conflict. African workers in Durban were not worse off, however, than their counterparts in other parts of the country. Other commentators have suggested that because of cultural homogeneity of African workers in Durban, it was easier to coordinate strike-

8 ACR, 1973-1974 puts the number of striking workers at Coronation Brick & Tile at 1 500.

9 S'bu Khwela, '1973 Strikes: Breaking the Silence', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 17, no 3, (May/June 1993), 21.

10 ACR, B439.

11 Khwela, 'The 1973 Strikes', 23.

12 ACR, B439.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Survey* 1974, 325.

15 *Ibid.*, 286.

related activities.¹⁶ What is beyond dispute is the negative impact of the economic downturn and the accompanying inflation that hit South Africa in the early 1970s, as described in chapter 1 of this volume. The resulting economic recession and inflation undermined the standard of living at grass-roots level, with the poorly paid African workers suffering the most.

The 1973 strikes were preceded by less momentous but equally significant industrial action in Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Ovamboland in northern Namibia.¹⁷ In 1969 about 1 000 casual dockworkers embarked on a wildcat strike in Durban which led to their dismissal.¹⁸ Official reports put the number of industrial strikes in 1970 at 63. They involved approximately 3 210 African workers. A further 22 workers were allegedly involved in lockouts during the same year.¹⁹ Official statistics put the number of strikes involving African workers in 1971 at 22, whereas Ray Alexander (writing as E.R. Braverman) noted that there were approximately 86 industrial strikes in South Africa in 1971.²⁰ During the same year the Durban and Cape Town dockworkers threatened to go on strike demanding wage increases. They repeated these threats during the Wage Board hearings in July 1972.²¹ In October that year, they staged a strike that virtually brought the two harbours to a standstill.²² In June 1972, bus drivers at the Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO) in Johannesburg went on a strike that left over 120 000 commuters from the coloured and African townships of Soweto, Evaton and Martindale stranded. Using a combination of threats and force, employers and the government broke this strike, with 318 bus drivers being arrested on 4 June 1972.²³ A crowd of over 500 people gathered at the John Vorster Square police station to demand their release.²⁴ They were released the following day, but charged and put on trial in July 1972, under Section 14 (1) of the Riotous Assemblies Act, for allegedly breaking their contracts, knowing that it would lead to riotous behaviour from the public.²⁵ The magistrate withdrew the charges against the drivers.²⁶

Industrial action by African workers, mainly miners from Ovamboland in northern Namibia, erupted in the middle of December 1971 and continued until January 1972.²⁷ On 10 December 1971, they elected a Committee of Twelve, which drew up a petition demanding the abolition of the contract labour system, freedom to travel and

16 Lodge, *Black Politics*, 327; UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 35, Marius and Jeanette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation'.

17 Lewis, 'Black Workers', 189-190.

18 B. Freund, 'Confrontation and Social Change: Natal and the Forging of Apartheid 1949-1972', in R. Morrell, et al. (eds), *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal: Historical and Social Perspectives* (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996), 131.

19 *Survey*, 1971, 249-50.

20 *Ibid.*, 1972, 342; R.E. Braverman 'African Workers Advance', *African Communist*, no 53, Second Quarter, 1973, 55.

21 *Survey*, 1973, 325.

22 *Cape Times*, 21 July 1972.

23 *Survey*, 1973, 331-32.

24 *Star*, 5 June 1972 and *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 June 1972.

25 *Star*, 19 July 1972 and *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 July 1972.

26 *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 September 1972.

27 Sam Mhlongo, 'Black Workers' Strikes in Southern Africa', in *New Left Review*, no. 83 (January-February) 1973, 45.

take employment where they wished, and higher pay. They threatened to go on strike from 14 December 1971 if their demands were not met. On 13 December 1971, about 5 500 workers stayed away from work following a mass meeting the previous day.²⁸ By 16 December 1971 many of them had been repatriated to the Ovamboland reserve. Employers meanwhile tried in vain to mobilise scab labour from the Namibian reserve areas.²⁹ The strike reached its climax in January 1972 when up to 13 000 workers downed tools.³⁰ The police opened fire on the unarmed workers, fatally wounding eight. Hundreds of other workers were detained and twelve of their leaders charged with incitement. Colin Winter, the Bishop of Damaraland who had supported the strikers, was deported from Namibia.

There is unanimity that the Namibian strike was most significant in the period immediately preceding 1973 because although the workers' demands were economically driven they also used their organisation and muscle power to make political demands.³¹ S. Mhlongo argues that the Ovamboland strikes 'altered the general political situation in the territory, and strengthened opposition to South African administration'.³² D. Lewis notes that although none of the pre-1973 industrial actions was as momentous as those of 1973, they helped set the tone for a more sustained process of revival rather than a bolt from the blue.³³

Perspectives on the significance of the strikes and the revival of the unions

The Natal strikes created an enabling environment for the revival of the political unionism that was first established by SACTU during the 1950s.³⁴ Formed in March 1955 by 14 trade unions, which declined membership of TUCSA, which was formed after the disintegration of the South African Trade Union and Labour Council (SATULC) the previous year, SACTU expanded rapidly, drawing a further 17 African trade unions into its ranks and forming 12 new ones within a few years.³⁵ SACTU membership stood at 20 000 in 1956 and peaked at just under 55 000 in 1962 – 40 000 were African, 14 000 coloured and Indian and about 500 white workers.³⁶ From its inception, SACTU concerns included not only factory floor issues but also township living conditions and the overriding problem of state power. It maintained that:

The organising of the mass of workers for higher wages, better conditions of life and labour is inextricably bound up with a determined struggle for

28 ACR, 1971-1972, B 390; Survey, 1973, 433.

29 Mhlongo, 'Black Workers' Strike', 45.

30 ACR, 1973-1974, B385.

31 B. du Toit, *Ukubamba Amadolo: Workers' Struggles in the South African Textile Industry* (London: Oryx Press, 1978), 113-4.

32 Mhlongo, 'Black Workers' Strike', 46.

33 Lewis, 'Black Workers', 190.

34 H. Gwala, 'The Life and Struggles of Harry Gwala', *New Era*, vol. 4, no 1, (June 1989), 33.

35 K. Luckhardt and B. Wall, *Organise or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), 90; R.S. Nyameko, 'Trade Union Movement at the Crossroads', *African Communist*, Third Quarter, 1980.

36 University of the Western Cape (hereafter UWC), Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers (MCHO2), Ron Press, Discussion Paper: 'The Context of Our Struggle', undated, p 2.

political rights and liberation from all oppressive laws and practices. It follows that a mere struggle for the economic rights of workers without participation in the general struggle for political emancipation would condemn the trade union movement to uselessness and to a betrayal of the interests of workers.³⁷

Political unionism necessitated that SACTU entered into alliances at both the national and local levels. Historically, this took the form of alliances with the ANC and its partners in the Congress Alliance and participation in joint campaigns around daily concerns such as transport and housing, in addition to shop floor issues.³⁸

SACTU's political unionism was a consequence of general acceptance within the Congress Alliance that South Africa was a unique society. Commenting on this uniqueness, Toussaint argued:

The problems of the course and strategy of the South African revolution have not been easy. Diagrams are not to be found in the Marxist treatises on political theory, nor ready made-made answers in the accumulated experiences of other nations. South Africa has always – in social, economic and political conditions – been subtly different, unique, requiring its own, subtly different answers to universal problems of revolutionary practice. Marxist theory has been a great illuminator; but its light has always needed to be cast on problems unique to South Africa, and demanding therefore the most careful, non-dogmatic study and application in new ways, beyond the textbook.³⁹

In this analysis, South Africa was regarded as an advanced capitalist country in which colonial-style patterns of life, work and administration kept the black majority in an exploitative and imperialistic relationship with the privileged white minority. The country's racist dispensation ensured that the whites enjoyed exclusive political and economic rights and privileges whereas blacks enjoyed none.⁴⁰ It was thus concluded that, as a strategic response to this situation, the national democratic revolution involving multi-class forces under the leadership of the ANC should take precedence over a pure class struggle.⁴¹ Some members of the alliance envisaged national democracy as an end point, while others favoured a conterminous unfolding of the national democratic and socialist struggles – hence the slogan: 'Socialism is the future!

37 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 97.

38 R.V. Lambert, 'Political Unionism in South Africa: the South African Congress of Trade Unions, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 1988, 32; Mark Williams Shope (hereafter MWS) Papers, Letter from Mark Shope to Barney Dladla, 28 January 1974, 2.

39 Toussaint, 'Class and Nation in the South-African Revolution', *The African Communist*, no. 72, First Quarter, 1978, 19–20; and J. Slovo, 'The Working Class and Nation Building', in M. van Diepen (ed.), *The National Question in South Africa* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1988), 142.

40 H. Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (London and Paris: James Currey and UNESCO Press, 1988), 31; see also MWS Papers, London and Paris, Letter from Mark Shope to Barney Dladla, 28 January 1974.

41 Wolpe, *Race, Class*, 56–65 and A. Fine and E. Webster, 'Transcending Traditions: Trade Unions and Political Unity', in G. Moss and I. Obery (eds.), *South Africa: Contemporary Analysis, South African Review*, 5 (London, Munich and New York: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), 257.

Build it now!⁴² This conception of the South African situation has sometimes been loosely termed ‘colonialism of a special-type’ (CST); others have referred to it as the ‘national-democratic tradition’.⁴³ SACTU members hoped to revive this tradition in the wake of the 1973 strikes and sought to achieve this by combining the underground and semi-legal approaches to the revival of the labour movement.⁴⁴

SACTU’s political unionism suffered attacks from at least three fronts. The first came from elements opposed to the ANC and its alliance partners. Edward Feit, a South African academic based in America and apologist for apartheid, represents this camp. The primary objective of Feit’s study, *Workers without Weapons*, was to trace how SACTU developed and why it ‘failed’ as an organisation.⁴⁵ Feit alleges that SACTU failed as a trade union because of its involvement in the political campaigns of the Congress Alliance which detracted it from its trade union base.⁴⁶ Feit’s workerist and economistic approach to trade unionism in South Africa was echoed in a range of right-wing and left-wing studies of black trade unionism which surfaced in the aftermath of the 1973 strikes. Some of these commentators, such as Friedman, dismissed SACTU as a ‘captive of the nationalists’ because of its involvement in the Congress Alliance;⁴⁷ while others, such as Lewis, condemned it for its alleged ‘willingness to subordinate worker interests and requirements to those of the political movements with which it was associated’.⁴⁸ They also blamed SACTU’s association with the Congress Alliance for the destruction of trade union structures within the country during the 1960s. Freund adds that with the banning of the ANC and its turn to the armed struggle, SACTU, although never made illegal, was effectively crushed, with many of its organisers and leaders either imprisoned or forced into exile and most of its component unions dying out.⁴⁹

The second source of criticism came from NUSAS-aligned white union activists, university-based white intellectuals, and new Marxists who took interest in the predominantly black trade unions that emerged in the wake of the 1973 strikes. Organised into the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) and the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) in Natal, the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau (WPWAB) in Cape Town and the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) in Johannesburg, these activists eschewed SACTU’s political unionism. They insisted that the black trade

42 Interview with Brian Bunting conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cape Town, 4 February 2005, SADET Oral History Project.

43 Fine and Webster, ‘Transcending Traditions’, 256.

44 MWS Papers, Letter from Mark Shope to Barney Dladla, 28 January 1974, 2.

45 E. Feit, *Workers without Weapons: The South African Congress of Trade Unions and the Organisation of Workers* (Hamden: Archon, 1975), 8.

46 *Ibid.*, 8. Relying exclusively on discredited turncoats like Bruno Mtolo, professional state witnesses in the trials of the ANC and MK cadres during the 1960s and 1970s, and on anti-SACTU federations like TUCSA and FOFATUSA for information, Feit deliberately distorted evidence in order to drive home his thesis that SACTU was a failure. As Luckhardt and Wall subsequently pointed out, he made no effort to contact SACTU officials in exile to cross-check his information.

47 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 26. For a critique of this view, see Baskin, *Striking Back*, 15–6.

48 Lewis, ‘Black Workers’, 197 and 208.

49 See B. Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 131–2.

unions which emerged after the 1973 strikes could not emulate SACTU since, in their opinion, it was never properly constituted as a trade union. This argument was made regardless of the overwhelming evidence which showed that SACTU was organised into sector unions that, in turn, were affiliated to the federation. These SACTU critics advocated ‘shop-floor unionism’ as an alternative.⁵⁰ Writing from such a perspective, Webster and Adler have suggested that the Durban strikes signalled a possibility of bringing together the two dominant but opposed approaches in the labour movement – the one they associated with the Congress Alliance that emphasised abstention from involvement in apartheid-created institutions for fear of possible cooption and, hence maintenance of the status quo; the other that favoured creating possibilities for a ‘radical reformist and incrementalist strategy’, placing great emphasis on the legal means of struggle.⁵¹ Webster and Adler saw this as the classical divide in liberation politics, between ‘idealists’ and ‘pragmatists’.

The third group of critics consisted of the England-based left-wing activists during the 1970s: Paula Ensor, David Hemson, Martin Legassick, Robert Petersen, and Peter Collins. The first four were suspended from the ANC in 1979 and in 1985 expelled for attempting to subvert the tripartite alliance. They subsequently constituted themselves as the Marxist Workers’ Tendency of the ANC – a misleading appellation that gave the impression that they were still part of the ANC.⁵² They espoused a thesis that ran contrary to that articulated by the Congress Alliance and argued in line with Alex Callinicos and John Rogers that South Africa was a capitalist country like any other in Western Europe and, therefore, some eternal verities of political theory as described by Marx applied.⁵³ In spite of their recognition that South African capitalists dealt differently with the country’s variegated working class, they argued that since capitalism was dominant in both South Africa and Western Europe, South Africa’s problems could also be explained in terms that applied to Western Europe and the same solutions prescribed. The situation, in their view, called for a revolutionary working class to overthrow the capitalist state and substitute for it a workers’ state and a socialist system.⁵⁴ Reiterating Callinicos and Rodgers, and reflecting the views of his colleagues, Legassick wrote:

The black working class in South Africa – because of its position in production and society; because of it has no property to protect, no privileges to defend, and nothing to lose but its chains; because the full weight of national oppression presses on its shoulders – is the only consistently democratic

50 Fine and Webster, ‘Transcending Traditions’, 257; see also Lewis, ‘Black Workers’, 171–2.

51 Webster and Adler, ‘Introduction’, 2 and Fine and Webster, ‘Transcending Traditions’, 257–8.

52 *Mercury*, 16 January 1980; UWC, Mayibuye Centre and Robben Island Museum (MCH02), ANC London Papers, box 65, ‘ANC Dissidents’, 1979; and A. Sibeko (with Joyce Leeson), *Freedom in Our Lifetime* (Durban and Bellville: Indicator Press and Mayibuye Centre, 1996), 140; Nyawuza, ‘New Marxist Tendencies’, 45–61.

53 A. Callinicos and J. Rogers, *Southern Africa After Soweto* (London: Pluto Press, 1977).

54 *Ibid.*, 18; see also Toussaint, ‘Class and Nation’, 18–33.

and anti-capitalist class, and the only social force capable of leading the revolutionary mass struggle for national liberation and socialism.⁵⁵

They dismissed the quest for national liberation by the vast majority of the masses as just an aberration in a struggle for socialism. They also questioned the role and genuineness of the non-proletarian forces in the struggle for liberation and rejected the colonialism of a special type (CST) thesis.

This approach to the South African situation came under heavy criticism from, among others, Toussaint, Wolpe, Slovo and Magubane. In a review of Callinicos's and Rogers's book, Toussaint commented on what he viewed as dogma that could lead to incorrect appraisal of the South African revolution. The first of these dogmatic positions was that in a developed (so-called Western) capitalist society, the only thoroughly revolutionary class is the proletariat, or industrial working class, and that other classes, such as the petty bourgeoisie and the peasants, were at best vacillating and partial allies of the revolution, incapable of playing a consistent revolutionary role and thus clearly incapable of leading it. The second was that the national struggle, which cuts across lines to unite disparate classes of 'the nation' obscured the real conflict, which was the class struggle – that the national struggle was, at best, a skirmish around the fringes of the revolution and, at worst, a red herring dragged across the revolution to divert it.⁵⁶ Toussaint accused the two authors of producing Marxist-sounding dogma which paledly mirrored past thinking of the SACP that at the time lacked concrete political activity and experience of the realities of the South African situation because they were far removed from the life and death situation of the unfolding revolutionary struggle and were merely writing an essay in Marxist theory.⁵⁷

Wolpe attributed hostility towards the CST thesis, and the accompanying charge that by espousing the thesis the ANC was prioritising the national struggle at the expense of the class struggle for socialism, to economic reductionism which emptied the South African class structure of its racial content.⁵⁸ On the one hand, it reduced nationalism to an instrument of the economic/political interest of only one class, the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, it portrayed the working class as having 'purely' economic interests deriving from the shop floor.⁵⁹ The struggle for national liberation was therefore seen as inconsistent with the struggle for socialism.⁶⁰ From this flowed the supposition that since for the working class, the national and class struggles stood in contradiction to one another, the 'correct' political perspective was a 'pure' class struggle with the working class alone opting for socialism.⁶¹ Wolpe dismissed this argument as devoid of practical experience of the South African revolution. He added that while it could not be denied that the national struggle had its share of

55 M. Legassick, 'The Past and Present Role of the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC', in I. Liebenberg et al. (eds.), *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria: HAUM, 1994), 173–184.

56 Toussaint, 'Class and Nation', 25.

57 Ibid., 27.

58 Harold Wolpe, 'Race and Class and the National Struggle in South Africa', in Van Diepen *The National Question*, 62.

59 Wolpe, 'Race, Class and the Apartheid State', 33.

60 Wolpe, 'Race and Class and the National Struggle', 57.

61 Wolpe, 'Race, Class and the Apartheid State', 33.

conservative, reformist or bourgeois elements, as characterised by the African petit bourgeoisie working within the Bantustan system, there were no grounds for denying the efficacy of revolutionary nationalism which had both national liberation and socialism as its objectives.⁶²

In his seminal paper on the South African revolution, Joe Slovo argued that in South Africa true national liberation was impossible without social liberation and that nationalist ideology which ignored the class basis of racism was false. He attributed this perspective to the fact that in South Africa capitalist relations of production had become the foundation of national oppression and therefore the national struggle had the objective of eliminating all forms of exploitation.⁶³ Furthermore, he said, given the existence of a large and growing working class whose political organisations and trade unions played a fundamental role in advancing and shaping the revolutionary cause, and class consciousness which complemented national consciousness, there was a great possibility for a short and sharp transition from the national democratic revolution to a socialist revolution.⁶⁴ Slovo acknowledged that the black middle and upper strata (like their counterparts in every part of the world) who found themselves on the side of the people's struggle are often inconsistent and vacillating. However, he warned against possible tactical mistakes that the working class would make if it were to reject all alliances and go it alone. In his 1988 pamphlet, *The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution*, he further says:

It is obvious that the black capitalist class favours capitalism and it will do its best to influence the post-apartheid society in this direction. It is obvious that the black middle and upper classes who take part in a broad liberation alliance will jostle for hegemony and attempt to represent their interests as the interests of all Africans ... But it is equally obvious that if the working class and its vanguard and mass organisations were to get locked up with themselves, the greatest harm would be done to the cause of both national liberation and social emancipation. By rejecting class alliances and going it alone, the working class would in fact be surrendering leadership of the national struggle to the upper and middle strata.⁶⁵

A choice of class purity, he argued, would lead to class suicide and, in the course of this, socialist-sounding slogans would actually hold back the achievement of socialism.⁶⁶ On political unionism, he said that it was impossible for trade unions in any part of

62 Ibid.

63 J. Slovo, 'South Africa: No Middle Road', in B. Davidson et al. (eds), *Southern Africa: The Politics of Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 139 and 140.

64 Ibid., 140. For an appraisal of the relevance of Slovo's 'No Middle Road', see J. Netshitenzhe, 'The Courage to Search for the New Personal Reflections on "No Middle Road"', in *African Communist*, no 163, First Quarter 2003, especially pages 57–8.

65 J. Slovo, *The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution*, An Umsebenzi Discussion Pamphlet, South African Communist Party, 1988, 8. For a recent appraisal of the relevance this pamphlet, see Blade Nzimande, 'Reflections on the Contemporary Significance, Relevance and Meaning of Joe Slovo's 1988 Pamphlet "The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution"', in *African Communist*, no 163, First Quarter 2003, 46–54.

66 Slovo, pamphlet, *The South African Working Class*, 8.

the world to keep out of the broader political conflict because of the use of force by the dominant economic classes of the state as their political and repressive instrument against the oppressed masses, in general, and the working class, in particular.⁶⁷

Magubane maintained that what was lacking in the analysis of race, class and nationalism by neo-Marxists and liberal academic writers was a dialectic approach. He attributed this to lack of practical experience of realities of struggle on the part of most of these academics who were generally divorced from the liberation struggle raging on in South Africa in the 1970s. As a result, he said, the neo-Marxists reified the working class and treated it as an independent entity that could act on its own and which was free of political, ideological and cultural baggage of communities in which they lived. Similarly, liberal academic writers, he said, offered idle speculation that, at best, celebrated white power and, at worst, was devoid of the living realities of the South African situation.⁶⁸ The reality of national oppression and capitalist exploitation in South Africa underlined the link between national and class struggles, Magubane concluded.⁶⁹ We approach the revival of the labour movement in South Africa in the wake of the 1973 strikes with these contentious ideological debates in mind. Our analysis will show that fierce contestations developed in various parts of the country as a result of the involvement of a range of forces from diverse ideological backgrounds and political persuasions in the revival of the new trade union movement.

The Urban Training Project and the revival of trade unions, 1972 to 1976

The Urban Training Project (UTP) was one of the first groups to help form black trade unions, following the PUTCO strike in June 1972.⁷⁰ The Laundry and Dry Cleaning Workers' Association (LDCWA) was the first African trade union established with UTP help. It was formally inaugurated on 20 May 1972 at the meeting held at the Darragh Hall, with Agnes Molefe as its first secretary.⁷¹ It was followed by the Transport and Allied Workers Union (TAWU) which was formed in 1973 as a direct response to the PUTCO strike of June 1972.⁷² Its headquarters were in Johannesburg but it had branches in the Transvaal, Natal and the Eastern Cape.⁷³ It grew by successfully improving conditions of its members, especially at PUTCO and in Port Elizabeth where it also assisted white workers. By the 1980s its membership exceeded 20 000 in the transport sector.⁷⁴ By 1975, the UTP had also helped organise and establish the Sweets, Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU), Paper Wood and Allied Workers'

67 Ibid., 21.

68 Bernard Magubane, 'Mounting Class and National Struggles in South Africa', in Bernard Magubane, *South Africa: From Uitenhage to Soweto*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1989), 86.

69 Ibid.

70 *Survey*, 1974, 323-4.

71 D. Lowry, *20 Years in the Labour Movement: The Urban Training Project and Change in South Africa, 1971-1991*, (Johannesburg: Wardmore, 1991), 101.

72 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow*, 45.

73 E. Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 3, (January 1986), 85.

74 Ibid.

Union (PWAU), the Building Construction and Allied Workers' Union (BCAWU), the South African Chemical Workers' Union (SACWU), the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers' Union (CCAWUSA), and the Glass and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU).⁷⁵

SFAWU was established in February 1974 with Skakes Sikhakhane as its secretary.⁷⁶ Its headquarters were in Durban and it organised in the sugar, milling, biscuits, bakeries, dairies, brewing, sweets and chocolate sectors. From its small beginnings, mainly in the Durban area, by 1977 it had established itself in northern and southern Natal and in the Transvaal.⁷⁷ By 1982, SFAWU had succeeded in organising 100 per cent of the workers in the factories that fell within its sector. PWAU was formed in Springs on 31 May 1974 with the YCW member, Benjy Mngoma, as its first secretary.⁷⁸ It organised workers in the paper and pulp, paper printing and packaging, wood, sawmills and furniture sectors. It had branches in the Transvaal, Natal and the Western Cape. One of its achievements was the breaking down of ethnic divisions that employers had entrenched in Natal, especially among Mpondo and Zulu workers.⁷⁹ BCAWU was formed on 1 March 1975, with SFAWU's Sikhakhane as its acting secretary. He was replaced by Frank Mohlala.⁸⁰ It engaged with sectors that were generally regarded as difficult to organise, such as building and construction, building materials, cement products, road making, ceramics, clay and stone-crushing.⁸¹ BCAWU subsequently became one of the strongest unions in the country with a membership of over 40 700 by the mid 1980s.⁸² GAWU was formed on 5 April 1975.⁸³

CCAWUSA, SACWU and GAWU were established with the help of registered TUCSA unions in 1975.⁸⁴ Emma Mashinini, who subsequently played a leading role in the formation of CCAWUSA, was first approached by Loet Douwes-Dekker of the UTP and by the leadership of TUCSA unions, the National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDAW) and National Union of Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers (NUCCAW) to help establish a parallel union in the catering and retail industry. CCAWUSA was eventually formed in 1975 with Emma Mashinini as the general secretary and M. Ledwaba as the president.⁸⁵ By 1976 the trade union had 1 000 signed-up members drawn mainly from OK Bazaars and Checkers,⁸⁶ and had established branches in major urban centres. In Natal it had branches in

75 P. Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 5, no 1, May 1979, 5–6.

76 Lowry, *20 Years*, 117.

77 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 80–1.

78 *Ibid.*, 77.

79 *Ibid.*, 78.

80 Lowry, *20 Years*, 118.

81 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 83.

82 *Ibid.*

83 Lowry, *20 Years*, 118.

84 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 19. Estelle Randall's 'Directory of Trade Unions', 84, gives 1972 as the date for the launching of SACWU.

85 Interview with Emma Mashinini conducted by Snuki Zikalala, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 17, no 4 (July /August 1993), 87–9. See also Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 70–1.

86 Emma Mashinini, interview *SALB*, vol. 17, no 4, 1993, 88.

Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Newcastle.⁸⁷ In the Transvaal its branches were in Johannesburg, Klerksdorp, Pietersburg, Vereeniging and Pretoria; in the Orange Free State they were in Bloemfontein; and in the Cape they were in Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town. Paid-up membership increased from 1 000 in 1976 to 50 345 in the 1980s.⁸⁸

The UTP operated mainly through seminars and workshops for black workers in the Cape Town and Johannesburg industrial centres. In Natal, however, it appointed Michael Faya as a part-time organiser in November 1972. He had formerly been a social worker in the Durban Catholic diocese and, prior to that, an organiser for the Federation of Free Trade Unions in South Africa (FOFATUSA)⁸⁹ Although student-supported initiatives were the only influences highlighted in the 1973 Durban strikes,⁹⁰ the UTP had also done substantial work to promote trade unionism among black workers through their discussion groups and the publication named the *Challenge*.⁹¹

Although the UTP subsequently became one of the leading forces in the establishment of black trade unions during the 1970s, initially it was not intended to be a trade union or worker controlled organisation.⁹² It only assumed these roles when money, provided by foreign sources to assist existing as well as new African worker organisations, was pumped into it.⁹³ The number of UTP-assisted trade unions grew until by the end of 1975 it was servicing ten different African unions.⁹⁴ In 1977, it set up a Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions (CCOBTU), a precursor to the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), which was formally constituted in September 1980.⁹⁵ By the mid 1980s some of the unions that had previously been assisted by the UTP claimed membership of between 40 000 and 51 000 each.⁹⁶ Lowry and Buhlungu highlight other positive contributions the UTP made towards the establishment of trade unions – such as developing a participatory methodology in its trade union education and training, which in turn empowered ordinary workers to hold their leaders (secretaries, organisers and shop-stewards) more accountable.⁹⁷

The ideological drive of overseas financial sponsors, mainly the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the British Trades Union Council (TUC), was primarily behind the UTP's economic reductionism and workerism. A condition for funding was that recipients should keep African workers away from

87 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 70–1.

88 Ibid.

89 Lowry, *20 Years*, 53. It is not clear why the UTP chose to prioritise Durban in the two months before the outbreak of the strikes there in January 1973.

90 Ibid., 54. For comment on the reasons for these silences on UTP's contributions see S. Buhlungu, 'Book Review: 20 Years in the Labour Movement: The Urban Labour Project and Change in South Africa; 1971–1991', in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 24, no 4 (August 2000), 69–71.

91 Lowry, *20 Years*, 54.

92 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 5; and Friedman, *Building Tomorrow*, 45.

93 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 6.

94 LACOM, *Freedom From Below*, 173.

95 Ibid., 174 and Lowry, *20 Years*, 216–7.

96 E. Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 70 and 84. Emma Mashinini put CCAWUSA membership at 80 000 by 1986 – see E. Mashinini, 'Foreword', in Lowry, *20 Years*, xvii.

97 Lowry, *20 Years*, 27–9; and Buhlungu, 'Rebels Without a Cause', 15–6.

politics.⁹⁸ Its ‘economism’ and hostility towards politics alienated the UTP from other groups that were involved in the revival of trade unions during this period.⁹⁹ Among those repulsed by the UTP’s ‘economism’ were trade unionists of Black Consciousness persuasion such as Drake Koka.¹⁰⁰

The Black Consciousness Movement and the revival of trade unions, 1972 to 1976

As discussed in chapter 3, the Black Consciousness Movement put its weight behind the labour movement, following a resolution to establish a national trade union project that was adopted at the third Annual Conference of the South African Student Organisation (SASO) in July 1972.¹⁰¹ This culminated in the formation of the Black and Allied Workers Union (BAWU) in 1972. It was never successful as a trade union movement, however, probably because it adopted a confrontational rather than cooperative approach to other groups that were involved in the emerging trade unions during the 1970s. It was suspicious of UTP and downright hostile towards TUCSA in particular, because of the latter’s decision to expel black workers from its ranks in 1969.¹⁰² It was equally hostile to SACTU because of its adherence to non-racialism.¹⁰³ As shown later, BAWU suffered several setbacks during the second half of the 1970s as a number of its members broke away to form community-based trade unions in various parts of the country.¹⁰⁴

NUSAS-aided initiatives and the revival of the labour movement, 1972 to 1976

NUSAS-supported initiatives unfolded alongside those of the UTP and the BCM in Natal, the Western Cape and the Witwatersrand. The NUSAS-aligned trade unionists also portrayed the UTP assisted unions as lackeys of the bosses, alleging that they often approached management for facilities within factories even before they had succeeded in organising the majority of workers. This, they charged, was proof that they relied heavily on the goodwill of the employers instead of developing worker strength. Therefore, the UTP unions could only make limited gains on bread and butter issues.¹⁰⁵

98 For references to overseas funding for the UTP, see Horrell, *Survey*, 1976, 209; UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 35, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 12.

99 Lowry, *20 Years*, 52.

100 *Ibid.* See also UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 12.

101 Agenda and Resolutions of SASO General Students’ Council, Hammanskraal, July 2–9, 1972, in Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence*, 509–10.

102 Karis and Gerhardt, *Nadir and Resurgence*, Document 80: ‘Call to Organise and Form Black Unions in South Africa: Abridged Statement by the Black Allied Workers’ Union, Johannesburg, 1973’, 607–8.

103 Lewis, ‘Black Workers’, 198.

104 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 6.

105 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 90–1.

A 1971 NUSAS annual conference committed the organisation to the formation of Wages Commissions on each of its affiliated campuses. This decision was primarily in response to NUSAS's rejection by black students, who broke away to form SASO in 1969, and the realisation that they were being marginalised from mainstream resistance politics.¹⁰⁶ The 1971 resolution paved the way for white student contribution to the labour struggles during the rest of the decade. Under the leadership of Jeanette Curtis, NUSAS students set up Wages Commissions almost simultaneously in Durban, Cape Town and the Witwatersrand. They worked primarily with registered unions and in other regions they collaborated with former members of the defunct African Affairs Department of TUCSA, such as Harriet Bolton in Durban.¹⁰⁷ Jeanette Curtis testifies to heavy involvement of SACTU members as well in the Cape Town and Witwatersrand initiatives.¹⁰⁸

NUSAS-aided initiatives in Natal, 1972 to 1976

In Durban, Halton Cheadle, David Hemson, David Davies, Fozzia Fisher and Karel Tip set up the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF, hereafter the Benefit Fund) in April/May 1972.¹⁰⁹ Davies served as its administrative secretary. They worked closely with Harriet Bolton of TUCSA and, to a lesser extent, with Norman Daniels of the registered trade unions.¹¹⁰ The aims of the Benefit Fund were to provide the basis for worker organisations by making workers aware of their rights through its in-house newspaper, *Isisebenzi*, and by making representations to Wage Boards for new skilled worker determinations. The Benefit Fund was a stepping stone to proper trade unionism once sufficient numbers per sector had been achieved.¹¹¹ The strategy followed in Durban, which was to a certain extent emulated by the student-assisted trade unions elsewhere, focused initially on the distribution of pamphlets and copies of *Isisebenzi*, written mainly in English and in the local African language, IsiZulu. They set out, in simple terms, trade union and organisational procedures, stressing the need to organise factory committees.¹¹² Once the Natal activists had achieved sufficient contact with workers, they made efforts to establish Benefit Societies which focused on medical and funeral benefits. They also paid attention to workers' complaints around issues like working conditions, Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and Workmen's Compensation.¹¹³

Cheadle and Hemson extended their responsibilities from supportive roles in the Benefit Fund to active organisation of workers. They expanded existing trade unions such as the African Textile Workers Industrial Union (A-TWIU) and helped form

106 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation', 5.

107 Ibid., 8.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., 8. Private Research Papers (hereafter PRP), Fozzia Fisher, 'Memorandum to Potential Funders for the Institute for Industrial Education, undated; Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 6; Baskin, *Striking Back*, 18.

110 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation', 8.

111 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 6.

112 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation', 8.

113 Ibid.

new unions in sectors where none existed.¹¹⁴ Cheadle became acting secretary of A-TWIU and Hemson served as the research officer for the Textile Workers Industrial Union (TWIU).¹¹⁵ Late in 1972 Hemson succeeded Ambrose Reddy, the Durban TWIU organiser and secretary, and Harriet Bolton took over as the Natal secretary of TWIU.¹¹⁶ In February 1973 Hemson moved to Johannesburg, where he took up employment with the Garment Workers' Union (GWU), and Cheadle took over Hemson's position as an organiser of the A-TWIU and TWIU.¹¹⁷

Following the outbreak of the Durban strikes in January 1973, crowds of workers gathered each Saturday morning at the James Bolton Hall premises of the Benefit Fund to apply for membership.¹¹⁸ These developments expedited the formation of trade unions sooner than members of the Benefit Fund had anticipated. In April 1973, the first union formed through the assistance of the Benefit Fund, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), was launched in Pietermaritzburg with Alpheus Mthethwa, an employee of the Benefit Fund, elected branch secretary.¹¹⁹ MAWU established other branches in Durban in Dalbridge,¹²⁰ at Leyland, where it achieved 95% membership within three months of its formation, and at Defy Industries.¹²¹ MAWU had 1 444 signed-up members and employed two full-time organisers in Pietermaritzburg alone.¹²² Although in 1975 it expanded to the Transvaal, it remained weak countrywide throughout the 1970s and only began to experience numerical strength after 1980.¹²³ MAWU organised in electrical engineering, electronic equipment, cables, motor, rubber, non-ferrous metals, iron and steel and heavy engineering sectors.¹²⁴

In June 1973, just over a month after the formation of MAWU, the TWIU Congress resolved to establish a parallel unregistered union for African workers, the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW).¹²⁵ Shortly thereafter a steering committee was elected to work towards the launch of the union. It was formally established at its inaugural meeting held at the James Bolton Hall in Durban on 26 September 1973.¹²⁶ The launch was attended by about 300 textile workers and it was addressed by Harriet Bolton; Halton Cheadle of the A-TWIU; Barney Dladla, the Councillor for Labour in KwaZulu; and Wiseman Mbali, who was one of its first organisers in Natal.¹²⁷ Emma Mashinini from Johannesburg, who was to emerge as the general secretary of

114 Ibid.

115 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 449.

116 Hirsch, 'An Introduction to Textile Worker Organisation', in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 4, no 8 (January and February 1979), 35.

117 Ibid., 36.

118 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 7.

119 Ibid.

120 Webster, 'A Profile of Unregistered Union Members in Durban', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 4, no 8 (January and February 1979), 45.

121 Ibid.

122 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions'.

123 K. von Holdt, *Transition From Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003), 20; Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, 233.

124 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 73.

125 Hirsch, 'An Introduction to Textile Worker', 36.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

CCAWUSA in 1975, was also present.¹²⁸ The Benefit Fund cards of 800 members were converted to membership cards.¹²⁹ Cheadle was elected Natal organising secretary, June-Rose Nala was elected secretary, and Mr Manyathi branch chairperson.¹³⁰ The NUTW organised in the textile, knitting, clothing and leather sectors.¹³¹

The NUTW was followed by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) founded in 1973 and 1974, respectively.¹³² The TGWU organised in the passenger transport, goods transport, stevedores, motor ferry, municipality, cement products, hospitals, cleaning and security sectors. The CWIU organised in the sectors handling chemicals, plastic, rubber, glass, industrial minerals, petroleum and coal products, gas, candles, oils and fats.¹³³ It had branches in Pinetown, Jacobs and Dalbridge in Durban. Omar Badsha was elected its secretary in 1975.¹³⁴

The growing number of new unions in Natal created a need for a coordinating body 'to govern the rate of formation of new unions and to ensure energies were not continually being redirected into newer unionisation without allowing a process of consolidation to take place'.¹³⁵ The Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) was formed in October 1973, with MAWU and NUTW as founding members. The TGWU and CWIU affiliated in 1974.¹³⁶ TUACC had a close working relationship with the KwaZulu leadership, especially Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Barney Dladla. Buthelezi urged TUACC to join Inkatha after its formation in 1975. Petersen refers to a meeting in 1975 in Durban with Copelyn, who informed him 'that a serious approach had been made to the union movement from Inkatha – from whom in Inkatha I am not quite sure – to bring the union movement of African workers under the wing of Inkatha, because in that way they would be protected'.¹³⁷

The Natal-based NUSAS students were assisted by what Buhlungu calls 'the freelance intellectuals'.¹³⁸ These were white activists who played a supporting role in the labour movement but were based outside it. Some of them were students, but most were academics, experts in labour, and professionals working for supporting organisations such as the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE).¹³⁹ In Durban, Richard Turner, the two Webster brothers, Eddie and David, Alec Erwin and Charles Simkins constituted these 'freelance' intellectuals.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid., 36-7.

130 Webster, 'A Profile of Unregistered Union Members', 45.

131 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 77.

132 Ibid.

133 Randall, 'Directory of Trade Unions', 71 and 81. See also M. Kiloh and A. Sibeko (Zola Zembe), *A Fighting Union: An Oral History of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers' Union, 1936-1998* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 2000), 69.

134 Webster, 'A Profile of Unregistered Union Members', 45.

135 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 7.

136 Ibid; Kiloh and Sibeko, *A Fighting Union*, 69.

137 Interview with Rob Petersen.

138 Buhlungu, 'Rebels Without a Cause', 14.

139 Ibid.

The IIE was founded in Durban in May 1973.¹⁴⁰ Its objective was to serve as a correspondence school for trade unionists of all races and to provide basic information and skills for effective trade union activity.¹⁴¹ Among its successes was the founding of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, which began to appear in 1974. Its chancellor was Mangosuthu Buthelezi and its chairperson was Lawrence Schlemmer, who was also director of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Natal, Durban.¹⁴² Others associated with the IIE were Foszia Fisher, Eddie Webster, David Hemson and Omar Badsha.¹⁴³

The IIE employed Harold Bhekisisa Nxasana as an organiser in 1973. He was later made assistant principal at IIE and also served on the editorial board of the *South African Labour Bulletin*.¹⁴⁴ During the 1970s he was drawn into the Gwala underground network, which he subsequently betrayed when he became the leading state witness, providing the most damaging evidence that led to a guilty verdict and life imprisonment imposed on five of the accused: Harry Gwala, Matthews Meyiwa, John Nene, Alpheus Mdlalose and Anton Xaba. Nxasana alleged during the trial in 1976 that he had been tortured into becoming a state witness.¹⁴⁵ Judson Khuzwayo worked closely with the IIE from the Institute of Social Research at the University of Natal, Durban, where he was a research assistant to Eddie Webster.¹⁴⁶ Khuzwayo, like Nxasana, had served a prison sentence on Robben Island from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s for furthering the aims of a banned organisation. Unlike Nxasana, he was put on the witness stand as a defence witness during the Gwala trial.¹⁴⁷

The IIE came under criticism from various quarters. Eddie Webster thought it had been designed by people who did not interact with workers and, therefore, had no sense of their needs.¹⁴⁸ Gwala dismissed it as inherently handicapped in that it could only tell workers what the rules were, whereas workers wanted higher wages and improvements in their working conditions.¹⁴⁹ The IIE largely adopted ‘workerist’ and reformist positions on unionisation. They put emphasis on some vaguely defined quest for human dignity that would, according to Nxasana, ‘give workers more power in determining what would happen to the wealth they produced’.¹⁵⁰ There was little indication of how

140 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 96–7.

141 PRP, Foszia Fisher, ‘Memorandum to Potential Funders for the Institute for Industrial Education, undated; Horrell, *Survey*, 1975, 322–3.

142 Foszia Fisher, *Ibid.*

143 G. Maré and G. Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the Politics of ‘Loyal Resistance’* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 120.

144 See M. Lobban, *White Man’s Justice: South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 172.

145 Interview with Anton Xaba conducted by Jabulani Sithole at Sobantu on 23 August 2001, SADET Oral History Project. Interview with Matthews Meyiwa conducted by Jabulani Sithole at Cato Ridge, 23 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

146 Pietermaritzburg Archival Repository (hereafter PAR), RSC Natal, box 1/1/997, vols 21 and 22 of case no. 108/1976. *State v T.H. Gwala and 9 others: Evidence of Judson Khuzwayo*, 1976, 3086.

147 *Ibid.*

148 Cited in Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 97–8.

149 PAR, RSC Natal, case no: 108/1976, box 1/1/995, *State v T.H. Gwala and 9 others*, Evidence of T.H. Gwala, 15 November 1976, 1919–1920. See also Lobban, *White Man’s Justice*, 173.

150 H. Harold Nxasana, ‘The Politics of Migrant Labour’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 8 (January–February 1975), 27.

this worker haven would be realised. It was impractical and ineffective to steer African workers away from liberation politics, which would seek to remove the yoke of their oppression, into some ill-defined quest of attaining greater human dignity.¹⁵¹ It was equally self-defeating to see Bantustan leaders such as Buthelezi paraded as the main vehicles for bringing about such improved conditions for workers.¹⁵²

NUSAS-aided initiatives in Cape Town

NUSAS activists at the University of Cape Town supported African workers through the Wages Commission they set up in December 1972.¹⁵³ Those involved included Paula Ensor, John Frankish, Gordon Young and Jeanette Curtis. They drew in Robert Petersen, a former UCT student who had recently taken up employment as an advocate in Cape Town.¹⁵⁴ They worked with SACTU trade unionists such as Elijah Loza, Zola Mehlomakhulu and Lukas Kukulela to form the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB), started in March 1973,¹⁵⁵ and the Workers Advisory Project (WAP) in September of the same year.¹⁵⁶ WPWAB was primarily concerned with organising unions while WAP directed the legal, educational and literacy wings of the labour movement.¹⁵⁷ Petersen adds that he, John Frankish and Johan Maree were trustees of the WPWAB; he also says they used Works Committees that were permitted under the Bantu Labour Settlement of Disputes Act.¹⁵⁸

Although Bonner asserts that coloured unions which were affiliated to TUCSA were either too fearful of state reprisals to be involved in the unionisation of African workers or cared little about the interests of the African workers, Robert Petersen cited some coloured people who were key in helping them organise WPWAB and WAP – such as a man called Peters, who was an organiser for the Coloured Labour Party (CLP) and helped them secure an office at CLP offices in the Benbow Building on Beverley Street in Athlone, where WPWAB and WAP activists met workers from Nyanga, Langa and Gugulethu every Saturday and Sunday afternoon.¹⁵⁹ There was also a group of coloured ex-service men known as the British Ex-Servicemen League who offered WPWAB and WAP their dilapidated hall for meetings. Petersen recalled: 'We used to go there with African workers and have education meetings in the hall. Education, being a serious and honest term, was also the cover under which we could discuss organisation and where these things were going on. This went on for a long time.'¹⁶⁰

151 Ibid., 24-28; Foszja Fisher and Harold Nxasana, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 2 (July 1975), 43-51.

152 Nxasana, 'The Politics of Migrant Labour', 27.

153 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation', 8.

154 Interview with Paula Ensor conducted by Jabulani Sithole and Martin Legassick at the University of Cape Town, 5 September 2003. Interview with Robert Petersen conducted by Jabulani Sithole (also present were Martin Legassick and Thozama April), Cape Town, 5 September 2001.

155 UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, MCHO2-65, box 65, Janet Love, 'Present Labour Situation in South Africa', Discussion Paper Presented to the 25th Anniversary of SACTU, 5 March 1981.

156 *Survey*, 1975, 324.

157 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, 'A Report on the South African Situation'.

158 Interview with Robert Petersen.

159 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 8; Interview with Robert Petersen.

160 Interview with Robert Petersen.

Several accounts highlight the uniqueness of the Western Cape situation, where in 1975 African workers accounted for 15% of the workforce, because of the Coloured Preferential Labour Policy and because of the tightening of the influx control laws from about 1966. All this had militated against the formation of African trade unions and of organising them into industrial sectors along the lines followed in Natal and the Witwatersrand.¹⁶¹ However, Petersen recalls: ‘Without ever talking about a trade union ... we succeeded under the umbrella of an Advice Bureau in organising about 10 000 workers in some 40 factories.’¹⁶² LACOM, however, puts the figure of signed-up WPWAB members by 1976 at 5 000.¹⁶³

The WPWAB emulated the Natal approach, also circulating a paper called *Abasebenzi*, written in English with IsiXhosa translations. As in the case of *Isisebenzi* in Natal, it set out in simple terms trade union and organisational procedures, stressing the need to organise workers within factories.¹⁶⁴ The slower organisational process in the Western Cape did not, however, create the same need for a coordinating body such as TUACC. Unique conditions in Cape Town forced WPWAB to only recruit workers into a general union irrespective of the sector of their employment.¹⁶⁵

NUSAS-aided initiatives on the Witwatersrand

SACTU stalwarts Mirriam Sithole and Phindile Mfeti and NUSAS members Steven Friedman and Jeanette Curtis formed the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) on the Witwatersrand late in 1973.¹⁶⁶ Other SACTU trade unionists, Elliot Shabangu, Elias Mohlabe and Joe Gqabi, later joined the steering committee.¹⁶⁷ Siphso Kubheka, who became active in MAWU, explained that Elias (Robert) Mancini, a SACTU veteran who had spent several years on Robben Island, introduced them to the IAS.¹⁶⁸ Kubheka had joined Immextra House, a wholesale company, as a clerk in 1972 where he met Mancini, who, although banned, actively organised workers.¹⁶⁹

IAS aimed to disseminate information, provide training and information service for workers and organisers, provide the complaints and advice service and certain material benefits to members. The IAS followed the pattern of the GFWBF and WPWAB. It set up an advice office, distributed leaflets, initiated worker education and established literacy groups.¹⁷⁰ Later on, it established a benefit society and a legal

161 Bonner, ‘Focus on FOSATU’, 8.; Tom Lodge, *Black Politics*, 347.

162 Interview with Robert Petersen.

163 LACOM, *Freedom From Below*, 174.

164 Interview with Robert Petersen.

165 *Ibid.*, p 8; Tom Lodge, *Black Politics*, 347 and 349.

166 Horrell, *Survey*, 1975, 322. Interview with Siphso Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 85–6. Interview with Siphso Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol.18, no. 5 (November 1994), 26.

167 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 8. Siphso Kubheka mentions more names of SACTU people who were involved in the IAS. See interview with Siphso Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 24–6.

168 *Ibid.*, 24–6.

169 See interview with Robert Mancini conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, 8 March and 14 June 2001, Roodeport, SADET Oral History Project.

170 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 8.

advice clinic. Phil Bonner, Bernard Fanaroff, Peter Hudson, Sheldon Leader and Taffy Adler, under IAS auspices, taught trade union politics to workers during the weekends.¹⁷¹ These lectures served as forums for empowering debates centred on the type of trade unions that were to be established. Some favoured general workers unions while others supported industrial unions. People changed their positions according to how convincing the arguments of their colleagues were.¹⁷² Kubheka remarks that he originally favoured general unions but was later convinced that industrial unions were the route to take.¹⁷³

IAS established the Transvaal branch of MAWU in 1975. Gavin Anderson, who previously worked at the University of Witwatersrand, was elected its branch secretary. Siphon Kubheka, who had lost his job after victimisation at Immextra House the previous year, was appointed an organiser.¹⁷⁴ In 1976 Anderson stepped down, arguing that because MAWU was a predominantly African trade union, it had to be African led. Kubheka succeeded him. Under Anderson's and Kubheka's guidance MAWU made in-roads into factories such as Heinemann, a factory with a little over 600 workers, where workers had constantly rejected the state-created Works and Liaison Committees' demanding trade union recognition instead.¹⁷⁵ The Heinemann struggles produced worker leaders such as Lydia Kompe and Baba Makama, who were to play key roles in building the labour movement in the Witwatersrand area from the second half of the 1970s.¹⁷⁶ Although by 1976 the IAS had only succeeded in forming one union on the Witwatersrand, it saw the need to set up a coordinating body, the Council of Industrial Workers of the Witwatersrand (CIWW), to coordinate the activities of MAWU and the IAS and of any other unions that might be formed.¹⁷⁷

Jeanette Schoon and Kubheka attribute the lack of progress to the prevalent anti-SACTU standpoint among most IAS members. Alongside healthy debates, which had characterised weekend classes, there was damaging bickering between IAS members who believed that both the class and national questions were important components of the liberation struggle in South Africa and lecturers and students who felt sidelined by the nationalist politics. Many of these academics and students were still smarting from their rejection by the black students who had pulled out of NUSAS to form SASO; they campaigned on an anti-nationalist ticket and emerged as the dominant political force within IAS.¹⁷⁸ Marius and Jeanette Schoon (née Curtis) made the following observation about these disputes:

Regrettably also in 1975 the progress of the IAS at every conceivable level was slowed [down] by a period of extended bitter power-fighting and ideological

171 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 86.

172 Ibid. See also Tom Lodge, *Black Politics*, 347.

173 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 86.

174 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 85-86; Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 27-8.

175 ACR, 1976-1977, B835.

176 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 27.

177 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 8.

178 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 26.

manipulation. It has now resulted in the almost total concentration of decision-making in the hands of a few white academics and the evolution of a far more conservative policy in which it appears that there is some considerable reservation about SACTU.¹⁷⁹

The anti-nationalist group labelled Siphso Kubheka, Gavin Anderson, Phindile Mfeti and Jeanette Curtis ‘populists’ for flirting with the ANC and SACTU.¹⁸⁰ They accused them of endangering the workers’ struggle by reviving the SACTU tradition, which in their view could never foster proper trade unions and did not have strong factory-based structures. This bickering had a negative impact on the process of reviving the labour movement particularly before 1977.¹⁸¹ In spite of glitches, however, by the end of August 1975 no fewer than 24 African trade unions were in existence in South Africa, drawn mainly from the UTP and student-aided initiatives, while others were older unions formed in the 1950s and before. A common denominator in the UTP and student-aided initiatives was their preference for legal rather than underground methods of organising workers. They were also hostile to political unionism in general, and the national liberation struggle, in particular. As indicated earlier, such hostility was a consequence of conditional overseas funding from trade union federations and organisations such as the ICFTU and TUC.

Foreign funding and the intensification of conflict, 1974 to 1976

A decision to provide support to black trade unions was reached after the visit to South Africa by the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) in October 1973.¹⁸² In December 1973, TUC released a report proposing the funding of black trade unions and union-supporting institutions to enable them to hire fulltime organisers on condition that they steered workers away from politics.¹⁸³ The TUC proposed joint funding of £100 000 with the ICFTU.¹⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Harriet Bolton had met Andrew Kailembo, the African representative of ICFTU, in Gaborone, Botswana, in December 1973 to discuss funding for the Textile Workers Industrial Union, African Textile Workers Industrial Union, IIE as well as Mrs Lucy Mvubelo’s Clothing Workers’ Union. ICFTU accepted on condition that the unions put emphasis on workerism and shied away from politics.¹⁸⁵

The proposals of conditional foreign funding provoked mixed reactions. Barney Dladla, who was the Councillor for Community Affairs in KwaZulu and who also had strong links with the SACTU underground, rejected the proposed financial support by TUC and ICFTU. On his return from an overseas trip in March 1974, he accused TUC of trying to bribe African workers into accepting a liaison with TUCSA by offering

179 UFH, ANC Archives, Lusaka Papers, box 13, Marius and Jeannette Schoon, ‘A Report on the South African Situation’, 10.

180 Interview with Siphso Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 29.

181 *Ibid.*, 30.

182 *Survey*, 1974, 27; See also MWS Papers, Letter from Shope to Dladla, 28 January 1974, 4.

183 *Survey*, 1975, 318; *Star*, 14 December 1973 and 15 December 1973; *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 December 1973.

184 ICFTU, ‘Opinion: A Trade Union for South Africa’, *Free Labour World*, January 1974, 3.

185 *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 December 1973.

sponsorship of R150 000.¹⁸⁶ ‘The Trades Union Congress can keep its money,’ he was quoted as saying. ‘The days are dead and buried when a black man can be enticed by a wad of money to accede to the white man’s control.’¹⁸⁷ This comment put him at loggerheads with TUCSA, which issued a statement in April 1974 warning African homeland politicians against becoming involved in labour and industrial relations.¹⁸⁸ In May 1974, its general secretary, Arthur Grobbelaar, issued another statement in which he dismissed Dladla as a sectional black-power politician who was doing everything he could to gain the most senior position in the KwaZulu Bantustan.¹⁸⁹

However, the sponsorship was heartily welcomed by the IIE and UTP. IIE chairperson, Foszia Fisher, held talks with potential sponsors in October 1974 and undertook a follow-up to Ruskin College, Oxford, and to West Germany in November of the same year. In her report-back she revealed that ICFTU had given IIE R2 000 to cover outstanding costs for the 1974 programme. The London-based International War on Want Committee also donated £1 000 towards the same programme, and the *Algemeen Diaconaal Bureau van de Gereformeerde Kerken*, a Dutch church group, pledged to give the IIE an amount of Dfl5 000 in 1975. The TUC dealt with the issue of conditional funding at its May 1974 meeting. When asked why TUC had not regarded SACTU as one of the trade unions to benefit from its proposed funding, the chairman of its International Committee, Jack Jones, said that they were not aware of SACTU’s presence in South Africa.¹⁹⁰ In June 1974 the TUC had committed itself to raise R160 000 for union support in South Africa,¹⁹¹ and in December of the same year it allocated R18 000 to the IIE. It also gave the UTP R22 000.¹⁹² Fisher justified acceptance of these funds by arguing that the IIE ‘activities are both legitimate and important, and can contribute to social harmony in South Africa’.¹⁹³

The *Sunday Times* labour correspondent noted the silence on the part of the apartheid regime following the announcement of the TUC plan, ascribing it to the fact that the government was comfortable with the strings attached to the proposed funding, since apolitical trade unions posed no threat to white economic and political power. Criticism of TUC policy came from the more than 50 delegates from 23 Commonwealth countries who met separately during the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conference in Geneva in June 1974.¹⁹⁴ African delegates expressed disgust at TUC’s avoidance of direct involvement in politics, while still claiming it was helping black workers. The harshest criticism came from Mark Shope, the general secretary of SACTU, who accused TUC of giving ‘first priority to British investments in South Africa and trying to torpedo the whole anti-apartheid

186 *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 March 1974; *The Star*, 23 March 1974.

187 *Ibid.*

188 *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 April 1974.

189 *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 May 1974. Maré and Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power*, 121 suggest that this was a calculated move aimed at persuading Mangosuthu Buthelezi to expel Dladla from the Executive Council.

190 *The Guardian* (London), 3 May 1974.

191 *Sunday Times*, 2 June 1974.

192 *The Guardian*, 3 May 1974.

193 Foszia Fisher, ‘IIE News: Ruskin College’, in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 8 (January-February 1975), 64–5.

194 *The Star*, 15 June 1974; *Sunday Times*, 16 and 17 June 1974.

programme'. Referring to the conditional funding, he said: 'Only a sell-out posing to be an African trade union leader can tell his members that African trade unions must fight only for economic rights.'¹⁹⁵ This criticism forced TUC to retract its earlier statement on non-involvement in politics and issue a statement supporting anti-apartheid initiatives aimed at ridding the country of apartheid.¹⁹⁶

Repression, dispersal and regrouping: SACTU from 1964 to 1970

SACTU was also secretly involved in the revival of the labour movement within South Africa. It simultaneously mobilised international solidarity against apartheid. A decade earlier, SACTU had suffered serious setbacks when the apartheid regime conducted the countrywide swoop on political activists, trade union officials as well as its rank and file members during the five-month state of emergency from April to August 1960. Among the emergency detainees were Leon Levy, its national president, Leslie Masina, its general secretary and the entire full-time personnel in all its offices in the country.¹⁹⁷ Those who escaped the security dragnet went underground or left the country to continue work abroad. Moses Mabhida and Wilton Mkwayi were sent out during the state of emergency to help mobilise solidarity support for the struggle in South Africa. Phyllis Altman, then an assistant general secretary, fled to Swaziland. SACTU sent out Maud Manyosi, Richard Bapela and M. Ranka to the trade union school in the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁸

SACTU suffered further blows when its leaders and members were banned under the General Law Amendment Act No 76 of 1962, commonly known as the Sabotage Act, and the General Law Amendment Act No 37 of 1963, commonly known as the Ninety-Day Law. Its president, Leon Levy, new general secretary, Mark Williams Shope and its assistant general secretary, Phyllis Altman, were among those banned under the Sabotage Act. Their replacements, John Gaetsewe and Eddie Davoren, acting general secretary and acting assistant general secretary respectively, were also banned under the same act. The next SACTU president, Stephen Dlamini, was detained under the Ninety-Day Law. By the time of the Ninth Annual General Conference in March 1964 more than 45 officials and members of SACTU – full-time organisers, leaders of local committees and secretaries of various affiliates – had been banned. Some were detained without trial under the Ninety-Day Law, and others were subsequently charged and convicted.¹⁹⁹ At its Tenth Annual General Conference in May 1965, SACTU elected a new national executive with Samuel Pholoto as president. They too were immediately banned.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 June 1974.

¹⁹⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 June 1974; *The Star*, 22 June 1974.

¹⁹⁷ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 412.

¹⁹⁸ MWS Papers, 'General Secretary's Report to the Full Meeting of the NEC of SACTU', Lusaka, Zambia, 25-27 October 1974, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 428-32.

²⁰⁰ MWS Papers, 'Letter from Mark Shope to the London Committee of SACTU', 9 March 1970. According to Shope, surviving officials and members solicited views of their exiled counterparts on whether to dissolve SACTU or not. This view was unanimously opposed because it was felt those who were in the external mission could continue to mobilise international labour solidarity against apartheid.

Moses Mabhida and Mkwai operated as the main SACTU representatives abroad until 1963, when the ANC took a decision to redeploy them. Mkwai was re-infiltrated into the country where he helped to revive the post-Rivonia ANC/SACP underground before he was himself arrested, put on trial, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mabhida joined the ANC mission in Dar-es-Salaam. Mark Shope, who joined them in exile, was sent by the ANC to replace Mabhida. He arrived in Prague in December 1963 to work at the World Federation of Trade Union (WFTU) headquarters.²⁰¹

SACTU regrouped in exile in 1969. At a meeting held at the house of Jack and Ray Simons in Lusaka on 2 March 1969 SACTU leaders Milton Miya, George Poonen, Uriah Mkebe (Maleka), M. Ranka, Alven Bennie (alias Aaron B.B. (Ben Bella) Pemba), Eric Mtshali (alias Eric Cengwa or Jack Sambo), James Stuart and Ray Simons reviewed the functioning of SACTU abroad, explored ways of reviving SACTU presence within South Africa and urged SACTU cadres to carry out SACTU work wherever they were. They also decided to hold regular meetings in order to carry all these decisions forward.²⁰²

A follow-up meeting was held at Morogoro in Tanzania on 2 May 1969. Those present included J.B. Marks, Moses Mabhida, Michael Harmel, Archibald Sibeko (alias Zola Zembe), Mark Shope, Eric Mtshali (Eric Cengwa), Milton Miya, James Stuart, M.P. Naicker, Uriah Mkebe (Maleka), M. Ranka, D. Mashigo, and Gilbert Hlalukana, who took advantage of their rare presence in one place after the ANC's 1969 Morogoro Conference. The meeting streamlined and formalised SACTU activities abroad. It took two landmark decisions. The first was the creation of the provisional SACTU headquarters in Africa with head offices in Lusaka.²⁰³ Prior to that SACTU had operated mainly from Prague and London. Its members who were seconded to the WFTU served as its spokespersons in Prague. Phyllis Altman and other senior members, Reggie September and Ronnie Press, operated from London in the 1960s. They were joined by John Gaetsewe, Archie Sibeko (Zola Zembe), J. Phillips, S. Tobias, Jane and Alan Brooks, and Janet Love. The second was the appointment of a headquarters' committee consisting of Milton 'Memory' Miya (convenor), Phyllis Altman, Ray Alexander, John Gaetsewe, Moses Mabhida, D. Mashigo, Maud Manyosi, J. B. Marks, Uriah Mkebe, Eric Mtshali, George Poonen, Reggie September, Mark Shope, Archie Sibeko, Solly Smith, James Stuart, and M. Titov.²⁰⁴

In addition to these developments, the decision of the Morogoro Conference to establish the Revolutionary Council (RC) went a long way towards assisting SACTU to work concretely towards resuscitating its structures within South Africa. Furthermore, the ANC helped the process in 1971 by redeploying several young trade unionists that had left the country as the first batch of MK recruits in the early 1960s

201 MWS Papers, 'General Secretary's Report to SACTU NEC Meeting, 25-27 October 1974'.

202 Ibid.

203 MWS Papers, 'Letter from Mark Shope to the London Committee of SACTU', 9 March 1970.

204 MWS Papers, 'General Secretary's Report to SACTU NEC Meeting, 25-27 October 1974'.

to SACTU structures. Among them were Archibald Sibeko, Alven Bennie and Eric Mtshali. The latter represented SACTU in the RC. Alven Bennie, who was appointed SACTU secretary of International Affairs, explains how the deployment came about and what his new role was:

One day Tambo called me ... and he said that they were having a problem on the question of sanctions and the ANC wanted to convince even the workers in Western Europe (there was no problem in Eastern Europe), in the Arab countries and in the African countries ... So Tambo said that he was going to pull us out from the MK *sino* (with) Eric to strengthen *i*-SACTU. Eric would be sent abroad to represent us at the World Federation of Trade Unions; I was appointed the head of the International Department in SACTU. As the Head of International Department my work was very difficult because ... SACTU was not functioning for a very long time and it had to go underground even at home and there was nothing which made SACTU known even outside. So we were to start from there. But my work was made easier because *u*-Eric ... was in touch with Arab countries, and African countries, and ... all the socialist countries.²⁰⁵

Mtshali was based in Tanzania, where he simultaneously served as the ANC's chief representative for East Africa. Thereafter, he was recalled to Lusaka, where he served as SACTU secretary of administration, a position he held from 1974 until he was seconded to the World Federation of Trade Unions in Prague in 1977.²⁰⁶

Other trade unionists were deployed to Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana. Johannes Mkhwanazi, who had led the Natal branch of the African Textile Workers Industrial Union during the 1950s, went to Swaziland, where he was assisted by Lukhele and Joseph Nduli. Lukhele had been a Ladysmith-based trade unionist and Nduli had worked for SACTU in Durban until he was charged in 1962 with belonging to a banned organisation. Following his release, he left South Africa, received military training and participated in the Wankie campaign, becoming the only one to make it to Johannesburg and subsequently retreat to Swaziland without being arrested. He teamed up with another Natal trade unionist, Cleopas Ndlovu, in Swaziland until they were abducted by security police near the Swaziland and South African borders on 25 March 1975.²⁰⁷ Chris Hani was sent to Lesotho in 1973 and Marius Schoon worked from Botswana when he left South Africa in 1977.²⁰⁸

205 Interview with Alven Bennie conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Algoa Park, Port Elizabeth, 7 February 2005, SADET Oral History Project.

206 Interview with Eric Mtshali conducted by Jabulani Sithole and Bernard Magubane in Clermont, 11 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project; interview with Eric Mtshali conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Clermont, 24 October 2001; SADET Oral History Project.

207 Interview with Cleopas Ndlovu conducted by Jabulani Sithole and Bernard Magubane, Clermont, 11 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

208 Interview with Thobile Mhlahlo conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Port Elizabeth, 6 February 2005; interview with Humphrey Maxegwana conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Port Elizabeth, 7 February 2005, SADET Oral History Project.

From exile, SACTU revived the 'defunct' Consultative Committee comprising SACTU, the ANC and the SACP. SACTU also planned to strengthen its units in the frontline areas and to create a strong internal leadership in South Africa. The SACTU Internal Committee, responsible for reviving structures inside South Africa, had two sub-departments, namely, the Information and Propaganda Department and the Planning Department.²⁰⁹ All SACTU units in the frontline areas were to be answerable to the Internal Committee. SACTU further resolved to launch campaigns for a minimum wage, for the release of political prisoners, for the right to work, and for unfettered trade union rights. SACTU rejected all cosmetic changes the apartheid regime had introduced in the labour code and lobbied the international labour movement to rally behind this programme.²¹⁰

SACTU and the revival of the labour movement, 1970 to 1976

SACTU leaders in exile understood that no matter how much the international community contributed to the struggle for freedom in South Africa, victory could not just 'come as a gift from people abroad'.²¹¹ The people of South Africa needed to fight for their freedom. Similarly, SACTU appreciated the fact that it was workers in various factories, shops and farms within the country who would make genuine trade union work effective. SACTU leaders, therefore, stepped up communication with the people of South Africa through Radio Freedom. In a 1971 broadcast, Shope said that the time had come when every single factory and workshop in South Africa 'must be organised into a trade union branch; every worker must become a member of a trade union. Furthermore, SACTU must demand skilled jobs for all and the end of job reservation. The union must also demand the right to vote and democracy for all.'²¹²

SACTU also appealed to white trade unionists to question their 'political neutrality'. It had always considered organising white workers on a large scale, in keeping with its non-racial character. But it was under no illusion that white labour would be weaned easily from the apartheid state that had ensured that white workers were beneficiaries, too, of the system.²¹³ Nonetheless, in an open letter to the 'South African White Workers and their Trade Union Organisation' during the 1970 whites-only elections, Shope argued that through the discredited pro-apartheid policy, formally adopted by TUCSA, the white working class found itself in a completely shameful position. They aligned themselves with their class enemies by supporting the most reactionary policies of a 'fascist regime'. This was unbecoming, he added, because trade unions everywhere regarded politics and economics as indivisible. Trade unionists could not afford to focus entirely on a purely economic struggle because avoidance of politics did not prevent white trade unions from being used by

209 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, Letter from Moses Mabhida to Alfred Nzo, 29 July 1975.

210 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, 'SACTU's Management Meeting', n.d.

211 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, M. Shope, 'Message to the Workers and People of South Africa on the Occasion of International Day of Solidarity 7 February' (1971).

212 Ibid.

213 Lewis, 'Black Workers', 193.

the apartheid state, directly or indirectly, against African workers. By adopting the ‘neutral’ attitude, which was of course a political decision, the white working class and its leadership systematically obeyed orders ungrudgingly and punctiliously.²¹⁴ Shope’s claim, however, that workers everywhere had accepted the indivisibility of politics and economics was not reflective of the reality within the international labour movement. As he was issuing his statement, TUC and the ICFTU were trying to promote trade unions such as TUCSA. In addition, the persuasion of South African trade unionists not to involve themselves in politics was being spearheaded by African based ICFTU officials such as Andrew Kailembo.

Nonetheless, there were regular SACTU broadcasts during 1971. One was on SACTU’s 16th anniversary on 5 March 1971, in which Shope conveyed the following message:

In the South African situation, SACTU believed then, as today, that the organisation of the African, Coloured and Indian workers for higher wages, better conditions of life and labour is inextricably bound up with the determined struggle for political rights and liberation from all oppressive practices and laws ... In the 1970s, African, Coloured and Indian workers must begin to work for strong, powerful and united trade unions among themselves. You must have your own leaders – and never allow the European trade unions to lead you. Help one another in organising the unorganised workers – especially the Africans. The unity of the African, Coloured and Indian working men and women is bound to strike fear and terror in the hearts of those who oppress us. This is so because our oppressors know for a fact that once the muscular arm of the African, Coloured and Indian working men and women get lifted, the yoke of despotism and fascism now guarded by soldier’s bayonet, police spies and informers will be smashed to atoms.²¹⁵

SACTU threw its weight behind reviving trade unions in South Africa. Its members who were based in the frontline states were also involved in efforts to establish the external machinery that would coordinate links with activists at home.²¹⁶ In June 1970, Moses Mabhida, Ray Simons, Alven Bennie and Eric Mtshali met Barney Dladla during an ILO Conference in Geneva.²¹⁷ Among issues discussed were ways of reviving SACTU structures in South Africa.²¹⁸ They agreed to hold a follow-up meeting in Lusaka. Such a meeting materialised in December 1973 when Barney Dladla, who had accompanied Buthelezi to a meeting of the African-American Institute in Addis Ababa, stopped over in Lusaka. Dladla secretly met Shope for

214 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, M. Shope, ‘An Open Letter to the South African White Workers’ and their Trade Union Organisation Concerning the 1970 General Elections’.

215 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, M. Shope, ‘Broadcast Message to the South African Workers on the Occasion of the 16th Anniversary of the Founding of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU)’, March 5 1977.

216 *Ibid.*

217 Interview with Eric Mtshali.

218 *Ibid.*

further discussions on union work. They planned to send potential organisers out of the country to receive training. Upon their return, these cadres would be deployed in various industrial areas in Natal. They also identified a need for transport that would be used to organise workers. Shope gave Dladla a sum of R1 000 to be used for underground work.²¹⁹

Shortly before the public spat between SACTU and TUCSA over foreign funding, Shope had written a letter to Dladla advising him to send 'someone with diplomatic immunity' to fetch a sum of R3 000 to R4 000 meant for Natal unions.²²⁰ In February 1974, Dladla wrote to a Mrs Magde Viljoen requesting her to forward 'enclosed documents to SACTU in Lusaka'. He requested her to ask SACTU to have him flown over to Lusaka as there were certain things better said by way of talking rather than in writing that he wished to discuss with them.²²¹ He also enclosed a monthly budget for organising five trade unions and running the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund.²²²

In Natal the revival of SACTU structures was further boosted by the release of trade unionists who had been incarcerated during the 1960s. Among the first trade unionists to come out of prison in the late 1960s were David Mkhize from Mpolweni and Stephen Dlamini from Bulwer. The latter was immediately served with a banning order. Despite this, he was able to begin underground work with the help of Johannes 'Pass Four' Phungula.²²³ Other trade unionists were released throughout the country during the early 1970s. In Natal, Harry Gwala, who was credited with remoulding what was originally a predominantly Indian union, the Howick Rubber Workers Union, into an inclusive and powerful union at BTR Sarmcol, was released in June 1972.²²⁴ Matthews Meyiwa, who had also served as a trade unionist during his days as an employee at Hulletts Aluminium in Pietermaritzburg before his arrest in 1963, was released at almost the same time as Gwala in 1972.²²⁵ William Khanyile, Shadrack Maphumulo and David Ndawonde were freed during the same period. Other Natal trade unionists who were released from Robben Island between 1972 and 1974 were Zakhele Mdlalose, John Mabulala Nene from Hammarsdale and Pietermaritzburg, respectively, Riot Mkhwanazi from Empangeni, Jethro Ndlovu from Inchanga, and Bernard Nkosi and Alfred Duma from Ladysmith. Nkosi had been the last trade unionist to work as an administrator at the Durban office of SACTU before his arrest in the early 1960s. The former prisoners linked up with other seasoned trade unionists that were either operating undercover or serving banning orders. In the Natal Midlands such trade unionists included Azaria Ndebele, Moses Bhengu, and

219 PAR, Natal Division of the RSC, case no: CC.108/1976, box no. 1/1/995, vols 10 and 11; *State v T.H. Gwala and 9 others*, Evidence of Barney I. Dladla, 197.

220 MWS Papers, 'Shope to Barney Dladla', 28 January 1974, 4.

221 MWS Papers, 'Letter from Barney Dladla to Mrs Magde Viljoen', February 1974. It is not clear whether Mrs Viljoen was the person with diplomatic immunity mentioned by Shope.

222 Ibid.

223 For more discussion on these underground activities, see J. Sithole, 'The ANC Underground in Natal' in this volume.

224 D. Bonnin, *Class Consciousness and Conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940-1987: The Case of BTR Sarmcol Workers*, Unpublished M.Soc Sc dissertation, University of Natal, Durban, 1988, 125.

225 Interview with Matthews Meyiwa.

John Khumalo (alias John Makhathini). Ndebele, in turn, recruited new members into the SACTU underground in the Natal Midlands. One of them was Moses Ndlovu, who went on to become a leading trade unionist in Natal.²²⁶ In the Greater Durban area, SACTU operated through the underground machinery led by Joseph Mkhuthuzi Mdluli. Other trade unionists were Raymond Nkosi, Osborne Mthunya, who originally came from Empangeni, and many others.

SACTU operatives established offices in Durban in 1972.²²⁷ They appointed organisers paid through funds received from the Swaziland-based SACTU machinery to recruit workers into a general workers union. They envisaged a situation in which they could form sector-based unions once workers in sufficient numbers had been recruited.²²⁸ Most workers were reluctant to take up SACTU membership, however, because they still remembered how SACTU members had suffered at the hands of the security police in the 1960s.²²⁹

Elsewhere in the country, trade unionists were also freed during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Some of the Eastern Cape SACTU stalwarts resettled in the Greater Port Elizabeth area. Among them were Siphso Hina, Edgar Ngoyi and Mfengu Makalima. The latter was redeployed to the Border region. In the Greater Cape Town area Elijah Loza, Christmas Mthinto and Mountain Qumbela, who were all active in SACTU during the 1950s, were released from Robben Island in the 1970s.

There is evidence of communication between prominent Johannesburg-based trade unionists and the SACTU headquarters in exile as early as March 1973. Richard Takalo, a 1950s and 1960s union leader in both the metal and mining industries, was in touch with Mark Shope. In a reply to Shope's letter dated 6 March 1973, Takalo voiced the opinion that although SACTU was never banned, the state was bent on banning its leaders. He said of SACTU-affiliated organisations: 'In my view these organisations are not dead but have taken one step backward and there is nothing to stop them to take two steps forward.'²³⁰ This letter reveals that Takalo was also in touch with Gilbert Hlalukana, whom he had replaced as the Transvaal Secretary of the Metal Workers Union when Hlalukana was banned in 1961

Takalo and Mirriam Sithole belonged to the same SACTU underground unit in the Transvaal. Their line of communication with SACTU was mainly through Botswana where a Francistown-based person called Tsela Mangonye (presumably a pseudonym) served as a contact. On 28 April 1973, Sithole wrote a letter from Mangonye's place explaining that she had hoped to meet Shope in person. She informed Shope that workers were demanding that SACTU reopen offices in Johannesburg. She appealed to Shope to arrange for someone from their internally based unit to travel to Lusaka

226 Interview with Moses Ndlovu conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Pietermaritzburg on 5 September 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

227 See G.W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 175.

228 Interview with Matthews Meyiwa.

229 PAR, RSC Natal, box 1/1/995, vol. 11, case no: CC.108/1976, *State v T.H. Gwala and 9 others*, Evidence of T.H. Gwala, 2 December 1976, 1920.

230 MWS Papers, 'Letter from Richard Takalo to Mark Shope', undated.

to discuss these matters. She informed him that she and Takalo had worked out safer means of communication in order to prevent the security police from intercepting their correspondence.²³¹

Ensuing ideological tensions within IAS also forced SACTU and ANC underground operatives such as Siphon Kubheka, Robert Manci and others to explore alternative ways of complementing classes in trade union politics, which Phil Bonner and Bernard Fanaroff were offering to workers during the weekends.²³² They held regular political education classes secretly in the townships. Dr Neil Aggett, an underground operative for SACTU and the ANC who later died in detention, was among the activists who offered classes in the townships, most of the time clandestinely.²³³ According to Kubheka, 'people like Manci and Joe Gqabi would organise things like parties. You would go to a party and you would get into discussions, without knowing that you were at school.'²³⁴

Manci set an example of how activists should deal with fellow workers, even if they were holding what they perceived to be relatively senior positions:

You see, we were in the offices, being clerks, and we regarded ourselves as better people than others. He said to us we needed to change our attitudes towards the other workers. Being a clerk at that period was some kind of prestige. We had our own offices, our own desk. Other workers would make tea for us. We would drink the tea and just push the cup aside and this woman would come collect the cup and wash it. So he had to deal with our attitudes first. He said: 'I am suggesting that from now onwards you make tea for yourself. And after having tea, wash your cups.'²³⁵

Manci also advised them to assist other workers to off-load boxes that were regularly delivered to the factory. At first they resisted this suggestion, fearing that people who had grown up with them in the townships and who had known them as administrative clerks would think little of them if they were seen off-loading boxes from delivery trucks. When these trucks came, Manci would put on his 'dust-coat' and go down to the yard to off-load. The desk-bound administrative clerks had no option but to follow suit.²³⁶ Kubheka and others were grateful in the end because their new behaviour broke down barriers between themselves and fellow workers. They gained their confidence and friendship. This gave union organisers access to workers and facilitated a process of trade union formation at Immetra House. Before they could establish any foothold at the factory, however, Kubheka and a colleague were dismissed in 1974. Workers went on strike to demand their re-instatement.²³⁷ Manci made a timely intervention when workers showed signs of exhaustion after

231 MWS Papers, 'Letter from Mirriam Sithole to Mark Shope', 28 April 1973.

232 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 86.

233 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 26.

234 *Ibid.*, 34.

235 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 85-6.

236 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 25.

237 Interview with Siphon Kubheka conducted by Snuki Zikalala, 86.

having been on strike for a week, advising Kubheka and his colleague to accept their dismissal in order to avoid potential disillusionment and division among workers. This, he argued, would give them room to re-strategise and take the struggle for union formation forward.²³⁸ In this way, the younger generation of trade unionists, like Kubheka, learned from veterans, like Mancini, how to choose their battles and to make strategic retreats when hopelessly outflanked.

Others in the SACTU underground network, who also aligned themselves to BAWU in the Johannesburg industrial area, were Samson Ndou, and Lawrence and Rita Ndzanga. Ndou was in contact with SACTU offices in Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia. Ndou describes the ideological divisions amongst various trade unions as follows:

The two separate movements were not of the same weight. We were linked to the Congress Alliance, and there was a new type of trade union ... which we regarded as sweetheart unions, because we did not regard them as part of the struggle for liberation ... They knew that we were aligned to the ANC and the Alliance ... They said the focus should be on workers on the factory level. We said that after the factory there is oppression, thus the functions of the trade union should be extended to the community ... So they could not wage the struggle by focusing on the workers at factory level only ... it must be waged at all levels of the society and then the pressure is not only felt at the factory level. So that is why they referred to us as these community-based unions, and they call us controllists.²³⁹

However, SACTU leaders were not necessarily hostile to trade unions that were emerging in the country after the 1973 strikes. On the contrary they encouraged their emergence and kept track of developments with keen interest. For example, in January 1974, Shope wrote to Barney Dladla praising him, Harriet Bolton and Halton Cheadle for organising workers into trade unions. He referred especially to the meeting attended by 6 000 workers at the Clermont stadium that was addressed by Halton Cheadle. He commented 'I cannot help expressing my appreciation of what you, Mrs Bolton, Halton Cheadle and others are doing for the struggle of African workers. I am very highly impressed indeed.'²⁴⁰ Shope urged Dladla and others not deviate from political unionism in their work among African workers:

While your concern at present should be the organising of workers into unions, one, most important fact should not be forgotten. The fact is, 'the African, indeed all black workers in South Africa are denied all fundamental human rights – the right to vote, freedom of assembly, freedom to voice their opinions and present their demands, freedom to form trade union

238 Interview with Sipho Kubheka conducted by Luli Callinicos, 27.

239 Interview with Samson Ndou conducted by Siphmandla Zondi, 21 May 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

240 MWS Papers, Mark Shope to Barney Dladla, 28 January 1974, 1 and 4.

organisations and freedom to publish their own newspapers.’ This is a political issue.²⁴¹

SACTU also intervened on the home front on behalf of victimised trade unionists. In mid 1974, Shope wrote to Arthur Grobbelaar, TUCSA general secretary, in defence of Harriet Bolton, general secretary of the Natal Garment Workers’ Union, amid reports of tensions between herself and members of the executive of her union.²⁴² Disputes had also developed between Bolton and TUCSA. In April 1974, she had defended Dladla against TUCSA and questioned why its officials had issued a statement condemning him after his criticism of TUC’s decision to attach strings in their funding of black trade unions.²⁴³ Bolton also alleged that Grobbelaar had warned TUCSA members not meddle in politics. By 1974, in fact, it had become common practice for TUCSA to victimise members who worked with their black counterparts outside its control.²⁴⁴ SACTU had an interest in the amicable resolution of such disputes that weakened the workers’ movement.

SACTU and the mobilisation of international labour

SACTU had a longstanding relationship with the international labour movement. Between 1955 and 1963, Phyllis Altman, as assistant general secretary, kept in regular contact with the WFTU and ICFTU and national trade union centres in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and New Zealand.²⁴⁵ The official organ of SACTU, *Workers Unity*, and newspapers of affiliated unions such as the *Morning Star* of the Food and Canning Workers’ Union, *Textile Unity* of the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union (TWIU) and *Truth* of the National Union of Laundry, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers devoted considerable space to workers struggles in other parts of the world.²⁴⁶ At its 1956 national conference SACTU had adopted a resolution to affiliate to the WFTU. As indicated earlier, Mabhida and Mkwazi served on WFTU structures between 1960 and 1963. They were succeeded by Shope.

SACTU campaigned on forums such as ILO and WFTU to persuade workers internationally to express solidarity with South African workers in their efforts to secure trade union rights, improve wages and working conditions in general. They launched campaigns to demand the release of trade unionists languishing in South African jails and of other political leaders, for the lifting of banning orders and house arrests imposed on trade unionists and political leaders as well as the lifting

241 Ibid.

242 MWS Papers, Mark Shope to Arthur Grobbelaar, undated. For contents of the letter, see Appendix E below. Also see *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 May 1974 and 7 July 1974.

243 *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 April 1974.

244 There were numerous reports of tension resulting from this practice. In 1977, three Cape Town based TUCSA affiliates, the Brewers’ Employees Union, the Jewellers’ and Goldsmiths’ Union and the European Liquor and Catering Union, disaffiliated, alleging that the federation was turning to the right. *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 July 1974; *Financial Mail*, 23 September 1977.

245 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 371.

246 Ibid., 371–2.

of banning orders imposed on political organisations.²⁴⁷ SACTU also campaigned against immigration to South Africa. Between 1946 and 1970 official immigration statistics showed an influx of 357 456 British immigrants to South Africa. There were large numbers of skilled workers from mainland Europe and the US as well who immigrated to South Africa during the same period. SACTU sought to discourage such immigration, which bolstered the racist policies of the apartheid regime.²⁴⁸

SACTU joined other members of the Congress Alliance in calling for a sustained diplomatic, trade, sports and tourism boycott of South Africa. Long-established comradeship with the progressive section of the international labour movement helped to isolate apartheid South Africa. SACTU had first called for solidarity action against the apartheid regime in the aftermath of the March 1960 Sharpeville and Langa massacres. In response, WFTU and the Ghana Trade Union Congress founded the International Trade Union Committee for Solidarity in 1961.²⁴⁹ During the same year, SACTU successfully lobbied the ILO to demand that South African employer delegates be withdrawn from the annual conferences of the ILO until the country abandoned its apartheid policies.²⁵⁰ African, Asian, Latin American and Soviet delegates to the conference staged a walkout in protest against the granting of permission to the South African employer delegate, J.H. Liebenberg, to speak on the matter. The conference then overruled the credentials' committee in its decision to recognise South African membership of the ILO. Liebenberg's membership credentials were invalidated on the grounds that African unions in South Africa had not been consulted about his appointment as a representative at ILO conferences.²⁵¹ Shortly thereafter the United Nations, after an ILO delegation met its Secretary-General, decided to exclude South Africa from membership of certain industrial committees.²⁵² To avoid the possibility of an embarrassing expulsion, South Africa withdrew from the ILO in March 1964.²⁵³ ILO then unanimously passed a resolution condemning 'the degrading, criminal, and inhuman racial policies of the government of South Africa and called on it to renounce these policies without further delay'.²⁵⁴ Lobbying of this sort also persuaded the World Trade Union Congress held in Budapest in Hungary from 17 to 26 October 1969 to recommit itself to the observance of 7 February as the International Day of Solidarity with the struggle of the workers and people of South Africa.²⁵⁵ These diplomatic offensives increased in the 1970s.

TUCSA continued to send delegates to ILO conferences, nonetheless, but only as observers. In June 1970, TUCSA sent Arthur Grobbelaar to the 5th Session of the ILO

247 MWS Papers, General Secretary's Report to SACTU NEC Meeting, 25–27 October 1974, 5.

248 For a discussion on this, see F.G. Brownell, *British Immigration to South Africa, 1946-1970* (Pretoria: The Government Printer, 1985), 142.

249 *Survey*, 1963, 330-1.

250 *Ibid.*

251 *Ibid.*

252 *Survey*, 1964, 128-9.

253 *Ibid.*, 129 and Hansard 8, Column 2803-06.

254 *Survey*, 1965, 130.

255 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Morogoro Papers, box, 26, file 11, Letter from Mark Shope to International Trade Union Federations and Trade Union Centres, 13 January 1970.

conference in Geneva. SACTU sent Mark Shope and Ray (Alexander) Simons. On 2 June 1970 they met with the chief of the workers' relations branch, H.A. Dunning, the chairperson, Mr Morris, and the secretary of the workers' group, Albert Heyer. SACTU was accorded the same observer status as TUCSA to attend all sessions of the conference.²⁵⁶ In a bid to wean SACTU from its rival, the WFTU, ICFTU embraced SACTU's call for an end of skilled white workers immigration to South Africa. They were followed by the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers. These were major achievements for SACTU. Arthur Grobelaar of TUCSA condemned ICFTU's move, claiming that a campaign against immigration of skilled white workers to South Africa would do more harm than good to the South African economy and this, in turn, would lead to even fewer job opportunities for African workers.²⁵⁷

At the June 1970 conference, Shope and Simons held talks with representatives of WFTU, AATUF, ICFTU, the Christian Trade Union Council, Intra-American Regional Organisation of Labour (ORIT) and the Latin American Trade Union Federation (LATUF).²⁵⁸ Shope and Simons also lobbied labour movements in the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, West Germany, Denmark and Holland. On 14–16 November 1970, a SACTU delegation attended the Sixth International Conference of Metal Workers in the Engineering and Metallurgical industry in Budapest. These meetings went a long way towards earning SACTU recognition as a genuine representative of South African workers at international forums.

As the campaign against immigration to South Africa intensified, British newspapers such as the *Guardian* wrote a series of articles exposing the extent of British business complicity in the maintenance of apartheid. SACTU and the ANC concluded, however, that these articles merely spelled out 'palliatives to salve the conscience of Western businessmen for more and more involvement in South Africa' as opposed to the intensification of the campaign for disinvestment. They argued that behind the projection of a public image of concern lurked a shady column with vested interests in the oppression and economic exploitation of the African majority in South Africa.²⁵⁹

SACTU refocused international attention on the persecution of South African workers by the apartheid regime. For example, it lobbied the world labour movement to send letters of protest to the Minister of Justice and to the presiding judge, Justice Bekker, during the trial of mainly SACTU members who doubled as ANC underground operatives in 1969–1970. Among them were Samuel Pholoto, SACTU president elected at its annual conference in 1965; Lawrence Ndzanga, a national executive member of SACTU and secretary of the South African Railways and Harbours Workers Union (SARHWU); Elliot Shabangu and Rita Ndzanga,

256 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 83, Report by SACTU Observers, Comrade M. Shope, Secretary General, and R.E. Simons, Committee Member, to the 54th Session of the International Labour Conference held at Geneva, Switzerland, June 3–25, 1970; Survey, 1971, 99.

257 *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 May 1970.

258 *Ibid.*

259 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 86, 'Brief on Exposés of British Businesses in South Africa'.

both members of the Witwatersrand local committee of SACTU; Samson Ndou, another SACTU member; Emily Mahoko, former SACTU head office typist, Snuki Zikalala and many others.²⁶⁰ Caleb Mayekiso, former vice president of SACTU and general secretary of A-TWIU in the Eastern Cape, was tortured to death during the investigations related to this trial.²⁶¹

In September 1972, SACTU requested AATUF affiliates to send protest messages to the South African Minister of Justice against the trial of 318 African bus drivers employed by PUTCO who were charged with public disturbance after a labour strike.²⁶² Two months later, four African employees of a plastic and rubber factory at Industria in Johannesburg were convicted and fined R100 or 50 days imprisonment each for engaging in a strike.²⁶³ Under South African law, strikes by African workers were regarded as a criminal offence and punishable by up to three years imprisonment or a fine of up to R500, or both. In addition, African workers could be declared ‘undesirable natives’ and endorsed out of the urban areas to the Homelands.

At the June 1973 International Trade Union Conference, 380 delegates, representing over 200 trade unions with over 186 million members, passed a series of resolutions against apartheid.²⁶⁴ The conference unanimously passed a resolution calling on governments to sever political, cultural, commercial and diplomatic ties with South Africa and stop public and private investments there. Organised labour was urged to pressurise their governments to refuse to supply arms or any other form of military assistance to South Africa and to close their ports and airports to South African ships and aircrafts.²⁶⁵ It passed a resolution which condemned apartheid policies, notably job reservation, and deplored the exclusion of African workers from trade unions.²⁶⁶ The conference reiterated its opposition to the emigration of skilled Western labour to South Africa. Further resolutions called upon international labour to pressurise economic and industrial countries that were collaborating with the apartheid regime to cease such collaboration, to boycott the loading and unloading of goods from and to South Africa and Namibia as well as from South African aircrafts and ships. There was also a call for a consumer boycott of all South African goods imported into their countries.²⁶⁷

260 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Morogoro Papers, box 26, file 11, Mark Shope's Correspondence, 1963-1972, Letter from J.B. Marks (Chairman of SACTU's Political Bureau) and Mark Shope (General Secretary) to all trade union organisations, 18 November 1969; Letter from Mark Shope to International Trade Union Federations and Trade Unions Centres, 13 January 1970. For a detailed discussion of the activities of these underground cadres, see G. Houston, 'The Post-Rivonia ANC/SACP Underground', in SADET (eds), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, 1960-1970*, vol. 1 (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), 639-660.

261 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Morogoro Papers, box 26, file 11, Letter from J. B. Marks and Mark Shope to all trade union organisations, 18 November 1969; see also Lobban, *White Man's Justice*, 162-3; and Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 451.

262 UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Morogoro Papers, box 26, file 11, Letter from Mark Shope to Headquarter Secretariat of All-African Trade Union Federation, 7 September 1972.

263 *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 November 1972; *Survey*, 1972, 342.

264 *Survey*, 1973, 272-3.

265 *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 June 1973.

266 *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 June 1973.

267 *Survey*, 1974, 272-3.

Lucy Mvubelo and TUCSA delegates Johanna Cornelius and Arthur Grobbelaar came out in defence of South Africa. Lucy Mvubelo had been a leading member of the Textile Workers' Industrial Union, one of SACTU's largest affiliates in the 1950s. She was elected SACTU vice president. But in the early 1960s she disaffiliated the union from SACTU and led its members into TUCSA. At the June 1973 International Trade Union Conference, when Mvubelo tried to speak against the international boycott of South Africa, African trade union delegates threatened to walk out. She was forced to withdraw.²⁶⁸ Two years earlier Mvubelo had accompanied Mangosuthu Buthelezi to the United States where they had tried to urge business people not to support the sanctions campaign against the apartheid regime.²⁶⁹

In October 1973 SACTU successfully lobbied the Eighth World Trade Union Congress to adopt a resolution declaring the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace and condemning imperialist manoeuvres by the navy of apartheid regime and its allies, the USA and the French, in the region.²⁷⁰ In 1975 SACTU was accorded recognition in the ILO and other specialised agencies of the United Nations.²⁷¹ In June 1975 SACTU's new secretary general, John Gaetsewe, was allowed for the first time to address the plenary session of the ILO on behalf of his federation.²⁷² He had replaced Mark Shope as the secretary general in 1975, following allegations of financial mismanagement against Shope in 1974.²⁷³ Shope remained an ordinary member of SACTU and in 1975 reverted to MK. Thereafter he was sent to Angola to represent MK as its chief of staff.

Before he became the general secretary of SACTU, Gaetsewe had established contacts with workers in Vancouver, Canada, in 1971 and 1972. SACTU secured Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) support, which gave financial donations and also undertook to circulate SACTU publications and leaflets to approximately eighty unions affiliated to it. These contacts were maintained throughout the 1970s, with high profile leaders attending crucial conferences where they had opportunities to articulate and clarify labour conditions in South Africa. Some of these visits to Canada were undertaken by Gaetsewe in 1975 and Stephen Dlamini in 1977.²⁷⁴ Canadian contacts were broadened towards the end of the 1970s when the Ontario Federation of Labour adopted a resolution at its 1978 annual convention pledging solidarity with SACTU and the ANC.²⁷⁵ In 1977 SACTU also sent Archibald Sibeko to the west coast of the US, where he addressed the national convention of the United Electrical, Radio

268 *The Star*, 11 and 19 June 1973; *Rand Daily Mail*, 18, 19, 20 and 22 June 1973.

269 Lewis, 'Black Workers', 197; Interview with Moses Ndlovu conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Ashdown in Pietermaritzburg, September 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

270 MWS Papers, Resolution of 8th World Trade Union Congress, Varna, 15-22 October 1977.

271 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 472-76; Braverman, 'African Workers Advance', 60; see also UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, MCHO2-65, box 65.

272 *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 June 1975; Survey, 1975, 210.

273 MWS Papers, 'Letter from Alfred Nzo, the Secretary-General of the ANC to Mark Shope', 12 December 1974. See also UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, box 89, 'Correspondence between Shope and Stephen Dlamini, Moses Mabhida and John Gaetsewe', 21 November 1974; and 20 May 1975; and 'Letter from Mark Shope to Thomas Nkobi', 16 February 1975.

274 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 487.

275 *Ibid.*

and Machine Workers of America. Thereafter, he went on an extended tour of major US cities addressing labour unions. This tour was a major breakthrough because until then the US had been accustomed to listening to conservative trade unionists like Lucy Mvubelo, who were urging investments in, rather than sanctions against, South Africa.²⁷⁶ Sibeko travelled to the US again from September to October 1979. As Sibeko began his tour of the west coast, Mvubelo was completing her tour, which was sponsored by the pro-apartheid South Africa Foundation, on the east coast.²⁷⁷ By the second half of the 1970s solidarity work had also been extended to Japan and India, where SACTU received significant support for its blend of political unionism.

Apart from cementing solidarity with Western labour movements, SACTU continued to enjoy longstanding support from socialist countries such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1978, the trade centres in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union hosted SACTU delegations. Also during that year, the Yugoslav trade union federation hosted SACTU's national executive meeting and SACTU developed close links with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions. SACTU delegates also attended the Afro-Arab Conference held in Algiers in October 1977.

SACTU efforts to unite various international labour organisations behind an anti-apartheid campaign were not without problems, especially in the context of the Cold War. The international labour organisations carried 'Cold War' agendas into the labour movement, particularly in the 'Third World'.²⁷⁸ In some cases these federations supported undemocratic, unrepresentative and corrupt affiliates. Rivalries between ICFTU and WFTU caused rifts within AATUF between African states aligned with the East or West. The American Federation of Labour Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) rapidly extended its influence into the African labour movement, challenging both the ICFTU and TUC and carving out a sphere of influence on African soil that would later be embodied in the African American Labour Centre (AALC), administered by Irving Brown from New York City.²⁷⁹ The ICFTU resented the fact that SACTU was closely allied to the WFTU and tried to promote any other trade union movement that appeared to be opposing it. But neither these external machinations nor internal repression could contain the avalanche of industrial action that exploded so forcefully in 1973.

Strikes and state response, 1974 to 1976

According to official estimates, there were 54 strikes and work stoppages involving African workers during the first six months of 1974 and a further 135 during the

276 *Ibid.*, 487-8.

277 *Ibid.*, 488.

278 MWS Papers, see for example, letter Secretary of AFL-CIO to Shope, 28 October 1971.

279 On some of these issues see Roger Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995), chapter 1; Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, chapters 11 and 15. Concerning the LO/TCO delegation's report see UFH, ANC Archives, ANC Lusaka Papers, boxes 83 and 89, 'South Africa Black Labour – Swedish Capital'.

second half of the year.²⁸⁰ According to LACOM, 58 975 black workers were involved in strikes in 1974.²⁸¹ There were seven in the Greater Durban area in June and July 1974 at Balatum Pty Ltd, Acme Timbers, Escom Power Station, Sandock Austral and Reckitt & Coleman.²⁸² Another strike at the Frame Group of Companies on 12 August 1974 involved about 1 500 workers.²⁸³ East London was also hit by a wave of strikes which affected 21 companies and involved more than 5 000 workers between 21 July and 3 August 1974.²⁸⁴

More strikes involving African workers were reported in 1975. Official records put these at between 119 and 123 in 1975.²⁸⁵ John Mawbey lists seven major strikes in Durban during the first four months of 1975.²⁸⁶ The first broke out on 15 January 1975 at the International Delivery Company over a pay dispute that workers had been negotiating since August 1974.²⁸⁷ The next erupted on 16 January 1975 at a construction company named R.H. Morris, where 144 workers downed tools, demanding payment owed to them since the week before Christmas of 1974.²⁸⁸ There were also 42 workers at the Miller Weedon Transport Company who refused to start work on 10 March 1975, demanding a living wage. They were subsequently successful in negotiating a wage increase of 17%.²⁸⁹ Forty workers at the Plate Glass Company were not as fortunate when they made representation for a living wage on the 10 March 1975. Instead they were given notice pay and forced to leave the company premises.²⁹⁰

Strikes also broke out at the Durban Abattoirs, James Brown & Hamer and Union Whaling Company from 11 to 21 April 1975.²⁹¹ Two hundred workers at the United Flaying & Dressing Company downed tools, followed by 100 workers at the Durban By-Products Company. On 22 April, the Meat Board meeting ratified the new wages demanded, giving workers a R5 pay hike. A day before the settlement of the wage dispute at the Durban Abattoirs, 300 workers at the Union Whaling Company also refused to resume their day shift, demanding a wage increase of R5 a week. When management refused to negotiate, they increased their demand to R20 a week. On 26 April, management finally agreed to an increase of R8.²⁹² LACOM puts the number of black striking workers in 1975 at 23 295.²⁹³

The period immediately after the Soweto uprising in 1976 saw resurgence of industrial strikes which exposed the bankruptcy and short-sightedness of

280 *Hansard* 3, Columns 204–205, 'Remarks of the Minister of Labour,' 21 February 1975.

281 LACOM, *Freedom From Below*, 166.

282 L. Ensor, 'Recent Strikes in Durban,' *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 4, (July 1974), 49–56.

283 H. Nxasana, 'The Cotton Workers' Struggle Continues,' *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 6 (September–October 1974), 44–49.

284 G. Maré, 'The East London Strikes,' *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 5 (August 1974), 26–30.

285 *Hansard* 1, Column 18, 'Minister of Labour's Reply to a Question,' 30 January 1975.

286 J. Mawbey, 'Strikes in Durban, January to April 1975,' in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 10 (April 1975), 52–60.

287 *Ibid.*, 52–3.

288 *Ibid.*, 53.

289 *Ibid.*

290 *Ibid.*, 54.

291 *Ibid.*, 54–60.

292 *Ibid.*, 57–60.

293 LACOM, *Freedom From Below*, 166.

economistic and workerist trade unionism, demonstrating the indivisibility of economic and political struggles. During the first strike, on 4–6 August 1976, firms in the Johannesburg area reported between 50% and 90% absenteeism in their African labour force. On the first day, some two-thirds of the African workforce in Johannesburg and Pretoria stayed at home, but on the second and third days there was less support shown.²⁹⁴ The strike was in response to a call by students for the release of detained student leaders and for the abolition of Bantu Education. In the second three-day stay-at-home, which began on 23 August, businesses in the Johannesburg area reported up to 75% absenteeism among African workers; police estimated that in the Witwatersrand area as many as 430 000 workers stayed away on the first day and 320 000 on the second and third.²⁹⁵ Similarly, during the third stay-away, on 13–15 September, absenteeism of up to 70% was reported in the Johannesburg industrial area; overall some 750 000 workers participated and the strike was joined in Johannesburg by migrant workers, who had opposed the second strike call. The stay-away also spread to coloured and African workers in Cape Town, where police estimated an 80% response to the call.²⁹⁶ The September strike was clearly politically motivated because no wage demands were made. African workers supported it in protest against police brutality that had caused the death of many youths and adults in Soweto. However, a fourth call for a five-day stay-away starting on 1 November was a failure.

Some white union organisers, on the other hand, saw the 1976 stay-aways as disruptive to their endeavours among African workers. Bernard Fanaroff, for example, complained:

After 16 June, the police were ever-present in the townships: unions could not hold meetings for fear of inviting arrest. Battles between students and police made the black areas unsafe in the dark and organisers insisted on leaving work before the sun set: they began to neglect factory visits. Pupils repeatedly demanded that workers stay away from work: the disruption in the factories made it difficult to sustain organisation. It was impossible ... we couldn't operate at all for three or four months – the unrest hampered us more than Heinemann.²⁹⁷

Imagine Fanaroff protesting about their inability to organise African workers because they were actively participating in solidarity struggles with black students! This clearly demonstrates that for workerists the coming together of workers and local communities in a common struggle against apartheid tyranny was not only undesirable, but was also seen as disruptive. In this regard they were supported by the hostel-dwellers from Mzimhlophe in Soweto who, acting as the auxiliary forces of the apartheid regime,

294 *Financial Mail*, 6 August 1976; *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 August 1976; *Survey*, 1976, 65–6 and 318.

295 *Sunday Times*, 29 August 1976; and *Survey*, 1976, 65.

296 *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 September 1976.

297 Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 118–9.

launched attacks on township residents, leaving more than 40 local residents dead during August 1976.²⁹⁸

The police were summoned to intervene in 60 strikes that broke out in 1976. A total of 521 men and 21 women appeared in court charged with illegal industrial action. Of the men 19 were charged with inciting others to take part in the strikes, while two women were charged with intimidation and 51 for disturbing the peace.²⁹⁹ In May 1977, 30 employees of the Witbank Coal Agency (Pty) were each fined R100 or three months imprisonment for refusing to work because of a pay dispute on 11 April 1976.³⁰⁰ In August 1977, 186 workers of Scottford Mills in Ladysmith in Natal appeared in court also charged with refusing to work after a wage dispute.³⁰¹

Confronted with this growing labour crisis, the apartheid regime responded in three ways. First, it clamped down on most trade unionists by banning them. David Hemson, Halton Cheadle and David Davies had been banned for five years in 1974.³⁰² Ninety-five blacks and 18 whites were served with banning orders in July 1976, partly in response to the youth uprisings of June 1976 and the supportive role that workers played and also in reaction to the growing confidence of the labour movement. Among those banned were Marius Schoon, who had just been released from a 10-year prison term; Siphon Kubheka and Gavin Anderson, both of MAWU on the Witwatersrand; Jeannette Curtis, who was employed at the time as an archivist at the Institute of Race Relations; John Copelyn, secretary of TUACC; Jeanette Murphy, assistant secretary of TUACC; Mike Murphy, acting secretary of the TGWU; Charles Simkins, former secretary of the IIE; Chris Albertyn of TWIU; Alpheus Mthethwa and Mfundise Ndlovu of MAWU in Natal; Eric and Jean Tyacke and Loet Douwes Dekker of the UTP and Deborah J. Bundlender of the Wages and Economics Commission at the University of Cape Town.³⁰³ Several union activists fled the country, among them Paula Ensor and Robert Petersen of WPWAB, and trade unionist and SACP member Eli Weinberg.³⁰⁴

Second, the regime reacted by detaining many activists. Some of them died in detention. Among well-known activists who did not come out alive was Luke Mazwembe, a WPWAB member. He was found dead in his cell at the Caledon Square police headquarters in Cape Town.³⁰⁵ At the inquest, the police denied ever assaulting Mazwembe. But they were unable to explain how he had come to have the razor blade that he allegedly used to cut the trousers to hang himself in his cell.³⁰⁶ Elijah Loza was also detained under the Terrorism Act in May 1977 and held at the Victor Verster Prison. He died at the Tygerberg Hospital on 1 August 1977, after allegedly suffering a

298 *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 August 1976; *Survey*, 1976, 68–9.

299 *Survey*, 1976, 306.

300 *Ibid.*, 307; *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 May 1977.

301 *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 August 1977.

302 *Survey*, 1975, 68.

303 University of Witwatersrand, Cullen Library, WCL, file AD2028, 'SAIRR Records on Unrest and Bannings'.

304 *Survey*, 1976, 103–5.

305 *Survey*, 1977, 125; *Cape Times*, 8 September 1976; Interview with Robert Petersen.

306 *Survey*, 1977, 151–2.

stroke while he was in police hands.³⁰⁷ Another SACTU underground operative to die in police custody was Lawrence Ndzanga, the first national president of SARHWU and its former secretary.³⁰⁸ He was detained together with his wife, Rita Ndzanga, on 18 November 1976. He was subsequently charged in December 1976 under the Terrorism Act for recruiting people to undergo military training abroad. He died on 8 January 1977 after an alleged heart attack. Rita Ndzanga, who was in detention at the time of her husband's death, was not permitted to attend his funeral.³⁰⁹

In Natal more than a dozen trade unionists were detained from late November to the end of December 1975 and some were put on trial from August 1976 to June 1977.³¹⁰ Five of these trade unionists, Harry Gwala, Anton Xaba, John Nene, Matthews Meyiwa and Zakhele Mdlalose, who had been previously convicted for political offences, received life sentences.³¹¹ Joseph Nduli was sentenced to 18 years, Cleopas Ndlovu and Magubane to 15 years each, and Azaria Ndebele to seven. In his statement from the dock, Meyiwa said: 'SACTU lives on in the hearts of black workers.'³¹² William Khanyile, acquitted, left the country. Conviction and the growing trend of deaths in detention forced SACTU to operate even more clandestinely than in the previous years. At the same time, it deepened the coordination between the internal and external structures of SACTU.

The third response of the apartheid regime was top-down reform. Unable to contain the spate of industrial action that continued to escalate, the Minister of Labour appointed a University of South Africa academic, Nicolaas Wiehahn, to head a commission of inquiry into South Africa's labour legislation. Its aims were to investigate the system for regulating labour in South Africa and other problems in the field of labour relations.³¹³ On 18 August 1977 the prime minister also appointed a one-person commission into the labour matters headed by his economic advisor, P. Riekert, 'to inquire into, report on and make recommendations in connection with a wide range of laws that dated back to 1936'.³¹⁴ The two commissions tabled their reports in May 1979 which recommended opening up trade union membership to Africans on condition they registered their unions.³¹⁵ This revived debates over the issue of recognition, registration and non-registration of black trade unions in the country.

307 Ibid., 157–8; *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 August 1977: 'Detainee Could have Died by Hanging'; *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 August 1977: 'This Time they Even Banned a Dead Man'; *Cape Times*, 4 August 1977: 'Security Police's Reluctance Invites Suspicion – Russell'.

308 Kiloh and Sibeko, *A Fighting Union*, 72–3.

309 *The World*, 24 January 1977; *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 January 1977: 'Detainee's Widow Released – Too Late'; *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 January 1977: 'Graveside Pilgrimage for Widow of Detainee'. See also interview with Rita Ndzanga conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, Soweto, 24 January 2001 and 3 August 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

310 PAR, RSC Natal, box 1/1/995, vol. 1, of case no: CC.108/1976, 'State v Gwala and 9 others, Evidence of Gwala', 2 December 1976, 1920.

311 *Survey*, 1978, 133–134; *Sechaba: Official Organ of the ANC South Africa*, vol. 11, First Quarter (1977), 'Pietermaritzburg Ten on Trial for ANC Activism', 17–20; Interview with Matthews Meyiwa conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cato Ridge, 23 October 2001.

312 UWC, Mayibuye Centre (MCHO2), ANC London Papers, box 65, Love, 'Present Labour Situation in South Africa'; Interview with Matthews Meyiwa, 23 October 2001.

313 *Survey*, 1978, 302–305.

314 Ibid., 305.

315 L. Gordon et al., *A Survey of Race Relations (hereafter Survey) for 1979* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1980), 274–82.

Apart from Smith & Nephew in Pinetown, which had recognised a non-parallel union, employers in general continued to favour parallel unions and to call in the police whenever there were labour disputes. The threat of prosecution hung over the heads of the workers following the 1976 clampdown. Though momentarily thrown into disarray, workers regrouped and more industrial action was undertaken from 1977 to the end of the decade. According to official reports, 90 strikes broke out in 1977 involving 15 304 workers; 14 950 of these were African.³¹⁶ The number of strikes rose to 106 in 1978 involving 14 160 workers, including 13 578 African. In 1979, 104 strikes were reported involving 22 803 workers, 15 494 of them African.³¹⁷ In 1980, 207 industrial strikes broke out involving 61 785 workers; 56, 286 of these were African.³¹⁸ Some of the strikes that broke out during the second half of the 1970s occurred in the 'independent' Bantustans like the Ciskei and Transkei where, as will be shown below, community-based trade unions such as the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) were beginning to establish some foothold.³¹⁹

FOSATU and the re-emergence of political unionism, 1977 to 1980

Regrouping and consolidation of independent 'factory-floor' unions occurred between 1977 and 1979. The National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA), a registered union, disaffiliated from TUCSA in 1976 and began to explore possibilities for an alternative broad-based trade union federation.³²⁰ The UTP, TUACC, CIWU, FCWU, WPWAB and the Western Province Motor Assembly Workers Union (WPMWU) endorsed the proposal. They all met in Johannesburg on 23 March 1977 and agreed in principle that a federation of registered and non-registered unions should be formed.³²¹ A committee was appointed to iron out areas of disagreement and regions were encouraged to meet and explore possibilities for cooperation. The inaugural meeting of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was held from 13-15 April 1979.³²² Although representing remarkable progress in the revival of trade unions in the country, FOSATU remained relatively weak, attracting only 35 000 members, many of whom were not fully paid-up.³²³

New kinds of trade unions, generally known as community-based unions, also emerged during the second half of the 1970s. They were mainly regional and they were structured as general unions. Some established footholds in manufacturing industries, while others established a presence in service sectors where working conditions were bad and organisation generally weak such as cleaning, catering, and local government.³²⁴ These trade unions were more focused on direct involvement

316 *Survey*, 1980, 187.

317 *Ibid.*, 187.

318 *Survey*, 1981, 208.

319 *Survey*, 1980, 286-7; P. Bonner, 'Independent Trade Unions since Wiehahn', in *SALB*, vol. 8, no 4, February 1983, 24-9.

320 Bonner, 'Focus on FOSATU', 9-11.

321 *Ibid.*, 11.

322 *Ibid.*, 20.

323 Bonner, 'Independent Trade Unions', 17.

324 G. Kraak, *Breaking the Chains: Labour in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s* (London and Boulder, Colorado: Pluto Press, 1993), 182.

in broader political struggles than those that came together to form FOSATU. They stressed the inseparability of the shop-floor struggles from broader political campaigns against apartheid.³²⁵ Prominent among these community-based unions was the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU) that became dominant in Durban (under the leadership of Sam Kikine) and East London and later expanded to Johannesburg. SAAWU had broken away from BAWU at the August 1978 conference.³²⁶ Bangumzi Sifingo, Sisa Njikelana, and Thozamile Gqwetha emerged as SAAWU leaders in the Eastern Cape. Although Humphrey Maxegwana never formally joined SAAWU, he worked closely with it as SACTU's underground operative in East London. He also worked with Rufus RweXu, who had recruited him in the middle of the 1970s, and Sifingo.³²⁷ SACTU underground operatives in the East London–Border region were serviced by the Lesotho-based machinery of SACTU. Khaya 'Kingdom' Myoli and later Tony Yengeni were responsible for this region.³²⁸

In 1980 BAWU split. The first split took place in the middle of 1980 and involved the Empangeni and Ladysmith branches led by Matthew Oliphant and Magwaza Maphalala. They formed the National, Iron, Steel, Metal and Allied Workers Union (NISMAWU), which joined forces with Sam Kikine's SAAWU.³²⁹ Kikine recruited Maphalala and Oliphant into the Natal underground of SACTU. The Transvaal region of BAWU also broke away at the end of 1980, when Rita Ndzanga, with the help of Mary Ntsike, founded the General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU).³³⁰ Other BAWU members who had, for a long time, been associated with the Transvaal underground of SACTU, such as Samson Ndou, Ephraim Shabangu, Samuel Pholoto and Sydney Mufamadi also joined GAWU. Other SACTU underground operatives in the Transvaal region included Kgalema Monthlanthe. Another split from BAWU in 1980 led to the formation of the National Federation of Workers (NFW), which soon established a dozen affiliates mainly based in Durban under the leadership of Themba Nxumalo, a SACTU operative.

In the Eastern Cape, SACTU worked through the Motor Assemblies and Components Workers' Union of South Africa (MACWUSA), which first began in Port Elizabeth. Before the formation of MACWUSA, Siphon Hina and Dennis Neer had recruited Thobile Mhlahlo, who had taken up employment at the Ford Motor Company in 1975, into the underground of SACTU in Port Elizabeth in 1976, which operated at the Ford Motor Company during the day and focused on township issues after work. In 1979 Mhlahlo was sent to Lesotho to link up with SACTU operatives. 'I got my instructions, you know, and lessons that came in handy in my work for

325 Ibid., 183.

326 J. Maree, 'SAAWU in the East London area, 1979-1981', in J. Maree (ed.), *The Independent Trade Unions, 1974-1984: Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), chapter 3. Interview with Sam Kikine conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Durban, 4 September 2001, SADET Oral History Project.

327 Interview with Humphrey Maxegwana. See also UWC, Mayibuye Centre and Robben Island Museum (MCHO2), ANC London Papers, box 63, *Africa Confidential*, 'South Africa: The Trade Union Challenge', vol. 22, no 6, 4.

328 Interview with Humphrey Maxegwana.

329 Love, 'Present Labour Situation in South Africa'; Interview with Matthew Oliphant conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cape Town, 3 February 2005, SADET Oral History Project.

330 Love, 'Present Labour Situation in South Africa'; Interview with Matthew Oliphant.

SACTU inside the country,' Mhlahlo explains. 'I was also instructed to link up with Mfengu Makalima, a former Robben Island prisoner who had emerged as a trade unionist with SACTU in the 1950s. He was living in Alice in eastern Cape.'³³¹

Makalima, described by Mhlahlo as an outstanding theoretician and strategist, served as Mhlahlo's counsellor and advisor on labour and general political issues.³³² In 1980 Mhlahlo became one of the first members of MACWUSA, which was formed at Ford and Volkswagen in Port Elizabeth, following the failure of the United Automobile Workers' Union (UAW) to respond appropriately during a labour dispute at the plant. At the time it was compulsory for new recruits to take up membership of UAW, which was recognised and supported by the employers. MACWUSA became one of the front unions through which SACTU began to operate within the country and it also worked with the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO) on community issues.

After 1976 the SACTU underground shifted away from recruiting members and sending them to operate abroad. Instead the new breed of operatives remained within the country, where they performed their duties as coordinators and organisers. Mhlahlo remained in Port Elizabeth until 1985, when he was instructed to leave the country and help SACTU abroad. Similarly, Humphrey Maxegwana, recruited in 1977, only left the country in April 1985. Matthew Oliphant was recruited in 1980 and he reluctantly left in 1989 on the instructions of SACTU after several attempts to assassinate him.³³³ In the same manner, Natal operatives of SACTU maintained contact with the external leadership through Lesotho. Among them was Themba Nxumalo from Durban, who worked closely with Mhlahlo.³³⁴

The disparate nature of unions, some political and others 'workerist', some non-racial and others racially exclusive, necessitated the talks that began in 1977 to establish a single trade union federation. This was after a resolution calling for unity was unanimously adopted at the TUCSA annual conference in 1976. There were many differences to be ironed out and talks continued from 1977 to 1980. Prior to the commencement of the discussions, Stephen Dlamini, on behalf of SACTU, had dismissed internally based unions as 'yellow or puppet trade unions' during his address at the ILO conference in 1976. Furthermore, the unity talks revealed multiple divergent views among the trade unions. Some of these were positions over registration, which the apartheid regime had imposed as a condition for the recognition of African trade unions.³³⁵ Other differences included political participation preferred by community based unions, and non-political involvement associated with FOSATU.

The SACTU underground studied the debates that ensued during the unity talks and SACTU encouraged its members to remain at the table in order to persuade FOSATU to accept political unionism by focusing on issues that promoted unity

331 Ibid.

332 Interview with Thobile Mhlahlo.

333 Interviews with Matthew Oliphant, Thobile Mhlahlo and Humphrey Maxegwana.

334 Ibid.

335 During the 1950s debates over registration involved Ray Simons and Eli Weinberg. See Luckhardt and Wall, *Organise or Starve*, 120–1.

rather than divisive matters. This was in line with SACTU's official position. In 1980 SACTU issued the following statement:

On the basis of democratic discussion, of give and take, of equality, it is possible for the various trade unions and indeed various federations or groupings, to get together. For a start all should agree to give concrete assistance to workers on strike in defence of their rights and for higher wages and better conditions. All should agree to exchange information and work together on areas of common interest, organising the unorganised, unemployment, banishments and detentions ... In time a united workers trade movement will again emerge publicly to confront apartheid and exploitation. The policy on which it will be based is enshrined in our history, our leaders fight for it, in South Africa, in jail, in exile or under conditions of banishment. When the power of organised labour is again strong enough, the flag of workers united will again fly openly in our country.³³⁶

By 1980, in spite of divergent viewpoints on numerous issues, there was slow but promising progress around worker unity. Union organisers in different parts of the country shared resources, office space and vehicles. There were more possibilities for cooperation among independent trade unions in the face of repressive labour policies that the employers and the apartheid regime were foisting on workers through the Wiehahn recommendations. The talks were temporarily postponed and resumed in Langa in 1981.³³⁷

An abortive take-over of SACTU, 1978 to 1980

Discussions were almost derailed by the problems within SACTU in London between 1978 and 1980, which threatened to undermine its unity and ability to work internationally and within South Africa. The source of these problems was an abortive attempt by a group of five South African Trotskyites to capture and redirect SACTU during the 1970s. They were Robert Petersen, Paula Ensor, David Hemson, Martin Legassick, and Peter Collins.³³⁸

Legassick had left South Africa as a student during the 1960s. In 1964 he was elected NUSAS international representative. He became estranged from NUSAS as a result of ideological differences with its internal leadership. After completing his PhD at UCLA he moved to Britain, where he featured prominently in the race-class debate on South Africa. Legassick was also a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Warwick.³³⁹

336 Love, 'Present Labour Situation in South Africa'. This quote also appeared in *Workers' Unity*.

337 Interview with Mark Sweet conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cape Town, 9 January 2005, SADET Oral History Project.

338 *Rand Daily Mail*, 'ANC Whites Start Splinter Group', 16 February 1981; Interview with Petersen.

339 Sifiso Ndlovu regards Legassick's role in the liberation struggle as ambiguous. See S.M. Ndlovu, chapter 11, in SADET, *Road to Democracy*, vol. 1, 557. For Legassick's trip to Sweden with Tambo and Kunene see T. Sellstrom, 'Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa', in *Formation of a Popular Opinion, 1950-1970* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999), 253.

As indicated earlier, Hemson was a former NUSAS activist from Durban and a member of the Benefit Fund. He had studied at the University of Natal and became involved in the Wages Commission in 1971. In June 1972, he was employed by the Textile Workers Industrial Union (TWIU) to organise African workers. As a result of the 1973 Durban strikes, he was banned in February 1974 and eventually left South Africa. In Britain he worked as a research fellow at the University of Warwick.

Petersen graduated from the University of Cape Town with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970 and in 1972 completed his LLB degree. He became a high-ranking member of the Progressive Party, serving at different times as the national chairperson of the Young Progressives. A series of disquieting events then occurred in Petersen's life. First, he clashed with the police during a student demonstration and was arrested but not charged. Shortly thereafter the house he was sharing with Geoff Bundlender at Mowbray in Cape Town was petrol bombed. These experiences, plus a meeting with Steve Biko, shifted his political stance away from liberal politics. At the time Petersen was dating Paula Ensor, former NUSAS leader, whom he later married. In 1973, when the Durban strikes broke out, he started legal practice in Cape Town. The labour unrest stimulated former students, many of whom were either in legal practice or already working in Cape Town, to mobilise and organise black workers.³⁴⁰ Among them were Jeannette Curtis, Gordon Young, who was working at the Wages Commission at the University of Cape Town, and Paula Ensor, who was assisting Gordon Young at the Wages Commission. Ensor, who was already a part of the Wages Commission in 1971, prodded Petersen in the direction of the commission before she was banned in 1973. Shortly thereafter they began to recruit workers into the WPWAB. They were joined by, among others, Elijah Loza, a former SACTU leader who had served a prison sentence on Robben Island and who was also working at the Wages Commission. They ran political education classes for WPWAB over weekends.³⁴¹

Some time in 1975, Petersen says, a working relationship was established with a Trotskyite group in Britain that had a significant presence in the British Labour Party, particularly with the Labour Party youth known as the Young Socialists. They frequently published a newsletter known as the *Militant* and were therefore known as the Militant Tendency. It was led by a former South African named Ted Grant or 'Red Ted'.³⁴² Grant was a Trotskyite who had worked with the African Laundry Workers' Union in Johannesburg before he emigrated to Britain in 1934. Early in 1976 Petersen went to Britain to meet members of this group under the pretext that he had been briefed to take up a divorce case. In May 1976 he and Ensor, who was then his wife, decided to leave the country, via Botswana, to Britain, where they took up membership of the British Militant Tendency.³⁴³

340 Interview with Robert Petersen. Also interview with Professor Paula Ensor conducted by Jabulani Sithole at the University of Cape Town, 5 September 2003, SADET Oral History Project.

341 Ibid.

342 *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 February 1981.

343 Interviews with Paula Ensor and Robert Petersen.

Petersen and Ensor viewed the ANC as a bourgeois nationalist organisation that had not been successful before it was banned, but had squandered the opportunities it had to utilise its mass support to take the liberation struggle 'forward to victory'. Their host, Ted Grant, convinced them to reconsider their position and their views on the ANC. He encouraged them instead to infiltrate the ANC and SACTU in order to have access to the masses that supported it.³⁴⁴ Grant expressed the view: 'When the revolution really begins, it will be the ANC.' Petersen and Ensor heeded Grant's advice and joined the ANC in London.

Petersen also says that when they arrived in London in 1976, because 'the old South African Congress of Trade Unions was defunct, totally defunct', they decided to give assistance to a plan 'to revive SACTU and have a little newspaper'.³⁴⁵ They met John Gaetsewe, who was the secretary-general of SACTU, whose flat in London was used as a SACTU office. It was somewhat ironic that Petersen had imagined SACTU was defunct. Ensor became Gaetsewe's secretary, placing herself at the heart of the organisation, and Petersen became the editor of the *Workers' Unity*, an old SACTU organ that had stopped circulation after the security disruptions of the mid-1960s.

The group began to shape its content to suit their designs. They convinced Gaetsewe to accept them as part of the technical sub-committee for the *Workers' Unity*. They sat in at editorial meetings of the *Workers' Unity* giving it a Trotskyite slant.³⁴⁶ Things began to go wrong for the group towards the end of 1978 when they consistently stood alone and disagreed with other members of the editorial board over such issues as publishing clauses of the Freedom Charter in various editions of *Workers' Unity*. 'Then, I think, some of the political heavyweights started to smell that there was something emerging here, which wasn't quite according to the accepted norms,' Petersen says. 'And this occurred particularly when we helped John Gaetsewe to produce a pamphlet, which we later called the "Green Book", entitled *Looking Forward*.'³⁴⁷

While SACTU officials had complete trust in Petersen, he was secretly consulting Legassick, Hemson and Peter Collins about the articles that would be included and published. Collins had trained as a printer for the *Militant*. Then SACTU uncovered their plot. 'Unfortunately Petersen did not last that long, as Rob tried to hijack our paper for extreme left views,' Archie Sibeko explains. 'We found out he was asking his friend Martin Legassick to rewrite the editorial each time after it had already been approved. This was unacceptable so we asked him to leave. Paula left too, leaving us without administrative support.'³⁴⁸

SACTU leaders Moses Mabhida and Ray Alexander had been keeping track of developments at the London office. They suspected that the Group of Five had infiltrated SACTU through John Gaetsewe and Archie Sibeko. Mabhida wrote to

344 Interview with Robert Petersen.

345 Ibid.

346 Ibid.

347 Ibid.

348 Sibeko, *Freedom in Our Lifetime*, 114.

Ray Alexander about the gravity of the situation at SACTU's London office. In a letter dated 7 June 1978 he outlined steps that had to be taken to rectify the situation and save Gaetsewe 'from complete ruin'.³⁴⁹ In a second letter, dated 16 June 1978, he blamed the Trotskyite clique for publishing articles that tried to subvert the ANC-led alliance. Identifying them by name, he wrote:

[T]he people who write articles for Workers' Unity are Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick, R. Petersen's assistant Editor (sic), is a person known only as Peter (I think his surname is Collins); he is only known to John (Gaetsewe), Paula, Rob and Zola (Archie Sibeko), and not to the rest; this person is certainly not A.N.C. The Editorial Board has never been told about his function; he is a lawyer from Cape Town.³⁵⁰

Mabhida alleged: '[T]he big worry with our people is that the organ of our Trade Unions [*Workers' Unity*] is being used against the sister organisation; [and that] the danger comes as a result of John [Gaetsewe] surrounding himself with Trotskyites.'³⁵¹ He further noted that, on two occasions, Sibeko and Gaetsewe had defended the Trotskyite line espoused by the Group of Five. He mentioned an editorial board meeting in which Sibeko objected to the proposal that the *Workers' Unity* publish an article celebrating Nelson Mandela's birthday. Sibeko allegedly asked 'why should we sactu (sic) want Nelson, why should we not have Billy Nair's birthday as a celebration?'³⁵² The second occasion was when Gaetsewe defended the publication of extracts in *Workers' Unity* which contradicted SACTU policy.³⁵³ When these extracts later appeared in a memorandum Petersen submitted to the SACTU NEC meeting that sat in Dar es Salaam in April 1979, tensions were exacerbated.³⁵⁴

The 31-page memorandum dealt chiefly with three issues, namely 'the future of workers' unity'; 'the need to build SACTU in South Africa'; and 'the policies of SACTU'.³⁵⁵ The memorandum argued for a simultaneous struggle for national liberation and socialism. Its main line of argument was that SACTU was the major movement in the struggle for liberation and that the apartheid state would be overthrown through armed struggle by a workers' army, drawn from the ranks of SACTU. However, it was silent on how it proposed to arm this army of workers within South Africa. The memorandum also envisaged a situation where this workers' army would seize state power and implement socialism. It argued that black workers could only secure liberation and democracy in South Africa through the liquidation of capitalism and the building of socialism. The memorandum also questioned the

349 University of Cape Town, Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Jack Simons Papers, Letter from Moses Mabhida to Ray Alexander, 7 June 1978.

350 Ibid.

351 Ibid.

352 Ibid.

353 Ibid.

354 Ibid.

355 UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, (MCHO2), box 65, 'Petersen Memorandum addressed to the National Executive Committee of SACTU', 8 April 1979.

CST thesis that was gaining credence within the ranks of the liberation movement. It stated that in the South African revolution there could be no separation between national democratic and socialist aims and went on to claim that ‘This understanding must be the cornerstone of SACTU’s approach to the revolution.’ The black working class – because of its ‘position in production and society and because it has no property to protect, no privileges to defend, and nothing to lose but its chains, and because the full weight of national oppression presses on its shoulders’ – was the only consistently democratic and anti-capitalist class. This class was also the only ‘social force capable of leading the revolutionary mass struggle for national liberation and socialism’, and that only under its leadership could the revolution be carried through to its conclusion and its gains secured against counter-revolutionary attack.³⁵⁶ Objecting to what it called militarism associated with MK and the role of SACTU in this, the memorandum further noted:

SACTU’s historical task is to fill with a revolutionary content the idea of working-class independence in the trade union field. Any hesitation or shyness on this matter will weaken the struggle for national liberation and open up possibilities of counter-revolution and defeat ... Are we not compelled to acknowledge that there has not yet been built in South Africa the necessary, nationally co-ordinated, revolutionary underground organisation for leading the mass struggle in all forms to the arming of the people and the insurrectionary seizure of power? ... This work is indispensable if we are to find a road to the mass of the workers, to unite through concrete struggles towards armed self-defence and the eventual forcible seizure of power. This is where SACTU’s role and future lies. Yet there is, it seems, no clear consensus on this within our ranks. There is, for example, the tendency (represented both on the NEC of SACTU and on the Editorial Board of *Workers’ Unity*) that holds the view that SACTU’s role is to serve as a ‘signpost’, directing the workers to *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. Whatever the loyal motives of the comrades who hold this view, it can only have a damaging effect on our whole struggle ... This ‘signpost’ idea is really nothing short of a formula for the liquidation of SACTU. Yet how widely is the view held within SACTU itself?³⁵⁷

This was strong criticism of official policy positions of both SACTU and the ANC. The argument implied that the ANC was not fit to lead the struggle for liberation in South Africa because it organised on a national, and not on a class basis.³⁵⁸ The memorandum highlighted a fundamental policy shift which had never been discussed by any SACTU structures. As a result, SACTU’s NEC took a unanimous decision that Petersen be replaced as the editor of the *Workers’ Unity* and that a new editorial board be constituted.

356 Ibid.

357 Ibid.

358 Claris ‘Conference Expels Left-wing Deviationists’, *Sechaba*, August 1985, 18–24.

Ensor was asked to stay on as a member of the editorial board but she declined.³⁵⁹ Collins, who had been assisting with the distribution of the newsletter, resigned too. Although Legassick, Ensor, Hemson and Collins remained members of SACTU's technical committee, they tried to undermine its work from within by adopting an obstructionist approach. Acting as a block and a faction, they defiantly told the editorial board that they were only willing to perform their duties if they were based on the basic tenets spelled out in Petersen's memorandum. When SACTU dissolved the technical committee, the five moved their challenge to a different plain. They publicly attacked SACTU leaders as Stalinist dictators and lackeys of the Soviet Union; they also dismissed the ANC leadership as a rightwing faction whose aims ran contrary to the interests of the working class in South Africa.³⁶⁰ The ANC viewed them as arrogant enemies of the ANC-led liberation struggle and suspended them in 1979.³⁶¹

At first, the suspended group campaigned for reinstatement, arguing that the ANC practised double standards. At the time they were suspended, they argued, the ANC was holding talks with Inkatha, a Bantustan organisation. They also suggested that they could not understand why they were dismissed for factionalism because the SACP could also be accused of the factionalism in the ANC and yet no one challenged it. They further said it was unfair that they were never summoned to an official hearing so that they could present their case before the leadership and general membership of the ANC. They petitioned the ANC Regional Political Committee (RPC) in the United Kingdom to reinstate them:

Reverse the decision you have made to suspend us from units and activities of the ANC ... But whatever your efforts to exclude us from the ranks of the ANC, we will not be separated from our comrades throughout the movements, in the trade unions at home, in SACTU, in the ANC and in the Communist Party. If we cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with them in the ANC, SACTU and the CP, we will stand shoulder to shoulder with them *alongside* the ANC, *alongside* SACTU and *alongside* the Communist Party. We will not give up the struggle until it is won.³⁶²

The ANC kept a stiff upper lip until the ANC Consultative Conference that sat at Kabwe in June 1985 expelled them from the ANC. Shortly thereafter, Claris (a pseudonym) reiterated that it was very arrogant of Ensor, Hemson, Legassick and Petersen to demand that their disagreements over SACTU policy issues be discussed within the structures of the organisation because they were mere helpers in the SACTU office and were not members of any trade union and had never been elected to any official position in SACTU.³⁶³ Furthermore, she added, the onus was on Ensor, Hemson, Legassick and Petersen, as members of the ANC, to raise their concerns

359 UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, (MCHO2), box 65, 'Handwritten Report 17 SALEP'.

360 Ibid.

361 Ibid. Peter Collins was not suspended because he had not joined the ANC.

362 UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, (MCHO2), box 65, 'Statement to the press issued by Paula Ensor, David Hemson, Martin Legassick and Robert Petersen', 18 January 1980.

363 Claris, 'Conference Expels Left-wing Deviationists', 19.

and disagreements with the policies of the ANC through relevant organisational structures. They had shown total disregard for organisational discipline when they discussed their grievances outside ANC Structures.³⁶⁴

Some ANC, SACP and SACTU members maintain that had they given the Group of Five a hearing, the latter would have simply used the opportunity to sow further discord as their sole objective was to drive a wedge between the people and their leaders. Furthermore, there were examples of how their mentor, Grant, incapable of mobilising a mass following, had resorted to the politics of ‘entry-ism’ and become a disruptive force in the British Labour Party.³⁶⁵

In March 1980, having failed to take over SACTU, the five formed a body known as the South African Labour Education Project (SALEP). This organisation sought to secure financial support and sustenance from British trade union movements and the British Labour Party. In May 1985, however, the British Labour Party sent out a circular to its constituencies instructing them not to maintain contact with SALEP and not to use its materials. They continued to give the erroneous impression that Legassick and Hemson were still active within the ANC and SACTU; they billed Petersen as a former member of SACTU’s *Workers’ Unity* newspaper. All this was misleading, because they were appealing for support by using the names of organisations they fundamentally disagreed with and with which they no longer had any contacts.³⁶⁶

An erroneous view the group held was that SACTU had no contacts with trade unionists and workers based in South Africa. Both Petersen and Legassick have argued that when they were still in charge of the *Workers’ Unity*, they had asked for the addresses of contacts but were told that none existed. They claim that they created their own lists which they took along with them when they were suspended. Claris maintains that this was tantamount to theft because the lists belonged to SACTU and not to private individuals.³⁶⁷ Mtshali, who was administrative secretary, and Bennie, who was secretary for International Affairs, assert that the five Trotskyites were not given the Lusaka lists for security reasons. ‘Why would you risk absolute disaster by handing out such delicate information to a group of unknowns?’, Mtshali asks, emphasising the fact that they were not registered SACTU members.³⁶⁸ Younger leaders of SACTU in exile, who worked with the mailing lists at one point or another, confirm that lists were available. Mark Sweet, who left the country in 1980, recalls that there was a separate underground house where the Internal Committee of SACTU performed its duties:

In Lusaka it was not part of the main SACTU structures. You had to go to Olympia, there is a place in Lusaka that is where the Internal Structures of SACTU were. There were separate rooms where we used to hold lectures. It

364 Ibid.

365 Interview with Brian Bunting conducted by Jabulani Sithole in Cape Town, 4 February 2005, SADET Oral History Project. See also Claris, ‘Conference Expels Left-wing Deviationists’, *Sechaba*, August 1985.

366 Claris, ‘Conference Expels Left-wing Deviationists’, 21.

367 Ibid.

368 Interview with Eric Mtshali.

was away from the general members of SACTU. There were documents that were just not available to anybody in SACTU. The secretary general could have access if he so wished but only comrades who were responsible for internal structures had access precisely because we wanted to limit damage in case we had a mole in our ranks.³⁶⁹

Petersen's memorandum was subsequently published in August 1979 as the main part of a booklet titled *The Workers' Movement and SACTU: A Struggle for Marxist Policies*.³⁷⁰ Its foreword claimed that 'the documents published here bring out in the open a struggle which has been taking place in exile, over the political direction of the South African Congress of Trade Unions'. According to the pamphlet, SACTU was an organisation which, from its inception, had proclaimed itself a workers' organisation, based on the principle of working class independence, and yet Marxism had suffered a set-back in SACTU at the hands of a right wing 'resolutely opposed to the mobilisation and organisation of the oppressed workers of South Africa for socialist aims'. This setback occurred, the pamphlet claimed, through the key roles played by individuals who were well-known SACP members. They were prominent in forcing retreat by the SACTU NEC from policies of the past. They accused the SACP of having played a key role in securing Petersen's dismissal and changing the paper's ideological thrust, and in this way blocking democratic discussion of crucial challenges facing SACTU. The irony though was that it was the Trotskyites who infiltrated SACTU and who, through their own admission, tried to re-orientate it and its organ, *Workers' Unity*, away from the aims and official policies of SACTU.³⁷¹

The Workers' Movement and SACTU tried to suggest repeatedly that the 'workers' movement' and SACTU were, in some sense, separate entities.³⁷² This seems to be the source of the idea that SACTU leaders abroad were no longer members of this federation.³⁷³ This was both false and damaging. The failed take-over could not have come at a worse time. It almost distracted SACTU from its more pressing tasks of providing constructive inputs at the unity talks. Although there were walkouts and the talks were eventually suspended until the next round which began at Langa in 1981, SACTU continued to make constructive contributions at the talks through its operatives working in disguise in front trade unions. SACTU established solid foundations on which it was to continue to make contributions in the 1980s.

Conclusion

In this chapter it has been argued that there were at least five concurrent processes of trade union revival in South Africa in the wake of the 1973 strikes. As they were driven by groups with diverse ideological and political backgrounds, contestations

369 Interview with Mark Sweet.

370 UWC, Mayibuye Centre, ANC London Papers, (MCHO2), box 65, 'SACTU Dissidents'.

371 Ibid.

372 Ibid. Also see untitled paper and review, undated, no author.

373 For this view, see also Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, chapter 6 in this volume.

over the direction the new democratic trade union movement was to take were inevitable. We have also shown that during the first half of the 1970s, white student-supported initiatives received more attention in historical accounts of the revival of the labour movement, despite the fact that their performance in unionisation was far outshone by that of the UTP. Attempts to discredit the latter were successful and yet both initiatives were reformist in nature and bordered on the reactionary. It has also been argued that from the second half of the 1970s political unionism along the SACTU tradition resurfaced and began to challenge ‘workerism’, in a fierce struggle that, as we shall show in the next volume, culminated in the adoption of the Freedom Charter by COSATU in 1987.

Evidence has also been presented that there were sincere efforts on the part of the SACTU leadership to regroup and revive contacts with the internally based trade unionists and cadres during the 1970s. At first SACTU deployed its leadership in the Internal Committee of SACTU and its partners as well as in the Revolutionary Council in an effort to bolster the campaign to resuscitate political unionism. Attempts at reviving links with trade unionists within the country were combined with efforts to persuade the international labour movement to rally behind an anti-apartheid programme. Internal restructuring was disrupted by a security clampdown in the mid-1970s. This necessitated a change of approach, putting more emphasis on retaining cadres inside the country where they were serviced ideologically and materially from the frontline machineries based in Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho. The end of the decade saw the laying of a sound foundation on which more advances were to be made in the unity talks and in struggles to create a democratic trade union movement, rooted in political unionism and guided by the basic tenets of the Freedom Charter. It has also been shown that the attempted take-over by a group of Trotskyites caused minimal damage to the revival work that SACTU operatives were engaged in at the time.