South African trade unions: a historical account, 1970–90

The South African trade union movement is in a state of transition; as unions move closer into the political arena, speculations and uncertainties abound

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The growth in size and sophistication of the trade union movement in South Africa over a relatively short period of time has been spectacular. It has resulted in changes in employment practices and has inspired the belief that unionism and wider political trends are indivisible. Unions have demonstrated forcefully that they will play a crucial role in the struggle for a new political structure.

The modern trade union movement in South Africa was formed in the 1970's. Prototype organizations, called advice centers, grew amid heightened black worker activism early in the decade. The centers evolved into trade unions, which led a series of strikes in 1973 in Durban. By 1976, there were 174 registered trade unions, mostly white, colored (mixed races), and Indian, with memberships totaling 670,000 and representing 12 percent of the work force; today, there are 2.5 million union members comprising about 35 percent of the work force.[1] In 1976, the government established an independent commission, headed by Professor Nic Wiehahn, to study burgeoning labor problems. The commission report resulted in 1979 amendments to the Labor Relations Act that established an Industrial Court and the concept of unfair labor practices, and granted black unions a degree of freedom to organize legally for the first time in decades.[2]

This article describes the recent history of unions in South Africa, their current status, and some questions about the trade union movement in the near future. Information is based on numerous interviews conducted in South Africa during January 1990, and on current literature.[3]

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Political traditions

Three distinct political traditions appeared in the labor movement in the 1970's, with different perspectives on broader political issues. (See exhibit 1.)[4] First, shop floor unions, particularly those affiliated with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), developed a cautious policy towards political involvement. Their leaders believed it was important to avoid the path taken by the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), whose close identification with a radically political organization, the Congress Alliance, and its unsuccessful campaign in the 1950's resulted in the decline of the South African Trade Unions in the 1960's. (See exhibit 2.)[5] The Federation of South African Trade Unions emphasized, instead, the building of democratic shop floor structures around the principles of worker control, accountability, and mandatory representation. They saw this as the basis for developing working class leadership in factories.

A second political alternative, the national democratic tradition, re-emerged in unions such as the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU). These "community unions," following in the steps of the South African Trade

Union, argued that labor had an obligation to address socio-economic issues because workers' struggles in the factories and townships were indivisible. Many of these unions affiliated with a political organization called the United Democratic Front (UDF) formed in 1983. They increasingly became involved in actions such as rent control, transportation, and local elections. Many of the unions were unable to survive intense state repression, arguably because of weakness on the shop floor and premature confrontations with the state and management.[6]

The third political tradition developed from the Africanist and black-consciousness movements. The Pan African Congress (PAC), which broke from the African National Congress in 1959 because of the latter's multi-racial definition of the nation, articulated the Africanist ideology, which emphasizes blackness as a common bond to the exclusion of other races. The American black power movement influenced the African black consciousness movement with its emphasis on racial categories. The demand of the trade unions for black leadership and its opposition to white leadership distinguishes the black consciousness tradition from other traditions. This tradition is clearly articulated in the constitution of the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). While the black consciousness movement and the Africanist perspective are closely allied, they are not synonymous; the differences appear to lie in tactics and strategies rather than ideology.

Exhibit 1. Types of unions that emerged in the 1970's

Democratic Shop Floor Structures: This tradition, fostered by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), took a cautious approach toward political involvement, stressing instead democratic shop floor structures as the basis for developing working class leadership in factories.

The National Democratic Tradition: This tradition which was promoted by "community unions" such as the South African Allied Workers Union, called on labor to take up socio-economic issues. Many of these unions became affiliated with the United Democratic Front in 1983 and were unable to survive state repression.

The Africanist and Black Consciousness Tradition: The Africanist ideology, articulated by the Pan African Congress, emphasizes blackness as a common bond to the exclusion of other races. The closely allied black consciousness movement emphasizes black leadership in the trade unions and opposition to white leadership.

Two labor federations

Four years of unity talks among the majority of independent trade unions in South Africa led to the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in December 1985. The predecessor of the National Council of Trade Unions, however, withdrew from the talks over the issue of white leadership, creating a major stumbling block for total solidarity. Nonetheless, during the 1985–87 period, membership to the Congress of South African Trade Unions grew substantially through recruitment of previously unorganized workers, poaching on other unions, and mergers with nonaligned unions. When formed in 1985, the congress had a dues-paying membership of 450,000. By July 1987, membership had expanded by 58 percent to some 712,000. Under the banner "One union, one industry," the congress managed, albeit with some difficulty, to streamline its structures and establish 12 industrial-based unions.

The year 1987 was a watershed for South African industrial relations. The number of workdays lost to labor action soared, due largely to protracted strikes in the mining and public service sectors. The harsh realities of workers' struggles for an improved share of industries' rewards were painful, and relations between management and labor polarized increasingly.

Membership figures for the Congress of South African Trade Unions reached 1 million at the end of 1989. The massive growth from the 1987 figure was largely the result of mergers—the most recent being that between the 100,000-strong Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers of South Africa to form the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU). Events like these left little doubt that the congress had emerged as the dominant labor federation in the country.

Conversely, membership over the last 2 years dropped considerably for the National Council of Trade Unions; from a high of 144,418, it had declined by 130,000 members by August of 1988. The ex-General Secretary of the council, Piroshaw Camay, attributed the decline to "NACTU unions not servicing members effectively, not recruiting new members, and members voting with their feet."[7] He said that there is growing evidence that the unions in the

Congress of South African Trade Unions are winning over council unions, particularly in the food and metal sectors.

Government response to unions

As a direct response to growing union strength and the violent strikes of 1987, both management and the state embarked on a concerted attempt to contain the union movement and reassert managerial prerogatives. Conflict between the state and the Congress of South African Trade Unions reached a climax in 1987 as management of the mines restricted union activities and dismissed 50,000 striking miners.

The South African government played an increasingly repressive role as it tried to contain labor's growing involvement in political issues. The headquarters of the Congress of South African Trade Unions was blown up under mysterious circumstances, and many regional offices suffered arson attacks, which, according to union sources, were the government's acts of repression. This openly hostile attitude towards the Congress of South African Trade Unions culminated in extensive restrictions on the Congress and its allies in the United Democratic Front. While the National Council of Trade Unions was not restricted in the same way, it too was subjected to increasing police raids on union offices, police intervention in union meetings, videotaping of union proceedings, and attempts to intimidate members by massive police presence at union gatherings.

The Labor Relations Act (LRA) amendments, promulgated in September 1988 were seen by the labor movement as another insidious state attempt to curtail growing labor power by undermining the union's hard-won gains after the 1979 Wiehahn reforms. Instead of involving the union movement as a partner in the industrial relations system, the amendments have caused industrial protest and labor militancy which have drawn the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the National Council of Trade Unions closer together in joint support for scrapping the onerous elements of the Labor Relations Act.

Despite a vigorous and intense state offensive against it, the labor movement emerged resilient. Indeed, far from distancing itself from politics in response to the banning and repression of political organizations, the trade unions took on a leading role in internal resistance to *apartheid*. The implications of the state's recent removal of bans on the African National Congress, Pan African Congress, and South African Communist Party are unclear with regard to labor's role in the negotiating process and future political arrangements. The terrain has shifted more quickly than anyone in the labor movement or opposition groups anticipated.

Exhibit 2. Key organizations

AALC—African American Labor Center; the AFL–CIO arm for assisting an indigenous labor movement in Africa, including South Africa.

ANC—African National Congress; a political organization outlawed in South Africa until early 1990, with close relations with the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

COSATU—Congress of South African Trade Unions; the largest and most rapidly growing union federation in South Africa, compatible with the ANC.

NACTU—National Council of Trade Unions; a declining union federation with close relations with the Pan African Congress.

NUM—National Union of Mineworkers; one of three largest unions.

NUMSA—National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa; one of the largest unions.

PAC—Pan African Congress; political organization outlawed in South Africa until early 1990; a breakaway from the ANC.

SACCOLA—South African Employers' Consultative Committee on Labor Affairs; a loose federation of the major employer organizations in South Africa.

SACP—South African Communist Party; a political organization outlawed in South Africa until early 1990.

SACTU—South African Congress of Trade Unions; union federation outlawed in South Africa until early 1990.

SACTWU—South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union; one of three largest unions.

UDF—United Democratic Front; a political organization with trade union ties.

Worker unity

The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985 brought together unions

from all three political traditions. Well organized industrial unions with their shop floor traditions, general unions with national democratic traditions, and the National Union of Mineworkers which had broken away from the black consciousness unions, blended together under the congress banner of "One Country, One Federation." But it has been difficult, and much has been written about the strategic and ideological differences between factions. The "populists," or "charterists," wanted the labor movement to become a political vehicle allied with the African National Congress. The "workerists," or "socialists," wanted to concentrate on the workplace and opposed surrendering union independence or abandoning working class politics in favor of broader political alliances. These polarities are very simplistic, however, and frequently fail to capture the complexities of the intense divisions and debates which have taken place covertly because of the country's political climate and have threatened unity in the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

During the 1985–87 period, membership to the Congress of South African Trade Unions grew substantially.

At the second National Conference of the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1987, the debate between "workerists" and "charterists" continued as intensely. Ironically, the state launched new attacks against the union movement shortly after the conference, thereby forcing labor to recognize the need to establish greater unity and support for *anti-apartheid* measures. While the relationship between the congress and the black consciousness movement remained contentious, the state's growing power under the Labor Relations Act in 1988 and 1989 caused the two federations—Congress of South African Trade Unions and National Council of Trade Unions—to move toward building a forum to promote unity.

In June 1988, the federations led a 3-day national protest—the largest of its kind—which brought out 3 million South African workers. The impending renewal of a state of emergency and restrictions on extra-parliamentary organizations resulted in a massive display of solidarity between the federations. Some observers assumed that cooperation heralded greater flexibility in their ideological viewpoints. But James Mndaweni, president of the National Council of Trade Unions scotched those hopes by stating that the two federations would remain poles apart as long as the congress upheld the Freedom Charter—a political statement by the African National Congress addressing political and economic reforms. Then, in March 1989, leaders of the National Council of Trade Unions withdrew during final preparations for a joint worker summit, explaining that because they were the only remaining Africanist organization which could operate lawfully, they were reluctant to subjugate their federation to the more powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions.

As a result, the question of formal unity between the federations remains difficult. The National Council of Trade Unions, however, has continued its involvement with the joint campaign of resistance against the Labor Relations Act, including overtime bans, protest marches, consumer boycotts, and joint negotiations with the South African Employers' Consultative Committee on Labor Affairs (SACCOLA), a loosely knit federation of nine major employer associations. In addition, the National Council of Trade Unions participated in a second workers' summit, held in August 1989, with over 800 representatives from both federations.

Nonetheless, the two federations apparently are unable to reconcile their ideological differences. In December 1989, the unexpected resignation of Piroshaw Camay, General Secretary of the National Council of Trade Unions, once more highlighted the political splits within the federations and raised questions regarding further unity steps. Camay, who advocated worker unity, believed that other council leaders were not serious about unity. Further, he said that decisions were being made in private political caucuses rather than in legitimate council forums. He also stated that the Congress of South African Trade Unions had been steadfast in building and implementing working class unity.

Camay also criticized his organization for failing to negotiate effective mergers. For example, the Metal Engineering Workers Union of South Africa, formed from the merger of several unions in 1989, did not include the powerful Steel, Engineering and Allied Workers Union (SEAWUSA). This deliberate exclusion resulted from the Africanist-black consciousness differences between the two and raises questions about the council's ability to survive. With the Africanists dominating the council and without Camay's strong leadership to mediate differences, will unions like the Food and Beverage Workers, who support unity talks, leave the council? Will they draw closer to the Congress of South African Trade Unions or become independent? Presently, there are no clear answers.

Foreign financing

An estimated 17 million dollars of foreign funding reaches the South African labor movement each year. The type of assistance clearly varies from affiliate to affiliate, but the numerically larger unions (the miners with 260,000 members, metal workers with 210,000 members, and clothing and textile workers with 185,000 members) have substantially more resources at their

disposal and are not dependent on outside financing for expansion and development. While smaller unions have great needs in education and infrastructure, particularly union administration, larger unions stress the importance of solidarity in local struggles and special projects and foster research into how key industries may be structured in a *postapartheid* economy.

The sources of economic aid exemplify the differences between the federations and between individual unions. The trade union movements in Western Europe, particularly those in Scandinavia and Germany, have historically been the preferred sources of funding for the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Leaders of the National Council of Trade Unions acknowledge that support from the American union movement has been invaluable in their federation's development.

The clash of divergent historic traditions of the trade union movements in South Africa and the United States are evident in their relationship. The anticommunist AFL–CIO and its regional affiliate, the African American Labor Center (AALC), contrasts with a South African trade union movement with deep historic alliances with the African National Congress and the Communist Party. In the past, this has resulted in an uneasiness among the leaders of organized labor in both countries. However, at the present time, there is a growing willingness to take corrective measures to improve their future relationships.

Leaders of the Congress of South African Trade Unions recognize the need for a positive relationship with the AFL–CIO. Many affiliates of the congress have good and longstanding links with their counterpart American unions and have stressed continued solidarity and assistance as vital to the South African labor movement.

Recent events in Eastern Europe have added another dimension to the issues of outside funding. Although support from East European countries has never been significant, all parties in South Africa anticipate that it will diminish. There is a growing concern that money from Western Europe will increasingly be channelled to Eastern Europe. While many observers are adopting a "wait-and-see" attitude, there are strong indications that during the 1990's, changes in Europe will force the South African labor movement to make a positive reassessment of its relationship with the U.S. labor movement.

Changes in strategy

Mobilization approach. The political divisions among South African unions are reflected in workplace strategies and tactics. During 1988–89, the mobilization approach within the congress, particularly as associated with the National Union of Mineworkers, was in retreat.[8] However, unions like the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa and the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union recognize mobilization as a core strategy for unions. They stress, however, the concrete gains and organizational strength rather than mobilization alone, and they appear to have gained support for their approach. During 1988, perhaps attributable to the state of emergency or more cautious approaches by unions, the number of workdays lost due to strikes dramatically declined to the lowest level since 1985. Clearly, more workers were reluctant to embark on actions which could have caused loss of pay and jobs.

Strikes. Worker support for "stay aways," (strikes) however, has been staggering. The 3-day "stay away" in June 1988 involved up to 3 million workers. The second highly successful "stay away," in September 1989, reflected the trend toward fewer strikes, but involved a larger number of workers nationwide than a strike might have involved. The "stay aways" were not simply a demonstration of strength, but were designed to facilitate changes in the Labor Relations Act.

Judicial system. Many labor disputes continue to be fought in courts. In 1987, 2,900 cases were heard in the Industrial Court, 3,838 were heard in 1988, and 4,492 were heard in 1989. The Industrial Court has become the subject of serious controversy as some unionists discourage its use because of amendments to the Labor Relations Act that limit the court's judicial independence. In fact, an increasing number of employers and trade unionists have negotiated agreements and procedures that bypass the provisions of the Labor Relations Act by establishing private dispute resolution procedures. Such agreements and procedures demonstrate the increasingly sophisticated response of the union movement against controls. They have also resulted in an expanded role for organizations such as the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa, which provides both mediation and arbitration services.

The labor arena nevertheless continues to provoke high levels of legal activity as employers initiate more and more actions against unions. For the unions, much will depend on the extent to which the Industrial Court remains a forum where significant labor rights can be guaranteed. The larger unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa are

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attempting to move away from dependence on expensive labor lawyers in favor of training paralegal officers within union structures to fight cases in the Industrial Court.

What is next?

While a strategic compromise has been emerging within the Congress of South African Trade Unions and between the congress and the National Council of Trade Unions, differences still underlie the competing political cultures. These traditions will continue to shape debates.

Political divisions among South African unions are reflected in workplace strategies.

The South African trade union movement and the extraparliamentary groupings are in a state of transition, and political reform is moving at a heady pace. The outlook has improved with State President DeKlerk lifting restrictions on the Pan African Congress, the African National Congress, and the South African Communist Party (SACP) on February 2, 1990, followed by the release of Nelson Mandela. There are talks of negotiations and the prospect of a *postapartheid* society on the horizon. This period is being equated with the first few days after the 1979 Wiehahn report. There is a sense, however, that South Africa could be on the brink of something infinitely more significant.

Questions being asked are: What will be the relationship between the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the African National Congress? How will the return to South Africa of exiled leaders of the South African Congress of Trade Unions affect the Congress of South African Trade Unions? What role will the South African Congress of Trade Unions play in the Congress of South African Trade Unions? Now that the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress have legal political platforms, will the orientations of both the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the National Council of Trade Unions swing more to bread and butter issues? What will be the role of the trade union movement in *postapartheid* South Africa? As yet, there are no answers—only opinions and speculation.

The link between the African National Congress, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and particularly the South African Congress of Trade Unions is clearly an issue that must be resolved now as a matter of some urgency. Some observers suggest that the present loose relationship between the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the African National Congress will not change, and that the congress will retain its independence. This view suggests that the return of exiled members of the South African Congress of Trade Unions will make little difference. There is a recognition of political status of their officials and a special empathy exists towards them; many are old and frail and a few will be absorbed into nominal positions under existing leadership. A more cynical scenario suggests the possibility of the South African Congress taking over the Congress of South African Trade Unions aided by forces inside—a move which would have serious implications for a future independent trade union movement and one which has the potential to destroy unity within the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

The link between the National Council of Trade Unions and the Pan African Congress appears to be strengthening as the Pan African Congress adopts a distant, far less accommodating stance toward the African National Congress and exhibits a critical attitude towards the concept of negotiation in favor of an "all-or-nothing" approach.

Finally, the relationship between the National Council of Trade Unions and the Congress of South African Trade Unions has shown recent signs of improvement. In June 1990, the two federations reached an agreement on changes needed in the Labor Relations Act amendment promulgated in 1989. And even more encouraging for peaceful labor-management relations in South Africa, the South African Employers' Consultative Committee on Labor Affairs joined the two federations in those recommended changes. To date, the Parliament has not acted on these recommendations.

In light of all these recent events and occurrences in South Africa, four major conclusions can be drawn:

1. Trade unions in South Africa have become a powerful force toward the abolition of *apartheid.*
2. The Congress of South African Trade Unions and its affiliates have emerged as the major force in the South African trade union movement.
3. Within the trade union movement, competition for leadership and direction dominates this major period of transition. It is likely that the three largest unions, the National Union of Mineworkers, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, and the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union will play major roles.
4. Although at present, the amount of outside funds does not constrain the growth and vigor of the South African trade union movement, this will change if Eastern Europe starts to get funds that otherwise would flow to South Africa. □

Footnotes

[1] Andrew Levy and Johan Piron, *Annual Report on Labor Relations in South Africa 1988–89* (Johannesburg, South Africa, Graylink House, 1989).

[2] Pat Stone, *Wage Bargaining in South Africa* (Johannesburg, South Africa, IR Data Publications, 1989).

[3] More than 50 trade union leaders from the two major federations were interviewed, as well as some independent unionists, a few academic experts, and some neutral labor relations experts.

[4] Alan Fine and Eddie Webster, "Transcending Traditions: Trade Unions and Political Unity," *South African Review* (Johannesburg, South Africa, Raven Press, 1989).

[5] Ross Martin, *Trade Unionism: Purposes and Forms* (New York, NY, Clarendon Oxford Press, 1989), pp. 139–40.

[6] Fine and Webster, "Transcending Traditions."

[7] *Weekly Mail*, Jan. 2, 1990, Johannesburg, South Africa.

[8] The "Full Court Press" in basketball, which describes the act of contesting or challenging an opponent on numerous fronts, is a useful analogue for the mobilization strategy in South African labor relations.

Comparable worth policies

Compensation of employees according to comparable worth is one of the most sweeping changes ever proposed for the U.S. economy. Its advocates argue for nothing less than a complete overhauling of the manner in which pay is determined by firms and governments. Even if only some sectors of the economy institute comparable worth policies, these limited programs could have wide ranging effects on wages, employment, labor force participation, production, and income distribution. Comparable worth has a compelling sound of fairness, and therefore political acceptability, which even without an economywide Federal mandate, may lead to its widespread adoption through an accretion of court cases, State-level lobbying, and collective bargaining agreements. Consequently, a greater awareness of what comparable worth entails and of the arguments for and against it is needed if one is to make an educated assessment of the desirability of instituting comparable worth programs.

—Joyce P. Jacobsen
"The Economics of Comparable Worth: Theoretical Considerations," in M. Anne Hill and Mark R. Killingsworth, eds., *Comparable Worth: Analysis and Evidence* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 1989), p. 36.