

South Africa, labor movement

Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van der Walt

2009

Contents

Unions in the Mining Era	3
Labor in the Era of Manufacturing	5
Labor and Apartheid	7
Economic Crisis, Neoliberalism, and Union Revival	8
After the Soweto Uprising	9
After Apartheid	11
Conclusion	11
References and Suggested Readings	12

The union movement in twentieth-century South Africa operated in a context in which capitalist relations were built upon relations of colonial domination. The persistent use of state power against labor movements, heavy-handed intervention in the supply and control of labor, and close linkages between the state apparatus and private business help explain the persistent tendency of the labor movement to break out of the bounds of bread-and-butter issues, and fight battles around civil and political rights.

Even avowedly economic unions that drew a sharp distinction between workplace issues and “politics” were affected, while other union traditions engaged politics in various ways. These ranged from a minority revolutionary syndicalist tradition, which saw One Big Union as the vehicle for civil and political struggles, to the more dominant tradition, political unionism, in which unions allied themselves with left-wing parties and/or nationalist movements and involved themselves in struggles over civil and political rights.

Unions in the Mining Era

The social formation of South Africa has always been deeply linked into the larger world political economy. The discovery of diamonds at Kimberley in 1867, followed by gold in 1886 on the Witwatersrand, transformed the previously marginal area into a major site of capitalism, affecting not just South Africa but also surrounding territories.

Gold mining was a capital-intensive process, because ore was located deep underground, and was initially largely financed by British and European investors. As with diamonds at Kimberley, gold mining was rapidly centralized in a few large companies, setting a pattern of conglomerate control that persists into the present. Africans provided the bulk of mine labor as migrant male workers who returned to the countryside after their contracts: segregated, subject to coercive labor laws and an internal passport system, they were drawn from conquered peoples across southern Africa, with Mozambique, ruled by Portugal, providing a third of the migrant labor force in the mines. Immigrant white workers from across the British empire dominated skilled work.

Besides the division between free skilled white workers and unfree, nominally unskilled African migrants, the fractured working class had intermediate layers of impoverished, unskilled Afrikaners, as well as Coloreds, Indians, and urbanized Africans. In short, South Africa began its industrialization in the context of the “first” globalization of the 1880s into the 1930s, a period of substantial international economic integration that was also the heyday of European imperialism. The British empire formed the South African state in 1910 as a self-governing white dominion, against the backdrop of a systematic series of wars dating back to the 1870s, and established protectorates and colonies along South Africa’s borders.

In this early period, the deep racial divisions in the working class shaped the unions, as did ethnic antipathies within the races. While the first recorded strikes took place amongst Colored dockworkers in the 1840s, it was only after 1867 that the first unions emerged, developing on the diamond fields amongst white immigrants who brought traditions of labor unionism from abroad. A number of British unions opened branches in Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, and Kimberley, including the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners in 1881 and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, founded with the help of W. H. Andrews in 1894.

To craft exclusivity was added segregationist politics, as the unions, facing replacement by cheaper workers of color, began to demand job reservation on racial lines. Early industrial and general unions amongst white workers, such as the South African Mineworkers' Union (SAMWU) formed in 1913, specifically excluded Africans from membership. The SAMWU went back to the Transvaal Miners' Association formed in 1902, headed by Tom Matthews from 1908 onwards, and before that to efforts by J. T. Bain. When the South African Labor Party (SALP) was founded in 1910 with union backing (an early example of political unionism), its platform included calls for Asian repatriation, job color bars, and

From the 1890s, white workers began to establish union federations, starting with Trades and Labor Councils, partly due to the efforts of men like Andrews and Bain. The Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions was formed in 1911 on the Witwatersrand, and was succeeded by the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) in 1914. The SAIF claimed 47,000 members in 45 affiliated unions (both craft and industrial) countrywide by 1919, and was headed by Archibald Crawford. A jealously independent Cape Federation of Labor Unions, mainly comprising craft unions, was formed in 1913, with no more than 6,000 members by 1919.

In the early twentieth century, white workers were led into vicious class divisions and working-class grievances, including fears of displacement by cheap labor and repressive state interventions in strikes. There were general strikes in 1907, 1913, and 1914, and in 1922 a general strike on the Witwatersrand turned into an armed insurrection. The 1922 Rand Revolt was suppressed with martial law, with 4,692 persons arrested, 853 tried, and four executed.

The Rand Revolt showed that white immigrants and local Afrikaners were increasingly united in a single white labor movement, including both craft and industrial unions, but also showed the deep divisions in the working class. At the heart of the uprising was the threat of replacement of white by African miners, and a famous strikers' banner called on "Workers of the World: Unite and Fight for a White South Africa." Serious racial clashes took place, despite the opposition of radicals, such as the syndicalist Percy Fisher, who instigated the insurrection. In this context it is, perhaps, not surprising that African trade unionists like Clements Kadalie of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), founded in 1919, supported the martial law measures.

If white unions dated back to the 1860s, unions amongst workers of color largely emerged in the second half of the 1910s. Part of the impetus came from the turbulent conditions of the time, with rising inflation and class conflict sparking the huge strike wave that peaked in the Rand Revolt. A second stimulus was the role of anarchism and syndicalism in Southern Africa. The anarchist Wilfred Harrison helped form an interracial General Workers' Union in 1906, which was followed by a local section of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1910 and a syndicalist presence in the 1913 general strike. The local IWW was based amongst white workers, and revolutionary syndicalist unionism amongst workers of color really started in 1917.

Rejecting the segregation of mainstream white labor, syndicalists like Andrews, S. P. Bunting, and Andrew B. Dunbar promoted interracial labor unity in One Big Union that would fight for both national liberation and libertarian socialism. Besides attempts to reform the SAIF and the Cape Federation of Labor Unions, syndicalists formed the Durban Indian Workers' Industrial Union in 1917, headed by Bernard L. E. Sigamoney, followed by the Industrial Workers of Africa in Johannesburg (the first union for African workers in British Southern Africa) associated with T. W. Thibedi, the Clothing Workers' Industrial Union and the Horse Drivers' Union in Kimberley, based amongst Coloreds like Johnny Gomas, and the Sweet and Jam Workers' Industrial Union in Cape Town. No syndicalist federation was formed, however, and the syndicalist unions

declined by 1921, partly due to the onset of recession. In 1921, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was formed, heavily drawn from the syndicalist milieu. The Cape section of the Industrial Workers of Africa merged, along with several other African and Colored general unions that emerged in the late 1910s, into the ICU. The ICU was influenced by syndicalism, with a constitution based on the IWW, but was also influenced by the ideas of Marcus Garvey as well as liberalism, Marxism, and moderate unionism.

The ICU found its greatest support amongst African and Colored farm workers and tenant farmers, the only mass-based rural union in South African history. It also recruited heavily amongst the African elite. Like SAMWU, which established branches in the northern colonies, the ICU established sections in Southwest Africa (now Namibia), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). However, corruption, infighting, weak structures, the lack of a clear strategy, members' frustration, and repression saw the ICU fragment rapidly after 1927. The movement virtually collapsed everywhere in the early 1930s, although it was revived in Southern Rhodesia in the 1940s by Charles Mzingeli.

Labor in the Era of Manufacturing

From the 1920s onwards, the South African state shifted toward an import-substitution model, led by the Pact government, a coalition of the SALP and Afrikaner nationalists. The new approach partially delinked South Africa from the world economy, and, while gold exports remained the main source of foreign exchange, local capitalists increasingly controlled mining. By 1945, manufacturing, including the output of the state corporations formed from the 1920s onwards, had overtaken mining as a proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP). The importance of mining and farming continued to decline in subsequent years, although the centralized structure of local capitalism persisted.

An Industrial Conciliation Act (1924) provided the country's first comprehensive industrial relations legislation, granting Colored, Indian, and white workers access to a cumbersome and bureaucratic bargaining machinery that, combined with the massive defeat of 1922, sapped the mainstream unions of their previous militancy. It specifically excluded shop stewards from the bargaining councils, as well as pass-bearing Africans, farm workers, domestic workers, and the public sector, and made legally protected strikes possible only after a lengthy procedure was followed.

The Mines and Works Amendment Act (1926) instituted comprehensive job reservation on the mines, helping prevent a repeat of 1922, while the racially preferential employment policies of the state corporations provided white workers with a new source of employment. The ICU, which claimed 100,000 members in 1927, was therefore largely excluded from the new industrial relations system, although it was able to make some use of the Wage Act (1925), which allowed applications for statutory wage determinations. Later African unions would also use the Wage Boards.

This was the context in which the white unions were rebuilt. The SAIF collapsed from 60,000 to 2,000 members by 1923. In 1925, however, a South African Trade Union Congress was formed, which was followed by the South African Trades and Labor Council (SATLC) in 1930. The secretary of the SATLC was Andrews, a founder member of the CPSA and former syndicalist.

Although the SATLC had refused to accept the affiliation of the ICU, which was twice the size of the entire federation, a growing number of SATLC affiliates began to organize interracial unions. The “new unionism” was based in the expanding manufacturing industries where the racial division of labor was less stark than in the mines. The most famous example was the Garment Workers’ Union, led by Solly Sachs, another CPSA member and onetime syndicalist, which had an interracial membership but a segregated structure. Another important example was the Food and Canning Workers’ Union (FCWU), identified with CPSA activist Ray Alexander Simons, and the National Union of Distributive Workers, of which Joe Slovo was a member.

CPSA members like Gomas and Thibedi had spent several years trying to reform the ICU, and were expelled at Kadalie’s behest in 1926. Following the break with the ICU, the CPSA established its own Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) in 1928, which formed the first real industrial unions amongst Africans. The federation was based on the Witwatersrand, and soon claimed 10,000 members. Although a member of the Red International of Trade Unions, led by CPSA members like Thibedi and Ben Weinbren, and hosted at the CPSA offices, FNETU was in practice an economic federation that shied away from politics.

The CPSA’s adoption in 1928 of “New Line” policies designed to Bolshevize the party had disastrous effects on its union work. Scores of active unionists like Andrews, Sachs, Thibedi, and Weinbren were expelled on a range of charges, including failure to support the CPSA’s new “Native Republic” approach, which argued that communists had to fight for a non-racial capitalism before socialism could be put on the agenda. Combined with the onset of the Great Depression, the New Line wrecked FNETU, and an early African Mineworkers’ Union established by Bunting and Thibedi in 1930 received scant CPSA attention.

It was only in the late 1930s that African unions revived, growing rapidly during World War II. A Joint Committee of African Unions was formed by the Trotskyist Max Gordon and incorporated into a Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) in 1941, with 100,000 members including the African Mineworkers’ Union headed by CPSA leader J. B. Marks. The SATLC also continued to grow, with 73,300 members in 1941, and affiliates ranging from African industrial unions, racially mixed “new unions,” to racially exclusive craft unions. Afrikaner nationalists had formed splinter unions from 1908 onwards. Initially these had little success, but grew from the 1930s onwards: the Spoorbond on the railways claimed 16,000 members by the 1940s. Afrikaner nationalists also tried to take over SAMWU, and in 1939 Charles Harris, controversial SAMWU general secretary, was assassinated by a young Afrikaner miner. Afrikaner nationalists, headed by Daan Ellis, took over SAMWU after 1948.

Inflation, a tight labor market, and state reluctance to engage in major confrontations saw CNETU reach around 150,000 members, while the SATLC had 168,432 members, two-thirds in interracial unions of various types. While CNETU was dominated by the CPSA, it shied away from strikes as well as civil and political struggles (like the growing squatter movement), in part because the party did not want to disrupt the war effort. Nonetheless, the war years saw the biggest upsurge of strikes and union activity since 1917–22, and the CPSA established itself as a major force in African politics.

Labor and Apartheid

The year 1946 opened a period of decline: the African miners were defeated in a major strike, CNETU split, the SATLC was deeply divided and began to fragment from 1947, and, as unemployment grew, employers adopted an increasingly uncompromising stand. In 1948, the National Party, which combined segregation, import-substitution policies, and Afrikaner nationalist goals, was elected with the goal of racial apartheid. The CPSA was banned in 1950, leftist CNETU and SATLC activists were banned from union work (56 by the end of 1955), and the SALP (which had moved to the left in the war years and was joined by figures like Sachs) withered away.

Following the premises that African workers were not sophisticated enough to form unions, and that African unions were, in any case, particularly susceptible to radical influences, the apartheid government set up a separate industrial relations framework for African workers. The Native Labor (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 made strikes by African workers illegal, and set up a complicated dispute resolution machinery that had no place for African unions. Amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1956 prevented any new racially mixed unions (unions with Colored, Indian, and white members) from being registered, and compelled existing registered racially mixed unions to establish segregated structures.

The unions were divided over how to respond. The SATLC splintered into three main currents. The South African Confederation of Labor (SACL) represented the first current: established in 1957, with Ellis as president, it consisted of racially exclusive, pro-apartheid white unions like SAMWU, which supported racial segregation and job reservation, and aimed to protect members from competition by lower-paid African workers.

The second current was represented by the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), which included registered industrial and craft unions and was formed in 1954. TUCSA unions claimed to be apolitical, focused on defending the wages of their Colored, Indian, and white members, and vacillated in their support of Africans. African unions were initially excluded from the federation, but in 1959 TUCSA helped establish an anti-communist Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA), which united 17 African unions. FOFATUSA had 18,000 members.

The third current, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), continued the inter-racial union traditions of the 1930s and 1940s. Comprising the remnants of CNETU and the leftwing of the SATLC, it was formed in 1955 and started with 31 affiliates and 32,000 members in total. It was smaller than the other federations: the SACL claimed 145,000 members, while TUCSA had 183,400 in 1958.

SACTU was a quintessential example of political unionism, and closely aligned with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The ANC was an African nationalist grouping formed in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress, which was transformed from a generally moderate and elite party into a mass-based party in the 1950s. In 1953, the CPSA was reconstituted as the underground SACP, throwing its energies into CNETU, SACTU, and the ANC. Communists were prominent in both the ANC and SACTU.

SACTU was closely involved in the civil disobedience campaigns of the 1950s and fiercely opposed apartheid. Activists like Elias Motsoaledi, elected CNETU chair in 1953 and a member of the ANC and the CPSA/SACP, were prominent in the SACTU leadership. Motsoaledi was banned from union work by the anti-communist legislation of the apartheid government. Elijah

Barayi, a young activist who would become a major trade unionist in the 1980s, was among the thousands arrested in these campaigns.

SACTU was also involved in the 1957 and 1958 nationwide general strikes, and in the 1960 National Day of Mourning, which commemorated the deaths of anti-pass demonstrators killed by police in Sharpeville and Langa. Apartheid had made interracial unionism almost impossible, and registered SACTU unions such as the FCWU, which was formed in 1941, had to racially separate their structures in order to gain access to the official collective bargaining system.

After the Sharpeville and Langa massacres, the state tightened up influx controls and residential segregation, transforming rural African “home-lands” into supposedly self-governing states. Repression increased, with a state of emergency in 1960 and the banning of ANC and the Pan-African Congress (PAC), a breakaway group.

In June 1961 the ANC and SACP organized an armed group, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (“The Spear of the Nation”, or MK), which undertook various acts of sabotage from December onwards. Many key SACTU activists were involved in the sabotage campaign, including Motsoaledi, who was detained in 1963 and sentenced to life imprisonment at the 1963–4 Rivonia Trial. SACTU was never banned, but the growing repression, and the turn to armed struggle, took a heavy toll on the federation, which collapsed in the mid-1960s, although some affiliates, like the FCWU, survived. SACTU was later reconstituted abroad in exile as the labor wing of the exiled ANC.

FOFATUSA dissolved in the early 1960s, and most of its affiliates joined TUCSA, which decided to open its doors to African unions. TUCSA officials sought to school African workers in “responsible” unionism, and placed African affiliates under the control of their registered counterparts. There was a marked decline in the organization and resistance of African workers. The number of African unions dropped from 53 in 1961 to 15 in 1967, with merely 23,000 African workers on strike between 1965 and 1971. TUCSA soon lost interest, encouraging African unions to disaffiliate, and in 1969 the last two African affiliates were expelled. The registered unions representing Coloreds, Indians, and whites now vastly greatly over-shadowed African unionism, with a total membership of 573,373 in 182 unions in 1970, with SACL the largest single federation.

Economic Crisis, Neoliberalism, and Union Revival

The apartheid economy grew extremely rapidly at 9.3 percent between 1963 and 1968. Foreign direct investment increased, local conglomerates continued to expand, and mechanization in manufacturing increased sharply. Consequences included a steady growth in the employment of Africans in semi-skilled positions, the fragmentation of traditionally white skilled jobs, and rising African real wages (although the overall ratio of African to white wages worsened).

However, the global onset of recession in the early 1970s, coupled with a massive and growing skills shortage in South Africa and the small size of the internal market, saw the boom come to an end. African unemployment, particularly amongst unskilled migrant workers, rose quickly, as did inflation, the real wages of all workers declining. Particularly hard hit by the economic downturn, migrant workers led a resurgence of African strike activity. A wave of strikes by African miners in Southwest Africa was followed by a spontaneous general strike in Natal in 1973. By the end of March, 160 strikes had taken place at 146 establishments, involving 60,000 African and Indian workers, followed by strikes in the factories of East London and Johannesburg.

These strikes were the first signs of the revival of African unionism, which later spread to the growing constituency of semi-skilled urban workers.

Worker support organizations in the major centers, such as the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB) in the Cape, the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund (GFWBF) in Durban, and the Urban Training Project (UTP) and the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) on the Witwatersrand, played an important role in forming new unions. With the strikes of 1973, the GFWBF was able to initiate the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), the National Union of Textile Workers, and other unions, grouped as the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TU-ACC) in Natal in 1974, which later spread to the Witwatersrand with IAS help. The WPWAB, meanwhile, transformed itself into the Western Province General Workers' Union (WPGWU).

Despite divisions over strategy, the WPWAB/ WPGWU and TUACC had much in common. Established by radical white intellectuals and students, influenced by the new left and critical of Soviet Marxism, and aided by SACTU veterans, they aimed at democratic and interracial unions that could withstand state repression and maintain a distance from African nationalism in order to develop unions with an independent and socialist agenda. The ANC was, in any event, moribund at the time.

TUCSA activists from the federation's defunct African Affairs wing played a central role in forming the UTP in 1970. The UTP assisted African unions, which were loosely linked as the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions (CCOBTU). The UTP aimed at reforming the industrial relations system and, influenced by separatist ideologies such as PAC-style exclusivist Africanism and the Black Consciousness movement, barred whites from leadership positions.

The Black Consciousness movement, a powerful force in the 1970s, also formed its own Black Allied Workers' Union, a very small body, while some independent registered unions like the FCWU undertook efforts to organize Africans. By 1974 there were 43,747 members in the emerging unions. With the new wave of unionism, TUCSA changed tack again and invited African unions to affiliate in separate unions, which it again hoped could be controlled.

After the Soweto Uprising

Following the dramatic student uprising and general strikes from June 1976, the apartheid government increased its repression, banning union activists and suppressing the Black Consciousness movement. The new unions were able to weather the storm of state and employer hostility: the Black Allied Workers' Union splintered, but a number of new community-based, overtly political unions like the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU) emerged; TUACC, joined by the National Union of Motor and Rubber Workers, a registered trade union that broke away from TUCSA, formed the Federation of South African Unions (FOSATU) in 1979; in 1980, the CCOBTU set up the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), a national federation with a combined membership of about 30,000.

The exiled SACTU was hostile to many of the new unions. It claimed to be the sole representative of African workers (despite having no union presence in South Africa), and even described the new unions as "yellow unions" controlled by a "fascist" apartheid state. The exiled ANC and SACP also accused FOSATU of economism, an unfair charge, for the federation wanted the development of an autonomous socialist workers' movement.

The growing unions were faced with new challenges. From 1977, the apartheid state moved toward neoliberal policies, drawing the country into the “second” globalization of the late twentieth century. It also began to experiment with limited political reforms, most notably amendments of the official industrial relations system from 1979 to 1983 that granted African unions equal rights. These amendments were cautiously accepted by TUCSA, but strongly opposed by SACL unions like SAMWU: headed by the hardliner Arrie Paulus, it called an unsuccessful strike in defense of job reservation at 70 mines in 1979. The SACL was increasingly antagonistic to the National Party government, aligning itself with the growing white right wing and flirting with the idea of forming a new workers’ party.

Divided over whether to register or not, the new independent unions nonetheless made rapid progress. FOSATU registered, grew from 94,614 members in 1981 to 139,917 in 1985, and headed a strike wave in the early 1980s. The eastern Witwatersrand was a hotbed of militancy, with Moses Mayekiso of MAWU actively involved in huge metal industry strikes and in the formation of FOSATU shop stewards’ councils uniting workers across factories and industries.

During this period, there was substantial repression of unionists, and several died in detention. Neil Aggett, a radical white unionist involved in FCWU efforts to organize Africans, was one of six union casualties. Community militancy, including boycotts in support of strikes, grew, and in 1983 the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed to oppose the apartheid state. The relationship between unions and national liberation struggles became even more contentious. Community unions like SAAWU were involved in the UDF, but FOSATU and the WPGWU stayed outside, although they participated in UDF campaigns.

Union membership grew at an unprecedented rate in the 1980s and 1990s, despite the repression that cost the lives of figures like Andries Raditsela and led to events like the treason trial of Mayekiso. After a series of unity talks between FOSATU, the community unions, and the WPGWU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched in December 1985 with 500,000 members in 33 affiliates.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was the largest CUSA union, but broke away and helped found COSATU. It accounted for a fifth of COSATU membership, and Barayi became COSATU’s first president. Metal unions, including MAWU, amalgamated as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), another key COSATU affiliate. COSATU was strongly influenced by FOSATU’s stress on interracial unions, industrial unionism, and shopfloor control, but, like SACTU, also aligned itself with the ANC, which had come to dominate the UDF.

The unions in the Africanist and Black Consciousness traditions were less successful. In 1986, CUSA joined with the small Azanian Confederation of Labor (formed in 1984) to form a rival National African Council of Trade Unions (NACTU), which was quickly outpaced by COSATU. By the late 1990s, COSATU claimed 1,700,000 members (the largest union federation in African history), while NACTU claimed its membership was 370,000, a figure that is certainly substantially exaggerated. COSATU was actively involved in campaigns against the apartheid state, such as the 1987 and 1991 general strikes, when it cooperated with NACTU. An attempt to introduce an overhauled and more restrictive Industrial Conciliation Act, called the Labor Relations Act, was particularly resented. In the meantime, massive strikes broke out in sectors like mining and railways, with the 1987 strike by NUM the biggest single industry-wide strike in South African history (albeit defeated). TUCSA was dissolved in 1986, having lost key affiliates, but white trade union membership remained fairly stable. The tradition represented by the SACL remained powerful, while more moderate unions in the TUCSA tradition regrouped as the Federation of South

African Labor (FEDSAL). A large number of mainly white unions remained outside any federation. The strike wave of the late 1980s and early 1990s was largely launched by the unions around COSATU and NACTU, both predominantly based amongst African workers, who finally established themselves as the dominant force in the South African labor movement.

After Apartheid

In 1990, the year the ANC, PAC, and SACP were legalized, SACTU was dissolved into COSATU. The 1994 elections brought the ANC into office, and COSATU, which was now formally aligned with the ANC and SACP through the Tripartite Alliance, believed it would have a substantial voice in government. In 1995, the ANC overhauled the Labor Relations Act, extending union rights to domestics, farm workers, and the public sector, but retaining provisions that made legal strikes possible only after lengthy procedures. A Basic Conditions of Employment Act the following year regulated working conditions, while an Employment Equity Act made affirmative action for people of color official government policy.

White labor, meanwhile, was going through some important changes. By the 1990s, SAMWU had replaced the SACL as the main pro-apartheid union body. Organizing beyond the mines, it aimed to form a white “super-union” in the early 1990s: with a specific focus on Afrikaners, it became the largest single white trade union, with 44,000 members in 1992, largely in state industries.

The failure of the rightwing to stop the political transition left SAMWU isolated. In 1997, the union was revived: a new leadership, headed by Flip Buys, sought to change its image, introduce business union practices like financial services, and fight for Afrikaner cultural rights and against affirmative action. After a number of mergers with other unions, the federation was relaunched as Solidarity in 2002. It claims 130,000 members and has been involved in litigation against state policies, but has also held joint strikes with COSATU affiliates and even attended the 2003 SACP conference.

FEDSAL, which claimed 230,000 members in 1994, merged with other unions to form the Federation of Unions of South Africa in 1997. A moderate body that grouped old and new craft unions, white-collar and semi-professional staff associations, several industrial unions, and a number of general unions, FEDUSA grew mainly by attracting new affiliates. It claimed 540,000 members, making it the country’s second largest union federation: politically non-aligned, it rarely engages in industrial action, concentrating on lobbying and providing services to members. It is based largely amongst Coloreds, Indians, and whites, but has a growing African membership. Outside these main federations there are a number of independent unions, including break-aways from COSATU affiliates.

Conclusion

The history of South African labor has been characterized by periods of industrial peace and waves of strikes. Until the mid-1920s, the labor movement was overwhelmingly dominated by white labor. By the 1990s, African workers were the dominant force. In 1996, union density (outside agriculture) was 57.5 percent, with the highest unionization rates, and the largest number of unionists, to be found amongst Africans. Racially divided from its inception, the South African

labor movement remains largely structured along racial lines, reflecting the persistence of a racial division of labor and racial antipathies. In one remarkable instance in 1997, COSATU, FEDUSA, and NACTU cooperated in a general strike against amendments to the Labor Relations Act, while the 2007 public sector strike also showed a degree of interracial labor unity. Later that year, FEDUSA and NACTU organized themselves as a loose South African Confederation of Trade Unions (SACOTU). Such cooperation has proved, on the whole, elusive.

With the exception of the ICU period, the agricultural sector, a major employer, has remained largely non-union. In periods of relative social peace, the unions have tended to become increasingly bureaucratized, a trend from which COSATU has by no means proved immune since 1994. The unions continue to face severe difficulties. The ongoing economic problems of the 1980s and 1990s led to massive retrenchments, with perhaps a million jobs being lost in the 1990s: compounded by accelerating privatization, this has hit blue-collar workers particularly hard.

COSATU's base in heavy industry has been undermined, and the federation's continuous growth has largely been due to rapid expansion of public sector unionism. In 1985, the NUM and NUMSA were COSATU's strongest affiliates. Today the National Education, Health, and Allied Workers' Union and the South African Democratic Teachers' Union are among the largest affiliates. SAMWU was also hit hard, and its support is increasingly drawn from outside the mining industry. Growing casualization and outsourcing has posed further challenges. COSATU has been unable to recruit significant numbers of workers in insecure and part-time employment, with the overwhelming majority of its members drawn from permanently employed workers in secure jobs.

The installation of the ANC government led to major civil and political advances for the majority of workers, and perhaps the country's best labor legislation to date, but the ANC embraced neoliberal policies soon after coming into power. COSATU's political unionism has complicated its ability to respond: intent on maintaining the Tripartite Alliance, the federation, which is officially socialist, finds itself in the awkward position of canvassing for an ANC dominated by neoliberalism. The involvement of COSATU leaders in ANC structures has led to suggestions of growing careerism amongst unionists. The federation's involvement in a range of policy forums in the 1990s, like the corporatist National Economic, Development, and Labor Council, has introduced an increasingly technocratic approach to policy, which sits uneasily with traditions of direct action.

SEE ALSO [in this encyclopedia]: Aggett, Neil (1953–1982); Anarchism and Syndicalism, Southern Africa; Anti-Apartheid Movement, South Africa; Bain, J. T. (1860–1919); Barayi, Elijah (1930–1994); Communist Party of South Africa, 1921–1950; COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions); Dunbar, Andrew (1879–1964); Ellis, Daniel Edward “Daan” (1904–1963); Harris, Charles (1896–1939); Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); Marks, J. B. (1903–1972); Mayekiso, Moses (b. 1948); Motsoaledi, Elias (1924–1994); Mzingeli, Charles (1905–1980); Paulus, Petrus Jacobus “Arrie” (b. 1930); Raditsela, Andries (1956–1985); Sachs, Solly (1900–1976); Sigamoney, Bernard L. E. (1888–1963); Simons, Ray Alexander (1913–2004); Slovo, Joe (1926–1995); South Africa, African Nationalism and the ANC; South Africa Communist Party, 1953–Present

References and Suggested Readings

- Alexander, P. (2000) *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Baskin, J. (1991) *Striking Back: A History of COSATU*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Berger, I. (1992) *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry, 1900 –1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bezuidenhout, A. (2000) *Towards Global Social Movement Unionism? Trade Union Responses to Globalization in South Africa*. Geneva: International Institute for Labor Studies.
- Drew, A. (2002) *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Fine, R. with Davis, D. (1990) *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Friedman, S. (1987) *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970–84*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Gitsham, E. & Trembath, J. F. (1926) *A First Account of Labour Organisation in South Africa*. Durban: E. P. and Commercial
- Hessian, B. (1957) An Investigation into the Causes of the Labour Agitation on the Witwatersrand, January to March, 1922. Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Hirson, B. (1990) *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930 – 1947*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press.
- Horrel, M. (1990) *South African Workers: Their Organisations and Patterns of Employment*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.
- Innes, D. (1984) *Anglo American and the Rise of Modern South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Kraak, G. (1993) *Breaking the Chains: Labour in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s*. London: Pluto Press.
- Krikler, J. (2005) *Rand Revolt: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killings in South Africa*. Cape Town: Jonathon Ball.
- LACOM (1986) *Freedom from Below: The Struggle for Trade Unions in South Africa*, rev. ed. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Lambert, R. V. (1988) Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955 –1965. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Lewis, J. (1984) *Industrialisation and Trade Union organisation in South Africa 1924 –55: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lowry, D. (1999) *20 Years in the Labour Movement: The Urban Training Project and Change in South Africa, 1971–1991*. Johannesburg: Wadmore.
- Luckhardt, K. & Wall, B. (1980) *Organise or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Macun, I. (2002) *The Dynamics of Trade Union Growth in South Africa: 1970 –1996*. Johannesburg: Sociology of Work Unit, Research Report 10.
- Mantzaris, E. A. (1995) *Labour Struggles in South Africa: The Forgotten Pages, 1903 –1921*. Namibia: Collective Resources.
- Ncube, D. (1985) *Black Trade Unions in South Africa*. Cape Town: Blackshaws.
- Simons, J. & Simons, R. (1969/1983) *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850 –1950*. London: International Defense and Aid Fund.

- Ulrich, N. (1999) Labour, Race and the State: The Death of Neil Aggett and the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa, 1979 –1983. Paper presented at the South African Historical Association Conference, Cape Town, July.
- Van der Walt, L. (2007) Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904 –1921: Rethinking the History of Labour and the Left. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Visser, W. P. (2006) From MWU to Solidarity: A Trade Union Reinventing Itself. Paper presented at the Rethinking Worlds of Labor: Southern African Labor History in International Context Conference, Johannesburg, July.
- Walker, I. L. & Weinbren, B. (1961) *2000 Casualties: A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa*. Johannesburg: South African Trade Union Council.
- Wickens, P. L. (1973) The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa. PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van der Walt
South Africa, labor movement
2009

Retrieved on 1st October 2021 from lucienvanderwalt.com
Published in the *International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest*, Blackwell, New York, pp.
3090–3099.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net