



Nicole Ulrich reflects on the birth of the modern non-racial trade union movement in the early 1970s, and draws lessons for the social movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

THE 1973 STRIKES AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW MOVEMENT IN NATAL

The Durban strikes and the rise of worker militancy

IN 1973 61,000 African and Indian workers in Natal downed their tools in the space of a few months. These strikes, which took place in various industries, were not coordinated by any organisation and represented a spontaneous upsurge by workers angered by a sharp increase in the cost of living. The unexpectedness of the strikes, and the large numbers of workers involved, prevented employers and police from simply cracking down on workers.

This new mood of militancy encouraged the re-organisation of African workers. After the demise of unregistered trade unions during the second half of the 1960s, this organisation had to start almost from scratch, and in a climate of extreme employer and state hostility.

Sowing the seeds

Even before the 1973 strikes some attempts had been made to assist with the organisation of African workers in Natal. These early initiatives arose from a number of different sources. There were radical students and lecturers based at the University of Natal who formed the Wage Commissions that aimed to research the wages of African workers and present their findings to Wage Boards. At the same time, activists linked to the ANC set out to revive the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) that had collapsed in the mid 1960s when the apartheid government cracked down on the Congress movement.

The first important step was taken when the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) was formed in Natal in 1972. While aspects of the GFWBF resembled that of a *stokvel* and it provided funeral benefits, the main aims of the organisation were to educate workers and to organise them. During this period similar initiatives were underway in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In Cape Town the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau (WPWAB) was formed, and in Johannesburg the Urban Training Project (UTP) was formed.

A new movement

The GFWBF became very popular as more and more African workers started to question their low wages and working conditions. Nevertheless, the 1973 strike wave took everyone by surprise. Workers linked to the GFWBF who were wary of forming trade unions just a few months before were radicalised. In April the first branch of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) was formed and this was followed by the formation of the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW). In addition to these new trade unions, the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) was also set up to act as the educational arm of the GFWBF and the new unions.

With this rapid growth of the workers movement in Natal, it was clear that a new coordinating body was needed. In October 1973, MAWU, NUTW, the GFWBF, and the IIE, came together to form the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC). TUACC adopted policies that promoted democratic, non-racial industrial unions. In addition to this, the TUACC was also designed to ensure that workers could exercise control over this structure and elected workers' leaders were represented at every level of the organisation.

One of the most distinctive of the TUACC's policies was that only 'open' trade unions would be allowed to affiliate. Open trade unions were defined as those that accepted all workers '...regardless

of race, religion or sex'. This challenged the long established practice of organising African workers separately, and fundamentally defied the racial segregation within the trade union movement that was promoted by the government.

By the end of 1973 the strike wave spread to other parts of the country, including Johannesburg and East London. While these strikes briefly boosted the confidence of workers in these areas, on the whole the organisation proved slow and difficult. In Natal, another wave of strikes engulfed the textile industry and workers continued to display a keen interest in organisation. The GFWBF was particularly successful in enlisting workers employed in the chemical industry and plans were made to form the Chemical Workers Industrial Union.

At the same time the NUTW made a significant breakthrough when the union signed a recognition agreement with Smith and Nephew. For the old unions bargaining took place in Industrial Councils, but now the new trade unions were signing formal agreements with individual factories. The plant agreements provided the open trade unions with a means to circumvent the legal limitations placed on unregistered trade unions, while at the same time provide the legitimacy required for unions to represent workers and negotiate on their behalf. In addition, this form of agreement suited the factory-based form of organisation that the open trade unions were increasingly based upon.

Challenges and new strategies

By mid 1974 organisation in Natal started to slow down, and the TUACC also experienced a number of internal difficulties, such as the lack of experienced organisers and inadequate financial controls. Government and employers' hostility proved to be the most serious threats to the new unions. Just after the 1973 strikes the government passed the Bantu Labour Relations Act, which aimed to further undermine trade unions with African members by promoting the formation of workplace committees to represent workers. In addition to this, the government banned a number of trade unionists in 1974 and again in 1976.

Employers increasingly refused to negotiate wages and working conditions with African workers, and they even resisted having to deal with the legally sanctioned workplace committees. More often than not, employers would victimise any workers belonging to a trade union and trade unions would be prevented from taking up issues with management. With trade unions unable to do anything for workers, organisation often became unstable as workers started to lose their faith in them. This gave rise

to a rolling membership and emerging worker leaders would also change quite often.

In the face of these challenges, in August 1975 MAWU called for a reassessment of the TUACC organisational strategy. Noting that the mass recruitment was no longer feasible, the union proposed that organisation should decentralise. This meant that organisers should concentrate on training and educating factory shop stewards, while recruiting and the collection of subscriptions would become the responsibility of shop stewards. In addition, MAWU proposed that the resources of trade unions should be concentrated on a few carefully selected factories.

The formation of an accountable worker leadership not only deepened democracy, but also provided the organisational flexibility and durability that was needed in a context of repression. By focusing on a few factories and winning small gains, workers started to regain their confidence in trade unions and this increased their commitment to building these unions. This strategy, therefore, provided the basis for building strong democratic industrial trade unions that were firmly rooted in the factories that they organised, and helped ensure the survival of the new unions.

The TUACC had also started to tighten up its structures and implement a number of changes. The GFWBF, which could not be registered, was transformed into the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The TUACC's strategy was to hive workers off into industrial unions once enough members from a particular industry had joined. With education and training becoming an integral part of organisation, the TUACC formed an education committee and brought the IIE under the direct control of the trade unions. From the outset the open trade unions planned to become national organisations, and the TUACC aimed to organise workers in other parts of the country. The TUACC established links with the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), a Johannesburg based worker centre set up in 1974. With assistance of the IAS, MAWU set up a branch in the Transvaal in 1975 and plans were also made to establish a section of the TUACC in the region.

At about the same time that the TUACC was slowly becoming a national organisation, the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA) decided to investigate the possibility of forming a new national federation that would include African workers. NUMARWOSA, a progressive registered union for 'Coloured' workers in the Eastern Cape, also organised African motor and rubber workers under the United Automobile Rubber and Allied

Workers Union (UAW). NUMARWOSA initiated talks that led to the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU).

Conclusion and lessons for today

FOSATU was inaugurated in April 1979 and became the first federation of mainly unregistered trade unions since the mid 1960s. The policies of the new federation were largely based on those developed by the GFWBF and the TUACC. In the years to come, the new federation would be faced with new challenges, including the new reform policies of the government and changes in labour legislation, as well as the re-emergence of political resistance and political organisations. As the federation attempted to come to terms with the rapidly changing political climate, its members refined and developed the practices and policies that it inherited from the early trade union movement in Natal.

There are a number of important lessons for the new social movements in South Africa that can be learned from the trade union experience in Natal. While we most certainly do not face the levels of repression experienced under apartheid, there are tremendous benefits in organising strong democratic organisations based on the local level, but coordinated with one another.

Such organisations are dependent upon the widespread education of members to ensure that 'ordinary' members are kept informed and conscientised; can win immediate gains which consolidate organisation; allow members to link immediate demands with larger political concerns; and develop durable forms of organisation based upon multiple layers of activists and upon political education. This creates a solid base for growth, centred on an organisational form that avoids the pitfalls of dependence on charismatic leaders, and on maximising participation within a democratic political culture.

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