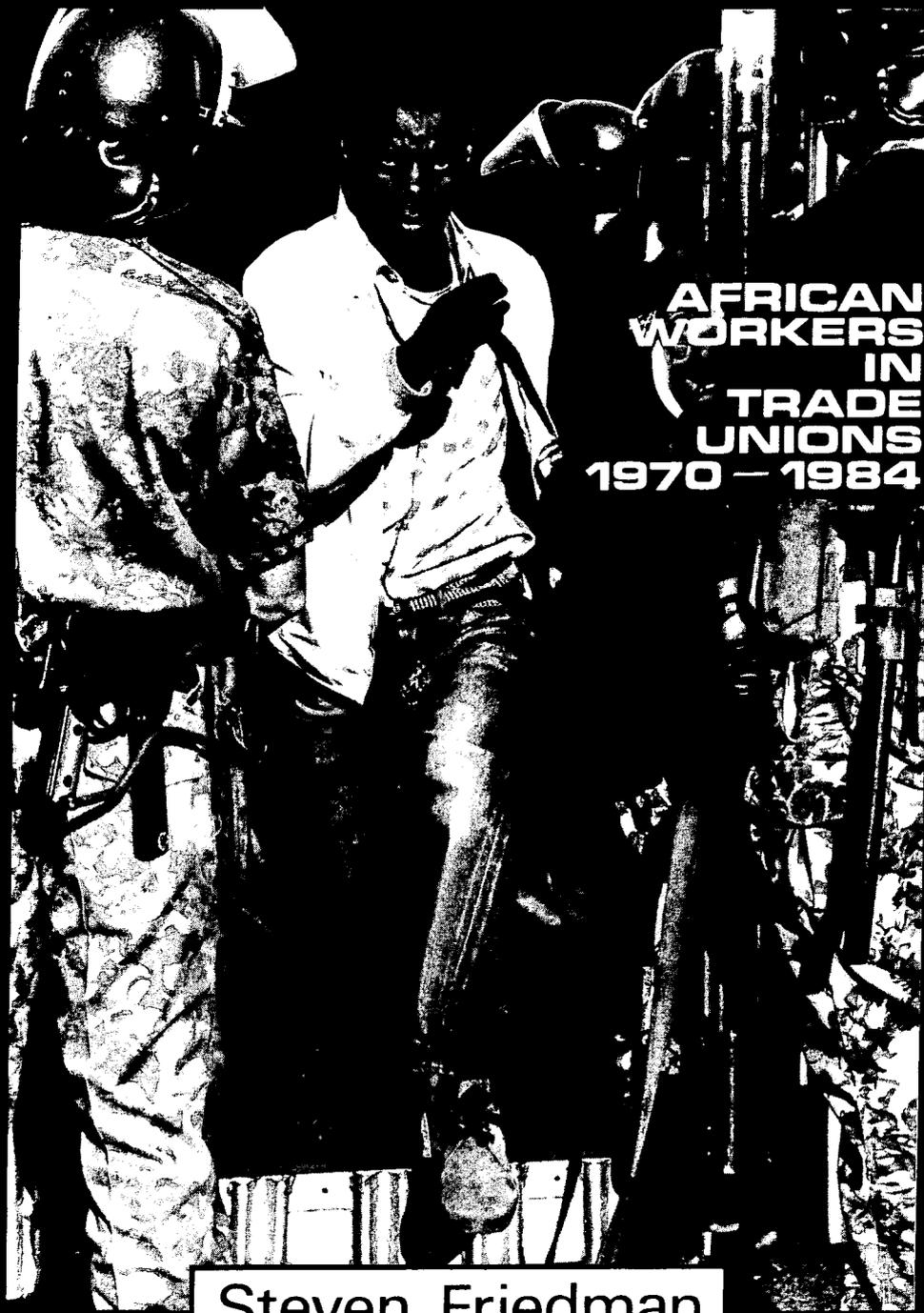


BUILDING TOMORROW TODAY



**AFRICAN
WORKERS
IN
TRADE
UNIONS
1970 - 1984**

Steven Friedman

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2. The Giant Begins to Stir: the 1973 Durban Strikes.

The twentieth century, we are told only began in Europe in 1914, when world war swept away its old, complacent rulers. The 1970s began for South African employers early on the morning of January 9, 1973, when 2 000 workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile works on the outskirts of Durban gathered at a football field and demanded a pay rise.

For more than a decade, African workers had been seen but rarely heard: only a few small unions, most of them tightly controlled by registered unionists, remained to carry the flame of African unionism and workers were silent as their bargaining power and living standards wilted under new assaults. The job colour bar tightened, the pass laws became ever harsher, but workers did not resist - strikes were so rare that each was a major event. Employers were free to run their factories as they chose and to pay Africans what they pleased; cheap, docile, African labour helped industry grow as never before.

The Coronation strike broke this mould. The next day, scores of employers opened their morning papers to behold, beneath banner headlines, a photograph of hundreds of African workers marching down a busy street behind a man with a red flag. The flag was meant to keep the early morning traffic away, not to proclaim the strikers' political sympathies, but the effect was no less dramatic: a new power was abroad in the factories and few employers were prepared for its coming.

The strike had begun at 3 a.m. in the company's single sex compound when migrant workers at the Number One plant were wakened by some of their colleagues and urged to meet at the football stadium instead of reporting for work. A group set off for Coronation's

But, from Wednesday, the strikes began to subside. That day, the textile workers accepted a R2 rise and returned. The next day, the municipal workers did the same after the Corporation warned them they would be fired if they did not resume work. By Friday, the unrest was petering out - nevertheless, stoppages continued into March, through the year, and into 1974. They later spread to East London and the Johannesburg area.

Between 1965 and 1971, less than 23 000 African workers had struck. In the first three months of 1973, 61 000 stopped work. By the end of the year, the figure had grown to 90 000 and employers had lost 229 000 shifts - more than seven times the number lost through African strikes in the past eight years.

The strikes hastened the rebirth of African unions and jolted employers and the government into changes which would help the new organisations survive and grow. The unions would face many setbacks and the reforms were often mingled with repression. But that January morning changed the factory world in ways which still affect us today.

Stirrings before the strikes

The changes began even before the unrest: for some workers and unionists the decade began on schedule. Isolated efforts to reorganise African workers had started in 1970 and, in the year before the strikes, some workers had begun to mobilise again.

The first attempts to revive African unions were begun by TUCSA unionists after they failed to convince it to organise Africans. In 1969, TUCSA fired two Johannesburg officials in its African Affairs department, Eric Tyacke and Loet Douwes-Dekker; it had just expelled African unions and believed the two were too sympathetic to them. They looked for ways to keep African unionism alive and, in 1971, launched the Urban Training Project (U.T.P.) with church help.

The U.T.P. was an education centre which aimed to help African workers win the limited rights they had in labour law, but were often denied: within a year a small group of unions gathered around it. One was an existing union forced out of TUCSA, others were formed with the help of U.T.P.'s contacts in registered unions. But its most important route to workers was through the churches, which invited its officials to address workers during services and distributed its

literature. The Young Christian Workers (Y.C.W.), a Catholic group which encouraged workers to apply church teachings to change their work lives, played the leading role and several key U.T.P. unionists received their early training in the Y.C.W.

In Durban, another TUCSA unionist, Harriet Bolton of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union, noticed around 1970 that a boom was bringing Africans into the garment and textile industries - some replaced the union's Indian members, who were taking better paying shop and office jobs. Bolton had learned her unionism from her late husband James, a British unionist who had built up many of the Natal unions: he had insisted that unions should organise unorganised workers whatever their race, and it seemed natural to her that the new workers should be organised. "It had nothing to do with colour," Bolton recalled later. "I saw the workforce was burgeoning and tried to persuade TUCSA that we couldn't ignore thousands of new workers."

But TUCSA's white leaders told her Africans couldn't be organised - that they paid their union dues for a while and then lost interest. It made only token efforts to aid her and she realised she would have to look elsewhere for help. She found it on Natal University's Durban campus.

For the past decade, white students at English language universities had protested against government policies - the political vacuum of the sixties meant this was often the only organised anti-apartheid activity. The protests were led by the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), a nonracial body: NUSAS provided a platform for white student leaders to meet and work with their black counterparts and so provided them with an exposure to black views which most whites were denied.

But the student protests were little more than ritual expressions of liberal dismay: they provided student leaders with many opportunities to make fine speeches, but did nothing to change apartheid. The students remained cloistered in their segregated campuses and made no contact with the rank and file blacks on whose behalf they presumed to speak. In the late 1960s, black student leaders in NUSAS began to charge that the white protests were "irrelevant" - they made the protestors feel better, but did not help blacks win freedom. They went on to argue that white students themselves were "irrelevant": they benefited from apartheid and would never make the sacrifices needed to end it. Only blacks had an interest in change and they did not need affluent young

whites to help them win it. In 1969, black students broke with NUSAS to form the blacks only South African Students Organisation (SASO) which argued that only blacks could change apartheid - working with whites was a hindrance and black students should instead work in their own organisations and with their fellow blacks. SASO gave birth to the black consciousness movement which helped prompt a limited revival of anti-apartheid activity in the seventies.

This rejection wounded many white student activists and forced them to rethink their role. They accepted many of the black students' charges, but refused to watch the battle for change from the sidelines - they wanted, an African unionist later remarked, "to be counted in the struggle". Their background prevented them from leading the fight but, they began to argue, it also gave them tools which could help it along: in particular, it gave them knowledge and skills which they could share with blacks and so help them to organise for change. Some were also influenced by the European student movement of the sixties which had tried to build an alliance between students and workers, and they saw African workers as the black group which could most use their skills. This view gained most ground in Durban, where a small group of politically aware students were deeply influenced by a political scientist, Richard Turner. It was he who first prodded students to take an interest in worker issues: they formed a Wages and Economics Commission to stimulate student involvement in labour and, in 1971, persuaded NUSAS to set up similar bodies on all its campuses.

At first, the students researched African wages, gave evidence to the wage board - which ignored them - and exhorted employers to pay the poverty datum line, the minimum an African family needed to survive. But they soon began to look for ways of backing these moral appeals with worker muscle. Again, Durban took the lead. Bolton contacted Turner, who suggested that she offer Wages Commission students jobs in registered unions, so giving them a base from which to organise Africans - she agreed and a new alliance was formed which did much to revive worker organisation.

The students brought to the union movement an energy and enthusiasm it had not seen for years: in return, Bolton offered them her experience, access to workers and registered union resources. Soon hundreds of African workers were beginning to meet in union halls and to join a new worker organisation she and the students had launched.

This was not a union - they believed any attempt to form one would be crushed by employers and the state - but, a General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund which offered workers death benefits and help in dealing with factory complaints. By the time the strikes broke out, it had about 2 000 members - in time, 60 000 workers would join it.

In Cape Town, another unionist-student alliance began to organise workers. In 1972, some former SACTU unionists met in Langa township. They had noticed a slight resurgence in worker activity and believed the time was ripe to begin organising again, but they were careful not to invite police action in the way SACTU had. They looked for a "safe" way to contact workers and their answer was a worker advice bureau run by an experienced unionist who was not overly tainted by links with the Congresses. The one person at the meeting who fitted the bill was Zora Mehlomakulu, who had run SACTU unions in the 1960s when they were not politically active.

The unionists now needed resources to put their plan into action - they quickly decided against asking SACTU for help. They had read of the Wages Commission in the press and decided to ask it for aid. "We went to see them and told them they wouldn't get far just by doing wage surveys - they needed a worker base. They agreed and we began to work together," Mehlomakulu recalls.

The meeting gave birth to the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (W.P.W.A.B.) with Mehlomakulu as director - at a salary, paid by the students, of R75 a month! Before it could begin to operate, it faced a seemingly trivial problem, but one which illustrated the climate of the times: it could not find a landlord willing to give it an office (the Group Areas Act prevented black companies or organisations leasing space in "white" areas). The problem was solved when the (coloured) Labour Party offered it premises in a run-down building in the Athlone township: the union which the bureau later formed still operates from them.

One other group also began to take an interest in organising workers - the black consciousness movement. The SASO students had stressed the need for blacks to form their own organisations to fight for change and unions were an obvious vehicle. In June, 1971, Drake Koka, a Black People's Convention activist who was also prominent in church politics, formed the Sales and Allied Workers' Association among black commercial travellers in Johannesburg and, the following year, a

meeting in Soweto mandated it to set up a general union for black workers, the Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU). Koka became its first general secretary, but his involvement was soon cut short when the government banned him and other black consciousness activists. In the same year, SASO decided to work with Black Community Programmes, the movement's community development wing, to set up a Black Workers' Project which would bring together surviving black unions and help form new ones. But, throughout the seventies, BAWU was the only vehicle for black consciousness unionism.

It made little impact. Like the white student activists, BAWU's founders were not workers and had little experience of factory life: the committee which formed the new union included a newspaper editor, M.T. Moerane, and a banker, L.B. Mehlomakulu. But, unlike the students, they did not form an alliance with unionists which would have given them expertise and contact with workers. They were nationalists who did not see a worker movement as an end in itself: they did not try to share worker concerns but expected workers to share theirs. Through the decade, BAWU lagged behind other centres which organised workers.

These early stirrings were not the only sign that the silence of the sixties might not last into the seventies: some workers were also beginning to mobilise again.

In 1969, Durban dock workers struck for more pay and their stoppage was later seen as the start of a new worker militancy. A more dramatic harbinger came in 1971 when 13 000 contract workers struck on the Namibian diamond mines in protest at low pay and harsh conditions. This was the biggest African worker action in over a decade: it did not lead to lasting organisation, but shocked many employers and reminded them that their workers might not remain docile for ever.

It might also have had some impact on African workers, for it was followed by a slight rise in strike activity the following year. In 1972, nearly 9 000 blacks struck - well over double the total for each of the past five years. More importantly, the stoppages cost employers 14 000 shifts, more than the total lost through strikes since 1966. Two 1972 strikes were particularly important.

On a Friday in June, drivers at some of the PUTCO bus company's Johannesburg depots stopped work to demand a R60 a week wage -

more than double their starting rate. Many employers rely on PUTCO to ferry their black workers to and from work and drivers' strikes are bound to affect scores of businesses - this one stranded 120 000 commuters and forced many employers to take note of African worker action for the first time in years. The company, which said this was its first stoppage, threatened to fire the drivers and the next day 300 were arrested. This broke the strike and drivers were back at work by Monday.

If this was typical of the times, the end result was not - PUTCO later raised drivers' pay and the charges against them were dropped. The busmen had skills - their heavy duty drivers' licenses - and this may have forced the company to go some way to meeting their demands: other employers were to learn later that trained workers could not be easily ignored and replaced. The strike was also the first in the 1970s to give birth to a union - the drivers made contact with U.T.P. which helped them form the Transport and Allied Workers' Union (TAWU). Today, PUTCO drivers remain TAWU's strongest source of support.

In October, 2 000 stevedores at Durban docks struck in support of pay demands, but they soon returned to work without winning pay rises. The next day, another 2 000 at Cape Town harbour began a far more significant stoppage - an overtime ban, which was prompted by their claim that they were being forced to work longer hours for less money. Despite employer threats to take "drastic" action, they continued the ban for 31 days and only ended it after learning that the wage board planned to raise their pay.

Few employers believed African workers could sustain a strike for more than a day or two; yet the stevedores had applied an overtime ban, which requires more discipline than a strike, for a month. While stevedores and bus drivers have often developed their own organisation without union help - the Cape Town stevedores later became the backbone of the city's emerging union movement - the stoppage sounded a clear warning.

These strikes were only straws in the wind, but they made an impact on the *Rand Daily Mail's* political commentator, Allister Sparks who, in November, devoted a prophetic column to the "Coming Power of Black Workers". He wrote that a new pressure was beginning to mount on South Africa's rulers. It would come from blacks, not whites; from within the country, not from abroad. "It will not be temporary this time

but will go on growing irresistibly, slowly at first, then rapidly later. And as it does so the processes of change will begin to move again."

The pressure was African worker action and, within two months, Durban workers would begin to prove him right.

Coronation and after

The 1973 strike wave was by far the biggest since the Second World War and so it made a dramatic impact on employers, the government and other whites. But the strikes had added force because they were unexpected. In one sense, they should not have been.

The cheap labour policies of the past decade had been so successful that, by 1973, average African pay was around R13 a week, well below the R18 which was then Durban's poverty datum line - and this after real wages had risen slightly in the late sixties. In the two years before the strikes, inflation had eaten into these meagre wages and Lodge reports that the price of basic goods for Africans rose by forty percent. Workers interviewed after the strikes complained that they were no longer able to manage on what they were earning.

Strikes were also the only way they could tell employers of their plight. Nearly eighty percent of the workers said afterwards that they had warned their employers that they needed more money, but employers had not heard them - fourteen out of nineteen firms interviewed after the unrest, and ten of the eleven whose workers had informal works committees, claimed to have had no inkling that workers were unhappy. Indeed, the strikes were more an attempt to persuade employers to listen than to challenge their power: while some, notably in the textile industry, lasted up to a week, most were brief and workers returned as soon as they were granted small increases. "We are not children, we are not on strike. We are asking for the managers to listen to our problems, then we will go back to work," a textile worker said at a strike meeting. (The textile strikers were able to hold out longer for two reasons: Bolton's involvement made this the only industry in which a registered union negotiated on behalf of the strikers and allowed them to meet regularly in its hall. They were also more skilled and so more difficult to replace than many other African workers - a study of one large Durban textile plant revealed that only eleven percent of the workers were entirely unskilled.)

It is less clear why the strikes happened in Durban, where wages were no lower than the national average. Several theories have been advanced, none of them entirely satisfactory. The fact that Coronation workers quickly won an increase may have encouraged others - the presence of the Frame group was also a key factor. One of the largest groups of its kind in the world, it was also one of the lowest payers - during the strikes, one worker complained that "I cannot afford to buy the blankets I make" at the company's mills. Wage discontent had been simmering at Frame plants before the strikes and the stoppages which began at Coronation ignited this tension. The size of the Frame stoppages may also have influenced other workers - Frame strikes would recur repeatedly through the decade and they invariably triggered unrest at other plants too. The fact that strikers gathered outside their plants daily, that some marched through the streets and that there was constant press coverage of the strikes may have alerted other workers to them and encouraged them to take action.

It also seems likely that Durban workers had developed greater informal organisation than those elsewhere - unlike workers in many other areas, they shared a common language, Zulu, and common traditions: many were concentrated in company compounds where communication was easier. The Wages Commissions' calls for workers to be paid the poverty datum line, a slight resurgence in black political activity and Bolton's attempt to involve African workers in wage talks may have created a climate in which workers began to question their conditions and in which informal organisation could grow.

What we do know is that Durban workers enjoyed some advantages which may have made it easier for them to act and which were to aid them after the strikes. The first was the support of key figures in the government of KwaZulu, the Zulu "homeland" in Natal. Unlike other "homelands", KwaZulu was led by men - Paramount Chief (later King) Goodwill Zwelethini and Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi - whose claims to authority were rooted in tradition and who enjoyed considerable support among city workers: in 1975, 87 percent of Durban workers interviewed in a survey by researchers Eddie Webster and Judson Khuzwayo named Buthelezi as their leader. While other "homeland" governments were hostile to worker concerns, Buthelezi repeatedly called for African union rights and his Community Affairs Councillor, Barney Dladla, was often to intervene in disputes on workers' behalf.

After the first strike wave, he worked closely with the new African unions.

The Coronation strike followed shortly after a visit to the plant by Chief Goodwill late in 1972: he addressed the workers and appears either to have offered to negotiate on their behalf or to have suggested that management had agreed to grant wage increases - his remarks almost certainly raised worker expectations. He also undertook to negotiate on workers' behalf after the strike, but withdrew when Buthelezi insisted that the royal house remain above controversy. It was Chief Goodwill who persuaded the strikers to return - it is noteworthy that they were reluctant, but agreed so as not to impair his dignity.

Dladla's role also gave workers a lever which those elsewhere did not have: while his intervention was opposed by the government, which later warned KwaZulu politicians to stay out of Durban labour disputes, he operated from a platform created by the government and this gave him some protection - "workers knew the government couldn't detain Dladla," a unionist noted.

Some Durban workers might also have been willing to risk a strike because they were not affected by the pass laws in the same way as most others. The largest African townships around Durban fall within KwaZulu: their residents cannot gain permanent city rights, but they also cannot be forced to leave the area if they lose their jobs. This prompted Sheena Duncan, the leading authority on the pass laws, to predict that workers in this position were most likely to unionise: if they were fired, they did not have to return to a barren country area to queue fruitlessly for city work, but could remain to seek new jobs.

In the textile industry, the presence of a sympathetic registered union which sought to involve African workers in negotiations with employers must also have been a factor.

But there is no way of knowing why the strikes should have occurred when and where they did and the explanation of one worker - that "this thing came from God" - may be as valid as any other.

If the cause of the strikes was unclear, their impact was not. The unrest dominated the press, was repeatedly debated in parliament, and attracted attention outside the country too. Employers in particular would debate the "lessons of the strikes" for years to come. Even in the early eighties, some still measured their labour relations policies against their experience in 1973.

The unexpectedness of the strikes may partly explain why employers and the police did not simply crush them. To be sure, many companies threatened to fire strikers and these warnings often ended stoppages quickly. Some carried out their threat. Even companies which granted increases often refused to negotiate - they simply announced a new increase and told workers to take it or leave it (most took it). But employers fired few strikers - those who did dismiss them often took them back soon afterwards and most sackings seem to have been attempts to force workers onto the defensive and back to work. Virtually all the companies granted wage rises and, in interviews after the strikes, most said they were planning further increases.

The police reaction was even more unusual. All the strikes were illegal as were many other striker actions: mass meetings and marches without official permission are outlawed and those who carried sticks - as many did - could have been charged with wielding a "dangerous weapon". The police, armed with guns and dogs, maintained a constant presence during the unrest and the mere fact that they were there reminded the strikers of the forces arrayed against them. But they did little to act against strikers. Some even seemed sympathetic to workers' wage demands: a senior officer, Brigadier T.M. Bischoff, said they had "nothing whatsoever against people demanding higher wages" and had been told to use force only where absolutely necessary, and then only minimum force. Only a few strikers were arrested, and they were freed after paying small fines.

The sheer size of the unrest may have had something to do with both reactions: the small stoppages which broke out after Coronation were quickly quelled by dismissals but, as the strikes grew, this threat was less effective. And even politicians who criticised the government for not taking firmer action against the strikers conceded that it would not have been practical for the police to arrest 40 000 workers, particularly as the strikes were spread over a wide area.

Lodge also suggests that employers may have raised pay because most had mechanised through the sixties and wages were now less crucial to company costs: African pay was so low that most could raise it without denting profits unduly. (After the strikes, most companies said the increases had not damaged profits.)

But there were other forces which compelled employers and the government to respond to African strikes in a new way.

To be sure, some reactions were predictable. Government members of parliament blamed the strikes on "agitators" - one MP, P.R. de Jager, declared that "the Bantu of Natal" did not "have it in them to come together and to agree that a thousand of them should strike" - and the Minister of Labour, Marais Viljoen, blamed not only "agitators" but "inciters" who lurked behind them. They blamed NUSAS and the Wages Commissions and implied that Africans were incapable of organising themselves, were contented with their lot, and could only have decided to strike if whites with sinister motives urged them to.

Many employers agreed: the Coronation management had immediately blamed the stoppages on "agitators" and "intimidators" as did most others. One employer association "proved" these claims by reporting that strikers at one plant had been assured by police that they had no need to fear intimidation and could return to work safely: none did. This, it insisted, proved that intimidators could exercise their influence even in the presence of police.

Remarkably, the police themselves disagreed: senior officers, including the local security police chief, repeatedly acknowledged that they could find no evidence of an organisation behind the strikes.

So did the then Prime Minister John Vorster. In a much quoted speech, he did not blame agitators, but urged employers to "not only see in their workers a unit producing for them.... They should also see them as human beings with souls." Both business and the government, he added, had lessons to learn from the unrest. The pro-government media also criticised African wage levels - although most made dark claims about agitation as well.

Two government moves soon followed, both consistent with Vorster's remarks. Viljoen ordered the wage board to review five wage determinations setting minimum pay for unskilled workers and to report to him within two months. This was unprecedented - the board usually took so long to complete its work that the wages it set were months out of date by the time it recommended them. The new minimum which followed - R13 a week in most major cities, rising to R15 within three years - was labelled "deplorably low" by the parliamentary opposition, but was the first African wage rise the board had proposed for years which increased worker buying power. (The previous minima ranged between R9 and R11.)

In a more long term move, the government amended the 1953

Settlement of Disputes Act to give African workers a limited strike right and to "improve communication" between them and employers. These were very limited concessions, but they were the first attempt since the forties to end unrest by reform, not force.

The government may have been partly influenced by a new climate of opinion which followed the strikes. Most whites seem to have been unaware of how little Africans were paid and to have been shocked when they found out. The press focused unusual attention on the strikers' plight and singled out Phillip Frame, head of the Frame group, for special attack. Most Durban whites agreed - ninety percent of those who took part in a telephone survey after the strikes said African pay was too low; even more surprisingly, 65 percent said the strikes had been justified and that Africans should be granted union rights or some similar forum. This forced many employers to defend their labour practices for the first time and foreign firms were specially vulnerable. Shortly after the strikes, the *Guardian* newspaper of London published a series of exposés on the wages which British firms paid African workers in Natal - the reports led to an investigation by a sub-committee of the House of Commons which signalled growing pressure on U.K. firms from politicians, anti-apartheid groups and unions; it focused first on pay and conditions but would later centre more on African union rights.

The white establishment also faced a more long term pressure: the cheap labour policies of the sixties had begun to outlive their usefulness. As industry grew, it began to run out of skilled labour. Tighter influx control, curbs on black job advancement and educational policies which trained Africans only for menial work did not hamper the economy when there were enough skilled workers to go around, but now there weren't. In industries such as transport, clothing and catering, whites had moved on to better-paying jobs and blacks, including Africans, had to take their place.

At the same time, industries such as metal and motor assembly had begun to mechanise and they needed trained workers, even in jobs which were not classed as skilled. The machines could do part of a skilled worker's job and they could be manned by semi-skilled workers. In the late sixties and early seventies, many plants began hiring semi-skilled machine operators and metal employers won union agreement to appoint Africans to these jobs, albeit under strict controls.

Many employers began to ignore job reservation and other job colour bars. Government officials, who had backed white workers' demands for protection, accepted that the economy would not grow unless Africans filled jobs which had once been done by whites and they began granting exemptions to job reservation orders where no whites were available - in 1972, nearly 4 700 exemptions were granted, nearly double the previous year's figure, and no new reservation orders were introduced after 1971. Where employers simply ignored job bars, officials often turned a blind eye. In 1973, Vorster, in a celebrated address to the Motor Industries Federation, appeared to sanction African job advancement, telling employers the government would not prevent them making better use of African labour if they could win agreement from white unions.

In 1973, the government set up training centres for African workers and offered tax benefits to employers who trained them. The centres did not train workers for more skilled work - they merely taught them to do their existing jobs better - but even this training made African workers less dispensable.

Employers also began demanding that registered unions allow Africans into more skilled jobs: in some industries, white unionists were forced to concede that their members would no longer do the jobs employers sought to fill, and agreed to employers' demands. In 1972, metal unions allowed employers to use Africans in lower-skilled jobs if workers of other races were promoted, resigned or were fired for misconduct. Motor assembly employers and unions had by then agreed to suspend job reservation.

None of these changes allowed Africans to compete for jobs with other races - they simply moved into jobs which others would not do. But they were now less expendable and this forced employers and the government to move from repression to limited reform. As the skills shortage and foreign pressure grew, they were forced further along their new path.

The reforms they chose did not give African workers a share in power - they aimed to prevent them gaining it. But the change in tactics was crucial. For decades, employers and the government, aided by the white unions, had controlled the factories by force - now they had to do it through reform. This was far more difficult, for each change aimed at strengthening their control also created new openings for workers and

unions. It also made them more vulnerable to moral pressure, for the climate of reform meant that they could now be judged against standards which had not applied during the sixties.

Attempts to control the factories by force were hardly abandoned. Through the seventies, unions and workers faced mass firings, usually supported by the Department of Labour, police action and a climate which was almost as hostile as that of the sixties. But repression was now mixed with reform and this opened up "gaps" for unions which they often took. These widened through the seventies and by the 1980s became wide enough to drive a union movement through.

The first sign of this change was the government's new law, the Black Labour Relations Regulation Act of 1973. It contained two measures which gave African workers slightly more power.

The first was the strike right. It was so hedged with conditions that workers only used it once. But it was an important symbolic change because, for the first time since the war, it recognised that African workers were entitled to withhold their labour. The second allowed some works and liaison committee members to attend industrial council meetings. They would not be allowed to vote, but the change gave Africans some access to the councils for the first time in decades. Later, in the motor assembly industry, it would allow an African union to take part in council bargaining. (Its negotiators were installed as the liaison committee delegates to the council.)

But, like the law it replaced, the 1973 act was designed to curb African unions and Minister Viljoen explained its purpose in much the same way as his predecessor twenty years earlier. It would, he said, deprive "Bantu trade unions" of "their life's blood and any necessity for existence". It sought to do this by introducing a new factory committee, the liaison committee, which offered workers even less power than the works committees the 1953 law set up.

The works committees had not been allowed to negotiate wages - industrial councils did that - and, even if they had been granted this power, they would not have been equipped to use it. They were not independent organisations who could recruit members, collect dues and build a power base. The workers who served on them had little protection against victimisation and employers could dominate them. At best, they were harmless "safety valves" for worker frustrations and most were not even that.

But works committees were, at least, chosen by workers alone - employers could appoint the chairman and up to half the members of a liaison committee. Works committees had some negotiating rights, but the new bodies were supposed only to "make recommendations" to employers. It was even easier for managements to dominate them and they later became known as "tea and toilet committees" because they discussed only minor grievances which posed no threat to employer decision making - indeed, many firms used them largely to pass on orders to the workforce. While the new law did not scrap works committees, workers could only elect them if there was no liaison committee in the plant. This "toy telephone", together with the modest increases the wage board recommended, was the government's first formula for avoiding conflict in the factories.

Employers, too, sought to avert unrest by offering workers higher pay and "better communication".

Before the strikes, most dismissed pleas to sharply raise African pay as dangerous "do-goodism"; now they began to make these calls themselves. First foreign and then local firms granted their lowest paid workers large percentage increases and, by the end of the decade, most major companies were paying well above the headline.

These pay rises also gave calls for African job advancement a new urgency. Because Africans were paid more, employers wanted them to produce more - but they couldn't as long as they were denied training and skills. Racial job bars also increased company wage bills because non-Africans were in short supply and could demand inflated wages. Employers therefore began to demand greater freedom to train and promote Africans: often they paid only lip service to these goals, but even this signalled an end to the cheap labour policies of the sixties. As the pressures grew, the government gave employers increased support, registered unions conceded more ground and African workers gained more power.

After the strikes, employers also began an almost unseemly rush to form liaison committees. They had never shared Minister Schoeman's 1953 enthusiasm for works committees - they had faced little pressure from African workers and saw no need to give them even a limited platform. By 1973, only 24 were operating - another 118 companies had set up unofficial committees. But, in the year after the new law was introduced, over 1 200 liaison committees were formed and the figure

continued to grow. Employer associations urged their members to establish them and offered training courses for committee members - so did private consultants and "making committees work" became a thriving growth industry. A few firms also set up new works committees, but only 240 were operating by mid-1975.

Employers who formed committees acknowledged that workers had struck partly because they had no other way to express grievances. This meant they could not challenge company decisions, but it did not stop them striking. When they did, managers had no advance warning and no way of negotiating an end to the unrest.

This was a recurring theme of the strikes. In many plants, strikers had refused to elect spokesmen to negotiate. Employers faced with unrest often warned that "ringleaders" would be punished and workers were understandably reluctant to volunteer for this fate. "We don't need a committee. We need R30 a week," a Coronation worker had insisted. This made it more difficult to end the strikes: employers complained that they were being forced to negotiate with a "mob" - or, as Coronation's acting general manager put it, "with 1 500 workers on a football field". If employers now wanted their African workers to talk to them, they would have to give them a platform to do it.

But, if they were now willing to hear their workers - at least in theory - they had no wish to share decisions with them. They would allow them to communicate, but not bargain. Indeed, by allowing them to do the one, employers hoped to prevent them doing the other and committees were not a step towards unions, but a way of forestalling them. (Just after the unrest, less than a quarter of strike - hit employers questioned by researchers favoured African unionism - an overwhelming majority backed committees, even though most said informal committees had been operating in their plants before the strikes but had failed to prevent or settle them.)

Advocates of bargaining believe workers need to counter employer power because the two sides' interests always conflict. Employers want bigger profits, workers want higher wages and better conditions: the more workers achieve their goal, the less will employers achieve theirs. This conflict can never be eliminated and, if workers are not allowed to resist employer power at the bargaining table, they will do it in less peaceful and manageable ways.

But the most popular employer ideology of the time insisted not only

that workers had no right to check employer power but that they had no need to. If the company prospered, they explained, so would workers and it could only grow if those with the necessary skills - the managers - were allowed to take the decisions.

Companies, they added, were "families" working together towards the same goal. In families, harmony, not conflict, is natural: fights only break out when their members forget how to talk to each other. If harmony is natural, unions, whose existence is based on conflict, are unnatural: most employers portrayed them as "outsiders" who destroyed the family peace, rather like the lodger who disrupts a settled family by trying to seduce his host's wife. Committees were supposed to maintain harmony so well that the lodger would not steal workers' affections.

But these employers did not only see their companies as families - they saw themselves as parents and their workers as children. In all well run families, the parents make the decisions and the way liaison committees functioned ensured that the factories were no exception. A 1974 study by Ryno Verster of the University of the Orange Free State found that 91 percent of liaison committees were set up by employers - only eighteen percent had consulted African workers before establishing them. In only one fifth had African worker members taken part in choosing the chairman.

Liaison committees were often formed to keep out works committees as well as unions. The law allowed African workers to choose between the two, but few knew this and those who did demand the choice often faced employer resistance. Managements claimed the law did not allow works committees or that they would be "useless" because they had no management members - some simply fired workers who demanded them. This was illegal, but the Department of Labour rarely helped the workers who were fired and public prosecutors usually refused to charge the employers who sacked them. In the years after 1973, worker demands for works committees were often a source of factory conflict - and many workers who demanded them were victimised.

But even this limited attempt to control through reform created new opportunities for worker organisation. Weak and pliable committees might now be workers' only platform in the factories, but before 1973 they had no platform at all. None of the new activist groups had any illusions about committees, but U.T.P. and the W.P.W.A.B. believed

they offered a tactical opening. Both argued that liaison committees were so dominated by employers that they could never build worker power - but works committees, provided they were backed by the resources of a union or similar body, could help workers organise.

In Cape Town, Mehloimakulu recalls that the crackdown of the sixties had so cowed workers that many believed unions were illegal - workers who joined them were also likely to be fired. The committees were not only obviously legal, but the law said employers had to deal with them. The W.P.W.A.B. thus saw them as a "springboard" which could allay worker fears and offer some protection against victimisation. They were weak, it argued, chiefly because their members did not have the skills and resources to "handle the bosses on their own" and the bureau could counter this by offering them skills and support and by helping them build a worker base to resist management.

Johann Maree, an academic who worked with the W.P.W.A.B., made a similar point. If their members belonged to a union, reported back to workers and took up their demands, committees could be used to force managements to bargain. Fighting for the right to form a committee could also "unite workers and provide them with extremely valuable experience in negotiating with management". Since this was a battle they could win, it could have "a valuable psychological impact".

The U.T.P. hoped to use committees to force employers to talk to its African unions. By the time the new law came into force, it already had shop stewards in some plants, but, Tyacke recalls, employers were so hostile that they were "operating underground - anyone who identified himself as a steward would be fired". This forced them to bring worker grievances to the U.T.P. office, not to their employer. "It was impossible to solve them that way - but if stewards took over committees, they could use them to raise grievances without being fired."

The U.T.P. distributed a popular Workers' Calendar which explained the difference between the two committees and repeated the message at weekend seminars. Workers who were given the choice opted for works committees - "they felt it was their own thing, that they wouldn't have management breathing down their necks," says Tyacke - and U.T.P. then helped them fight for them. Soon, whole committees were made up of union members and two new unions, in the glass and building industries, were formed out of battles for them. U.T.P. trained

committee members to negotiate - at times entire committees would arrive at its offices to request help. It also took legal action against several employers who refused to deal with works committees: all settled out of court and this gave its organising work a major boost. (Later it and other unions used the courts repeatedly to win organising rights.)

In Cape Town, the committee strategy began as a necessity but soon became a principle. The area was dominated by "top heavy" TUCSA unions which were controlled by a few officials and the W.P.W.A.B. activists were determined that their organisation would be different. They stressed grassroots organisation more than any other group and were suspicious of any structure which seemed to give union officials undue power. The committees seemed to offer a way to an alternative - Maree stressed that they could help ensure that "it is the workers in the factory that give a union its strength and not the officials sitting in their offices". The W.P.W.A.B.'s stress on forming committees also yielded early gains.

The committee strategy forced activists to concentrate on building unionism factory by factory. This helped unions survive in the seventies and gave them a base to challenge the government's official bargaining system in the eighties: it grew, ironically, out of an attempt to eliminate unions.

The Durban unions also used committees later: but at first they attacked the strategy, arguing that unions should have no truck with bodies designed to destroy them. They alone could afford this principled stand, for they were making dramatic progress without using committees. Because their activists were now officials of registered unions, they had an advantage which the other groups lacked and this partly explained their greater success.

The strikes had influenced Durban workers as much as employers - they gave them a new sense of power. One account describes the mood at strike meetings as "euphoric" - workers sang and made jokes. Many waved sticks "but they were dancing with the sticks, not threatening with them". They had been bottling up their anger for decades - now that they had finally expressed it, they "felt released of a great psychological burden". Most also expressed this euphoria by making demands they could not possibly have expected employers to meet, but they had not seen their failure to achieve them as a defeat: just after the

strikes, seventy percent told researchers they would do the same again. The unrest, says Harriet Bolton, "taught workers that the sky wouldn't fall on their heads if they struck".

Workers were now eager to organise and they joined the Benefit Fund in such numbers that its founders gingerly decided to risk forming a union. Fully expecting the police to intervene, they organised a meeting in Pietermaritzburg to launch the Metal and Allied Workers' Union. To their surprise, the police stayed away: emboldened, they soon formed textile, chemical and furniture unions. Within months, they had 40 000 members.

Workers in other centres were also more confident after the strikes. Both U.T.P. and the W.P.W.A.B. grew and, in 1974, Johannesburg Wages Commission students formed their own advice bureau, the Industrial Aid Society (I.A.S.). They too, tried to enlist the help of unionists but they found only one, who played only a minor role. Two workers fired for I.A.S. activities in their factories were hired as organisers, but they had as little union training as the students and the new bureau made little progress at first.

Birth of a movement

Four worker organisations were now recruiting Africans in the main industrial centres - they were to carry the torch of African unionism through the seventies. They often differed sharply, but they had enough in common to mark them off as a distinct group, the "independent" or "emerging" unions.

All four began as advice bureaux rather than unions in an attempt to avoid repression: this showed a tactical caution they were to retain through much of the decade. All four were formed by activists whose experience or reading made them aware of the mistakes of earlier union generations: they were to tailor their tactics to avoid repeating them.

But the most important common thread was that all were committed to democratic grassroots unionism. The registered unions and those elsewhere in the west had grown more organically: they had been formed by workers who did not attempt to *create* democracy. At times, it emerged despite this: at others, power was concentrated in the hands of a few leaders.

The activists realised that union democracy is not automatic -

particularly in a society in which workers have no experience of democracy. They deliberately sought structures which would ensure that workers took part in decisions: they did not succeed until the 1980s, but much of the groundwork was laid in the 1970s.

For a year after the strikes, this new movement continued to grow - it reached its zenith early in 1974, when Frame workers struck again and Halton Cheadle, one of the new breed of ex- Wages Commission activists, led a march of thousands of strikers from the back of a truck, so fulfilling the romantic fantasies which lay deep in the heart of every student activist.

But this high point of the new wave of African unionism also triggered its decline. Shortly after the strike, the government banned Cheadle and two other Wages Commission graduates, David Hemson and David Davis. While the unions quickly found replacements, events after the bannings confirmed that 40 000 workers organised in a year no more made an enduring union movement than any of its predecessors. The unions virtually collapsed and their paid-up membership dwindled to little over 2000: the bannings helped prompt this slump, as did the beginnings of a recession which made employers less dependant on their workers and allowed them to retrench union members. While strikes continued for part of the year - 1 500 Frame workers struck again in August and returned after an MP, Graham McIntosh, persuaded the company to agree not to fire them - the unions were soon restricted to a handful of plants. The year had been little more than a speeded up film of African union history: the inevitable growth and decline had been played out in only a few months. For much of the decade, the unions faced a grim battle for survival.

But the employer and government strategy which the strikes prompted and the tactics the unions had begun to develop would enable them to survive and begin to grow again only four years later. If the immediate worker organisation which the strikes prompted largely died, the legacy they left endured - it still does.

NOTES

Attitude surveys after the strikes: The surveys of worker, management and white public attitudes quoted in the main text were undertaken by the authors of *The Durban Strikes* shortly after the unrest. One of their chief goals was to rebut the claim that "agitators" were responsible for the strikes and they largely succeeded.

The information on worker attitudes towards Buthelezi is drawn from a 1975 survey of union members' attitudes by Eddie Webster and Judson Khuzwayo. An interesting feature is that, despite this support, only one percent of the workers interviewed believed their union should link up with KwaZulu directly. They believed the union should represent them inside the factory, the KwaZulu leadership outside this. This is crucial to an understanding of later events, when Buthelezi revived the Inkatha movement and it began to urge unions to join it.

TUCSA hires some help: TUCSA did not entirely ignore Bolton's appeals to help organise Africans: it did agree to appoint two young men to its Durban office whose job was to carry out this task. Their identity is of some interest. The first was Strini Moodley, who later became a key black consciousness activist and served five years in prison after a celebrated "show trial" of SASO leaders. According to Bolton, he had little enthusiasm for the task and left after three months. The second, who stayed longer, was Brian Fredericks. He went on to become an organiser for the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers - later the National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union, a major force in FOSATU. Today he is the permanent secretary of the South African council of the International Metalworkers' Federation.

BAWU during the seventies: BAWU attempted to organise all black workers nationally and it made an early foray into the Ford plant in Port Elizabeth, which was later to become a key centre of union activity. But by 1977, it claimed only 6 000 members of whom 1 000 were paid-up. After Koka's banning, the union's links with black consciousness weakened and, by the end of the decade, it was no longer part of the movement. From 1978, it suffered repeated splits and breakaways which prompted the formation of unions who played a far more prominent role in the unionism of the eighties than BAWU itself. The South African Allied Workers' Union, General and Allied Workers' Union, National Federation of Workers, and African and Allied Workers' Union were all formed by BAWU dissidents. The union has survived despite these setbacks, but it has little influence or worker support.

The PUTCO strike of 1972: At the time of the strike, drivers received a starting wage of R27.26 a week - the company labelled their R60 demand "totally ridiculous". While the strike was broken almost immediately, in September the company raised their starting wage to R35 a week, increased their maximum wage and reduced the time it took them to qualify for this from 26 to ten years.

An indication of the strike's spontaneity is the fact that the committee which represented drivers held its first meeting in the cells at John Vorster Square police station after the men were arrested.

The drivers' contact with the U.T.P. was largely fortuitous. After they were charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act, they sought legal help and, for reasons which are not entirely clear, enlisted it from a leading corporate law firm. It so happened that one of its partners was sympathetic to African unionism and had met one of U.T.P.'s founders: he invited him to make contact with the drivers in the law firm's boardroom. U.T.P. quickly took up the offer and the contact soon led to

The Durban stevedores' stoppage: This brief strike followed a wage board hearing in July which stevedores' representatives attended at the urging of the Wages Commission. The sitting was stormy: the workers demanded that their pay be raised from R8.50 a week to the poverty datum line of R18 and said they would appeal to their "homeland" governments if it was not. They were called to order by the chairman, Hugh Tindale, after charging that employers were trying to victimise workers who attended the sitting. Harriet Bolton recalls another revealing incident: who years, the board's hearings had been attended by an "induna" or African foreman who employers had appointed to represent workers - his chief role was to thank the stevedores angrily challenged his right to speak for them - and his claim to be a dock worker. "The board's faces were a picture," recalls Bolton, "I don't think they'd ever heard a real worker speak at a hearing before".

This was an early example of activist attempts to offer workers a platform and those who sought to blame the students for worker militancy often cited this sort of activity. But wage unrest among the stevedores predated the students' involvement - in September 1971, they had threatened to strike if they were not granted an increase and were quickly granted a thirty percent rise. (Their employers insisted that the strike threat had nothing to do with the increase.)

Like the 1973 strikers, the stevedores refused to elect spokesmen - when they were asked to do so by a company executive, the crowd shouted back: "We will be fired". They are also reported to have asked Buthelezi to intervene on their behalf. The dockers returned to work after the company threatened to fire them: although they won no increase, employers did react by asking the wage board to speed up its investigation.

The Coronation strike: Coronation was one employer which clearly did expect unrest. The day before the stoppage, management had put out a notice to workers which warned that talk of a strike the following day was the work of "communist agitators" and that "ringleaders" would be "severely punished". It promised that "loyal workers" would be protected from "intimidation". The notice backfired - the warning about "ringleaders" ensured that worker leaders refused to come forward during the strike and one worker suggested afterwards that the company's message had so angered him and his colleagues that it had sparked the strike. "We would not have gone on strike if the notice had not called us communists," he said.

Once workers massed on the football field, management nevertheless asked them to elect spokesmen - they refused. Durban's Bantu Labour Officer issued a similar appeal and was met with cries of "No, never".

The strike ended on the afternoon of the second day after Paramount Chief Goodwill addressed the workers for an hour, appealing to them to return and promising to negotiate on their behalf. Workers were sceptical about this call because it meant they would only receive an answer to their wage demands a week later: they suspected that, by returning to work, they would be surrendering the initiative. "You cannot extinguish fire by words, but by action," a worker insisted. But they grudgingly agreed to return after his representative, Prince Sithela Zulu, warned that they would impair his dignity if they did not. (It is unclear how the chief came to address workers. One report claimed the Department of Labour had invited

him to mediate, but it flatly denied this.)

In the event, the chief did not negotiate with the company - probably in reaction to Buthelezi's warning that he should keep out of disputes - and workers then elected an eleven man committee to negotiate with management. Coronation did not meet the full committee, but called in its leader, Nathaniel Zulu, and conveyed its wage offer to him. A first offer, R1.50 a week, was rejected by workers but the next day, a week after the strike ended, they accepted a R2.07 raise. This second offer was conveyed to workers in each plant separately by company officials who were escorted by police in trucks and Land Rovers.

Stoppages after Coronation: At least four stoppages occurred in the days immediately following that at Coronation and all centred around wage demands. At tea factory T.W. Beckett, workers alleged that they were given ten minutes to decide whether to return to work and were then fired. Later the company said it would consider reinstating the strikers and issued a statement defending its wage levels - its minimum wage of R10 a week was, it added, "competitive by prevailing Durban standards" and much higher than the minimum of R8.50 laid down in the industry's wage determination. It said it would not offer them a raise.

On 25 January, however, it gave in and agreed to a R3 a week increase - the full amount workers had demanded. But it did not rehire all the strikers: "We took this opportunity to weed out what we considered bad material," a spokesman said.

The strikes at ship builders J.H. Akitt and James Brown and Hamer were noteworthy for a reported management suggestion that the strikers be replaced temporarily by convicts. Asked about this plan, a James Brown and Hamer spokesman said: "I don't know who mooted this idea first, but it is worth looking into". The railways, he noted, used convicts to clean the harbour area. Nevertheless, the company decided against using prisoners.

Durban: This coastal city was, at the time of the strikes, South Africa's major port, its third largest city and its second most important industrial area. According to estimates at the time, it had an African population of one million, of whom 200 000 were in employment - at least 100 000 were contract workers. The city also has the country's largest Indian population - more than 300 000 in 1973. Its two key industrial complexes are Pinetown/New Germany to the north and Jacobs/Mobeni in the south. The main African townships are KwaMashu to the north and Umlazi to the south - both of which are located inside KwaZulu - and Clermont, near Pinetown/New Germany, where most migrant worker hostels are situated.

Some forty kilometres to the west is Hammarsdale which, because it abuts the KwaZulu "homeland", is designated as a "border area" by the government. This means that employers qualify for incentives if they invest there and are also often exempted from minimum wage laws.

The textile industry and the strikes: The textile industry was hit by most strikes - 26 (metal was next highest with 22). It was also the only one in which a registered union assisted African strikers - this was made possible by the fact that Harriet Bolton had recently become Natal branch secretary of the registered Textile Workers' Industrial Union (T.W.I.U.).

The industry was dominated by the Frame Group, whose size and political

influence enabled it to dominate wage setting machinery, a power it used to depress wages. In July 1972, some of its women workers were earning a basic wage of R3.50 a week and labour relations at its mills were usually branded as the worst in the area.

The climate for the strikes was partly created by wage negotiations between the T.W.I.U. and employers in mid-1972. Decades of weak union leadership had led to a steady decline in real wages and a steadier rise in worker discontent - it also prompted the change in the union's local leadership. In 1972, union members took part in drawing up demands far more than in the past and their negotiators entered the talks armed with calls for a sixty percent increase over three years, the removal of wage discrimination against women and major improvements in work conditions. The talks deadlocked and the union seemed set to submit its demands to arbitration, a prospect which heightened worker expectations.

But employers thwarted arbitration by insisting that it would spell the end of the industry's industrial council. T.W.I.U.'s national leaders, who had branded the employer proposals "pitiful" - "If we had even thought of accepting them, I am sure you would have lynched us. You would have said we had sold you down the river and you would have been right," union leader Norman Daniels told a worker meeting - then accepted them. Worker expectations were dashed and the ensuing discontent was ignited in 1973.

The demands raised by strikers provide some insight into conditions at Frame: they insisted that they no longer be forced to report to the factory when they were sick; nor should they be searched without their consent, be forced to stand outside the factory gates when they were slightly late or have their pay docked when they saw a doctor. They demanded notice pay when they were fired - which they were entitled to by law - and that they be allowed to leave the factory immediately after they had clocked out.

During the strike, the union attempted to negotiate with the company through the industrial council - which it could do because Indian members of the registered union were among the strikers - and all strikers met regularly in its hall to discuss the dispute. But the council negotiations did not settle the dispute and agreement was finally reached in independent talks between the company and union.

Frame initially suggested a small cost of living increase, which workers rejected. Later it offered a R1.50 - R2 a week rise and a day's strike pay. This fell far short of worker demands, but they accepted it because, after a week, they believed they would not be able to remain united for much longer. But even this rise was immense by Frame's standards: between 1966 and 1972, weavers' pay rose by 90c a week.

T.W.I.U. also successfully negotiated a settlement at one strike hit firm which was not covered by the council. Here its organiser persuaded the company to meet the workers' demand for an R18 a week minimum but not their call for pay equality between men and women. The company was Smith and Nephew, which was soon to play a more prominent part in our story.

Employer associations and the strikes: During the strikes, the Durban Chamber of Commerce issued a circular to its members advising them how to react. It provided a useful insight into the official employer view of the unrest.

The chamber advised strike hit companies to notify the Department of Labour and to tell workers that they would consider their demands only if they returned to work.

They should also be warned that they would not be paid while on strike.

"If you consider that your present rates of pay are fully justifiable, stand by these and in no circumstances move from that stand," it continued. "If you feel that an increase in minimum wages is necessary, determine this increase and tell them of your decision. Thereafter stand by it."

Employers were advised not to bargain "as this will only encourage the Bantu to escalate his demands". They were also urged to grant a set amount of money rather than a percentage as "percentages are not easily understood by the Bantu and across the board increases are a greater benefit to the lowest paid workers".

It urged employers to call the police if violence broke out but noted that the stoppages had been mainly "good natured", largely because of the "tactful" police action. "Make every effort to keep it that way," it ended.

The insistence that workers return before talks is a common employer response, now as well as then. Workers tend to resist it because they insist that, by ending a strike, they are surrendering an advantage they cannot easily regain - if talks fail, they must face the perilous task of organising a new stoppage.

Indian workers and the strikes: Inter-racial solidarity between African workers and their coloured and Indian colleagues has been a constant goal of emerging unionists but has often proved elusive - particularly before 1979, when Africans were denied official bargaining rights which the other two groups enjoyed. In Natal, relations between Africans and Indians were also soured by race rioting in 1949 in which Africans had attacked and killed Indians. But Indian workers frequently joined their African colleagues during the 1973 strikes. Employers suggested that they were prompted by fear of further riots, but a survey conducted after the strikes suggests that they did identify with African demands - three quarters agreed that Africans should be allowed to join their unions. One reason for this attitude may be the fact that most Indian workers in the area were unskilled and had no reason to fear job competition from Africans. Their wages were also low and this gave them an added incentive to strike.

The pass laws in the sixties: The tightening of the pass laws which began with the 1945 Black Urban Areas Act and continued with the creation of the labour bureaus and the quaintly named Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Acts (which extended the pass laws to African women) continued into the 1960s. By the end of the decade, they had become an all pervasive system of labour control.

The government's weapons were the 1965 Black Labour Act and a series of regulations promulgated in terms of the 1945 act: both sought to override clauses in the law which allowed Africans who were not born in the cities to acquire permanent city rights.

Thus Section 10(1)(c) of the Urban Areas Act granted city rights to the wives and minor children of men who had been born in the cities. The government now decreed that they could only live in the cities if they were granted a "lodger's permit" by the white officials who ran the African townships. The officials could thus prevent any spouse or child from living legally in the township by denying them a permit: they enforced this stipulation strictly.

A more devastating blow to workers was a 1968 regulation which prevented

contract workers from gaining city rights. Section 10(1)(b) of the 1945 act had granted these to any migrant who worked continuously for one employer for ten years or for several for fifteen years. The regulation forced migrants to renew their contracts annually and officials ruled that the contracts were broken at the end of each year. This meant that they could, technically, never work for an employer for more than a year at a time and it became impossible for them to gain permanent rights, no matter how long they worked in the cities.

These measures ended the legal influx of Africans to the cities and so gave effect to the National Party's ideological insistence that Africans were only "temporary sojourners" in the cities who would return to the "homelands" once their labour was no longer needed.

They also struck a crippling blow to worker bargaining power. Except for a relatively small group of Africans who had been born in the cities, workers were now tied entirely to one employer and they could never acquire the rights which would allow them to remain in the cities to seek a new job if they were fired.

These regulations were rigidly enforced until the 1980s when they were struck down by the courts, who ruled that a regulation had no force in law if it removed rights which had been granted by an act of parliament.

One further measure which denied Africans access to city jobs was the 1968 Physical Planning Act (later the Environment Planning Act). This limited the number of Africans employers could hire by laying down a ratio between white and African workers which they could not exceed. Usually, it prevented them from employing more than five Africans for every two whites on their staff.

The aim of the law was to force companies to move from the cities to the African rural areas. By forcing industry to move to the African "homelands", the government hoped to remove their residents' need to travel to the "white" cities to seek work. A further aspect of this "decentralisation" policy was an absolute bar on the training of African artisans in "white" areas.

The 1973 Black Labour Relations Regulation Act: The limited strike right in the 1973 act was not extended to mine and farm workers, public servants and domestic workers.

Factory workers were also barred from striking over issues which were covered by an industrial council agreement in their industry or if their wages and conditions were covered by a wage order which had come into force less than a year before the dispute. They also could not strike if the wage board was due to make a recommendation on the issue in dispute. Before workers could strike legally, they had to refer their dispute to one of the Department of Labour's black labour officers and then wait thirty days.

These restrictions were similar to those placed on non-African members of registered unions by the Industrial Conciliation Act: they, too, were not allowed to strike if a council agreement was in force and Minister Viljoen insisted that the new law gave them the same strike right as other races.

But non-Africans had access to industrial councils: their unions had signed the agreements which strikers were supposed not to disrupt. If they deadlocked with employers over a new agreement, they could strike as soon as the old one ran out. African workers had no such control and they were expected to honour agreements which they had not made. The law also allowed the government to prevent a legal

strike by ordering a wage board inquiry into the industry where one was threatened.

Even if they complied with these procedures, workers who struck legally had no protection against dismissal. Their right to picket - an essential element of the strike right in all western countries - was effectively removed by security laws which restricted public demonstrations.

Besides introducing liaison committees, the 1973 law also made several minor changes. It slightly expanded the works committee system by allowing several of these bodies in the same enterprise to form a coordinating committee and allowed the Department of Labour to appoint Africans to official committees which dealt with their work conditions. These gestures had little practical effect.

The 1973 strikers and the anti-strike laws: The Durban strikers were not prosecuted under the anti-strike laws because police had instructions not to arrest them unless they disturbed the peace. But their refusal to elect spokesmen to convey their demands would probably have ensured their acquittal even if they were charged.

According to the law, workers cannot be convicted of striking illegally simply because they have refused to work. The state must prove that they did this in support of common demands and, as long as workers did not voice these, their stoppage could not be a strike. Some commentators at the time suggested that workers had deliberately refused to raise demands during the strikes to ensure that they were not prosecuted: while it seems unlikely that they had that intimate a knowledge of labour law, later strikers were acquitted when the state failed to prove that they had raised demands when they stopped work.

The police found it difficult to obtain convictions against strikers because of this and they later preferred to use more general security laws against strikers rather than the anti-strike clauses in labour law.

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