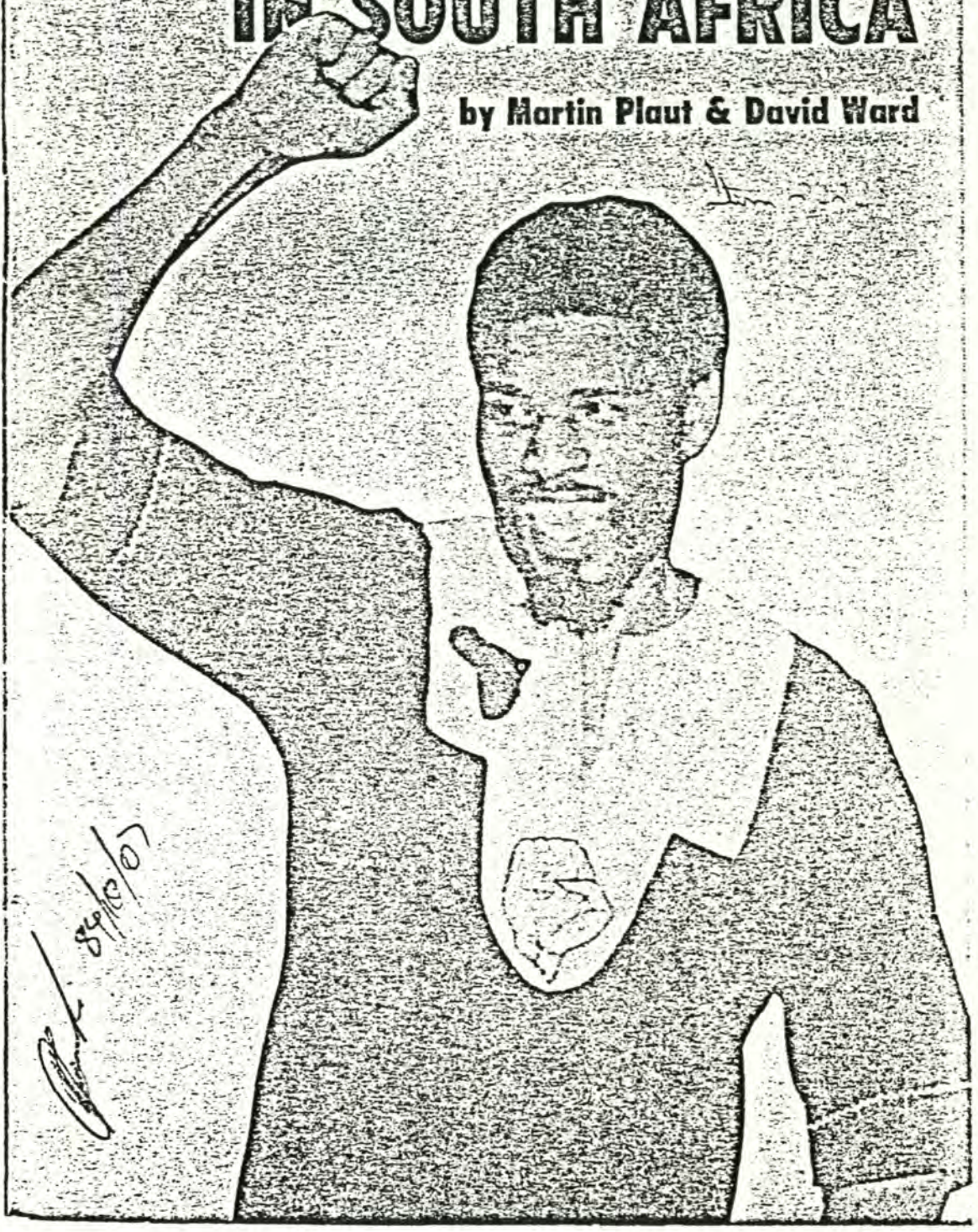


# BLACK TRADE UNIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

*See "APZ"*

by Martin Plaut & David Ward



*Plaut 8/10/07*

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## *Foreword*

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The struggle for trade union rights throughout the world is intimately bound up with the quest for wider human and democratic rights. In countries where trade unionists are repressed and intimidated by governments, there you will also encounter a general denial of human rights and political freedoms.

South Africa is a prime example of a repressive state in which the rights of the majority of its people are denied. Through the racist system of apartheid the Black people of South Africa have no political freedoms and have been struggling hard to win the right to organise trade unions.

This timely and important study outlines the current struggle of Black workers for trade union rights. In the last few years the independent Black unions in South Africa have become firmly established, growing rapidly and representing a major challenge to the Pretoria regime. The successes of Black workers despite brutal state harassment and legal constraints are enormously encouraging.

Those committed to oppose apartheid and all it represents must offer their solidarity to Black workers in South Africa. We must be prepared to defend the rights of the independent unions to organise free from state interference or control. The achievements of Black workers are of major significance in the wider struggle against the system of racial domination and oppression that prevails in South Africa today.

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Cover photo of Thozamile Gqweta: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa.

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## *Introduction*

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Black workers in South Africa are challenging the apartheid system at its roots. In the last few years a wave of strike action has shaken the Pretoria Government and thrown the country's traditional industrial relations system into turmoil. A young, powerful and independent union movement is emerging in the Republic and is organising black workers in a struggle not merely for trade union rights, but against the racist principles which are the foundations of South Africa's divided society.

In spite of fierce Government inspired repression the independent unions have achieved notable victories and are gaining in both strength and confidence. They have forced major multinational companies, like Ford and Volkswagen, to recognise their negotiating rights and shop stewards; they have won substantial wage increases and defeated government legislation; they have generated major splits in the ruling Nationalist Party and continue to mount a virtually unprecedented level of industrial action in defence of their rights. Indeed in 1981 strikes or work stoppages occurred on 342 occasions involving a total of some 92,842 workers.

Meanwhile the unions have engaged in lively and open debates about the future of the independent union movement in South Africa. They have established the basis for building a unified workers movement that will be capable of resisting and overcoming the obstacles the South African government places in its path.

As yet little public attention has been focused on the growth of South Africa's independent unions and even in Britain few members of the trade union movement are aware in detail of the developing struggle of black workers against the apartheid regime. This booklet aims to provide a brief introduction to the emerging independent labour movement in South Africa and provide a full description of the major unions involved.

The booklet begins with a summary of the historical background to black and non-racial unions in South Africa and the response of the Pretoria Government. The second chapter describes individually the

leading unions of the independent movement and explains the moves towards creating a unified trade union movement.

The wave of strike action in the last few years is featured next and includes some case studies of individual strikes. This section illustrates the growing success of the independent unions in challenging the legislative framework that the South Africa Government has tried to impose on the unions. In contrast the fourth chapter recounts the brutal tactics that the Pretoria regime is prepared to adopt in the attempt to crush the power of organised black workers. The death in detention of Dr Neil Aggett, a trade union organiser, provides a chilling reminder of the risks facing the members and leadership of the independent unions.

The last chapter discusses our response to the struggle for trade union and democratic rights in South Africa. The range of action that can be taken in sympathy with black workers and their unions is outlined stressing the significant contribution that inter-union solidarity can accomplish.

Inevitably a publication of this scale can only provide an introduction to the emerging struggle of the independent unions in South Africa. The authors hope that it will stimulate greater awareness among British trade unionists of the problems faced by black workers as they challenge the apartheid system's denial of their basic rights.

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## *History*

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Black workers in South Africa have a long history of organising for a decent standard of living and elementary trade union rights. As early as 1854 the Cape Town dockers struck for a living wage. In the 1920s the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union had a membership of 100,000. After 1927 it declined rapidly, broken by state repression and organisational problems. However, it represented the first wave of unionisation, and activists that had learned from the experience went on to form the small and often fragmented unions that grew up in the late 1920s and 1930s.

The Second World War provided an enormous boost to black workers, for with so many whites under active service blacks filled the skilled jobs from which they had previously been barred. These skilled workers formed the backbone of the second wave of unionisation. Unskilled workers in the gold mines — crucial to the economy — also

began organising. In 1946 100,000 workers struck, closing 21 pits. The strike was brutally crushed, with miners driven down the pits at bayonett point.

In 1955 the SA Congress of Trade Unions was formed, bringing together 19 unions with 20,000 members into the first non-racial union movement. SACTU, closely allied to the national liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), led a series of important campaigns, and grew to 53,000 members at its height. However, the period was marked by intense conflict between the liberation movements and the state, culminating in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. As an ally of the ANC, SACTU was savagely attacked. Five of its activists died in police custody and by 1964 it had been driven underground and into exile.

The second wave of unionisation had been effectively crushed. By 1969 only 16,000 black workers were in unions (3 per cent of the industrial workforce) down from a peak of 60,000 in 1961 (19.5 per cent of the industrial workforce).

Yet at this nadir of the union movement the seeds for its regeneration were being planted. Between 1970 and 1972 a number of centres were established to inform workers of their rights and to provide basic trade union education. The patient work of these organisations was transformed by the Durban strikes of 1973 that swept South Africa. Involving 60,000 workers the strikes were on a scale unknown since the mineworkers action of 1946. Management and the state were thrown into confusion and the third wave of unionisation had commenced.

The dynamism of the growth of the union movement can be illustrated by the example of one union — the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU). In 1974 the union had 3,900 members. Its organisation was vulnerable, and the state was openly hostile to its activities. In March 1976 it was involved in the Heinemann dispute — one of the bloodiest confrontations of the period, ending with its members pursued down the street by baton wielding police and alsatiens (*South African Labour Bulletin* Vol.3 No.7 June-July 1977). Yet by the end of 1981, MAWU had over 24,000 members and was organised in 130 factories.

This remarkable growth was reflected throughout the non-racial union movement. Today some 250,000 black workers are members of independent, democratically controlled unions.

### **The State Response**

The South African Government has not stood idly by witnessing the

growth of such a formidable challenge to the apartheid system. In response Pretoria has adopted a dual strategy of applying repression and legislative control. Union officials and shop floor activists have been at times savagely attacked, and successive acts of labour legislation have attempted to emasculate black workers. Yet the South African economy's increasing reliance on the black workforce to fill skilled and unskilled jobs has confronted the state with seemingly unresolvable dilemmas.

It has been estimated that by the year 2000 only 7 per cent of the workforce in South Africa will be white. The shortage of skilled white labour has resulted in blacks surging up the job market and gaining crucial economic importance. While in the 1960s an entire workforce could be dismissed and replaced almost without cost, the increasing reliance upon the skills of black workers has reached a point in many industries that this is simply no longer a feasible option. As a black worker at General Motors commented, "Our strength is in the economy. We have the power to bring the economy to its knees".

Black workers, as a result of their economic power and growing organisation, have breached the state's apparatus of labour control and repression. The real gains achieved by the independent unions on the shop floor have challenged South Africa's industrial relations framework. Union organisers have ignored laws that make strikes illegal and which excluded black workers from the state controlled system of industry-wide wage determinations.

In the late 1970s the South African Government made a major attempt to reformulate their response to the growth of the independent unions. Two state commissions of enquiry were held — the Wiehahn Commission into industrial relations and the Riekert Commission into the movement of black workers (i.e. the notorious 'influx control' system that regulates entry of blacks into 'white' South Africa). In particular the Wiehahn Commission has resulted in a substantial revision of the laws governing South Africa's labour force. The Commission's recommendations were incorporated in the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act in 1979 and further changes are proposed in current legislation, the Labour Relations Amendment Act of 1981.

The new legislation reflects the gains made by the independent unions. The act recognises the right of all workers to join a union, and drops most overtly racist aspects of previous labour legislation. It extends a range of controls that previously only applied to unions registered with the state to unions that refuse to do so. The controls are mostly

administrative, such as providing a registrar with a copy of the union's constitution and supplying information concerning membership, finance and the names of union officers. However, maintaining links between unions (registered or unregistered) and any political parties or organisations are forbidden, and all forms of picketing are illegal.

Following these legislative revisions the independent unions have been faced with a strategic choice; whether to participate and test the legal 'space' they have obtained, or to adopt a tactic of confrontation on the grounds that any contact with the state will compromise the unions' independence. This strategic argument has focused on two issues: whether to register with the state; and, once registered, whether to join the industrial councils which set the wages and conditions for entire industries.

Registration brings with it certain advantages, such as, the right to deduct union subscriptions by direct debit. Some unions, however, cannot register, since they are general worker unions and only industrially based unions are allowed to register. Others refuse to register on principle, on the grounds that registration has been used by the government to prevent non-racial membership, encouraging instead the development on 'multi-racial' unions that organise black workers in unions parallel, but separate from the white parent unions.

The industrial councils have also produced differences of approach. Some unions now feel that in certain industries (motors, paper and textiles) their membership is sufficiently widespread to warrant joining a council to influence the wages and conditions in the entire industry. At the same time they insist on the right to negotiate agreements with individual companies which improves the terms set by the industrial councils. They are also determined to retain a full shop floor system of shop steward rights and grievance procedures etc.

In contrast, other unions reject the industrial councils, arguing that they reduce the ability of the workers to control their negotiations over wages and conditions. They believe that the Industrial Council system removes the unions from contact with the workforce on the shop floor.

Despite these differences of approach the independent unions are increasingly working together and attempting to define a common strategy. The same cannot be said for the South African state and industry. The white political establishment have engaged in bitter arguments over the new labour legislation. For many employers the new legislation has caused confusion and political controversy. As a representative of the Federated Chamber of Industries (FCI)

commented, "It has been very hard to realise that our world has changed right from the bottom up as a result of the sweeping changes in labour legislation introduced recently. Indeed many of the institutions which appeared to be so firm and strong a few years ago have already lost their underpinnings".

The issue of negotiating with unregistered unions is a major headache for industry and the attitudes range from the hostile to the pragmatic. Despite opposition from some of its members the FCI has published a set of guidelines urging employers to be "flexible" and recognise representative unions even if they were not registered. The guidelines state that "legislative frameworks must not be permitted to obstruct the democratic development of workers' organisations or to disrupt bona fide collective bargaining".

In the political arena the ruling Nationalist Party has become divided and ultimately split over the process of refining the apartheid system to ensure the survival of white rule. The leader of the break-away, ultra-right wing, Conservative Party, Dr Andries Treurnicht has accused the South African Government of weakening the base of apartheid. In a speech during the budget debate in April 1982, Conservative Party members singled out the Labour Minister, Mr Fanie Botha, for bitter criticism. Botha and his labour legislation was said to have alienated white workers and betrayed the Nationalist Party's principle of protecting white workers.

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## *Black Unions*

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The growth of black unions in the late 1970s and early 1980s has created a diverse and fluid labour movement in South Africa. The development of these independent unions has quickly created a new structure of trade union organisations and as already mentioned has placed heavy burdens on the apartheid state and on the old white-dominated labour movement.

Today the black independent unions inside South Africa are organised in two national confederations, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). In addition there are a number of large, unaffiliated black unions, such as the South African Allied Workers Union and the General Workers' Union. Collectively these national centres and individual unions are frequently termed the 'independent', 'black', or 'non-racial' unions.



They must be sharply distinguished from the 'white' or 'multi-racial' unions.<sup>1</sup> The latter are organised in the remaining major trade union federations, the South African Confederation of Labour (whites only) and the Trade Union Council of South Africa (multi-racial).

**Table 1**  
**Trade Unions in South Africa**

	<i>Membership (1981)</i>
<i>Independent black and non-racial</i>	
Federation of South African Unions (FOSATU)	95,000
Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA)	45,000
Unaffiliated Unions — e.g. SAAWU & GWU etc.	100,000
<i>Multi-racial</i>	
Trade Union Confederation of South Africa (TUCSA)	370,000
<i>Whites only</i>	
South Africa Confederation of Labour (SACOL)	118,000
Unaffiliated Unions	280,000

*Source: ILO Report on South Africa 1982.*

Before examining the independent black unions in detail, it is useful to consider the 'multi-racial' unions organised in TUCSA and, briefly, the exclusively white unions of SACOL.

### **SACOL**

The South African Confederation of Labour is openly racist and exclusively composed of white unions. Recently SACOL has come into conflict with the South African government over its labour 'reforms' and the decision to include black trade unions in the industrial relations system. Some of SACOL's affiliates have either withdrawn or been expelled due to opposition to the Confederation's hardline posture. Notorious among SACOL affiliates is the Mine Workers Union led by its General Secretary, Arrie Paulus. The MWU has threatened to strike if any discriminatory laws are removed from the mining industry and Paulus has called on "all whites to join one union" to protect their jobs from black labour.

1. In the South African context a distinction is drawn between non-racial and multi-racial organisations. The former demand a complete absence of any racial discrimination, whereas the latter implies a membership that accepts all races but which organises them separately.

## TUCSA

The Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) is a multi-racial — as opposed to a non-racial — national centre. It was set up in 1954 and has long held an ambivalent attitude to organising black workers. TUCSA has at times expelled its black members so as to conform to government legislation, only to readmit them later. This shifting policy changed in the 1970s when TUCSA allowed blacks to affiliate but only if organised in exclusively black unions, in parallel to the original unions which effectively 'sponsor' them.

The so-called 'parallel' unions are highly dependent on their parent unions for finance and administration. Many general secretaries of the parallel black unions are also the secretaries of the parent unions. Frequently they are introduced into a firm with the co-operation of the management in an attempt to head off the establishment of an independent union. For example parallel unions have been offered the use of company facilities denied to the independent unions.

The TUCSA General Secretary, Arthur Grobbelaar (who was a member of the Wiehahn Commission) has said that "the administration (of parallels) should continue to be subject to the overall supervision of the registered (white) union". Yet black workers have complained that subscriptions are deducted from their wages for a union they have never joined, which has no shop stewards and never holds meetings.

At present TUCSA is the largest union federation in South Africa with a total membership of some 370,000 workers: 209,000 coloureds and Indians, 97,000 whites and 62,000 Africans. TUCSA affiliates have generally welcomed the legislation introduced post-Weihahn and have experienced little trouble in registering its parallel unions.

In the long term TUCSA seems to be in trouble. The independent unions like FOSATU and SAAWU etc., have gained shop floor credibility in contrast to the black parallels which are regarded with suspicion. At TUCSA's 27th annual conference in September 1981 delegates expressed deep fears about competition from the independent unions. "It cannot be denied", said a delegate, "that there is a terrific battle on the shopfloor, which extends to the townships, for the hearts and minds of South African workers". Revealingly conference delegates spoke bitterly about "so many people in responsible positions", including some government officials who describe TUCSA affiliates as "sweetheart unions".

Another issue which threatens TUCSA is the sharp decline in support from international labour organisations in favour of the independents.

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The Geneva based, international trade secretariat, the International Metalworkers' Federation recently threatened to expell two of its affiliates which were TUCSA unions, unless they ceased apartheid practices.

These developments are encouraging splits within TUCSA itself. In June 1982, two unions with a combined membership of 11,000 workers in the catering and distributive trade withdrew from TUCSA as a result of dissatisfaction with the Council's policies. The splinter unions were concerned with TUCSA's distancing itself from the wave of protests from the independent unions following the death in detention in February 1982 of the union organiser Dr Neil Aggett.

### **FOSATU**

The largest of the independent union federations is the Federation of South African Unions (FOSATU). It was established in 1979 and in November 1981 boasted a membership of 95,000 workers organised in approximately 390 factories. A further indication of FOSATU's increasing strength are the number of companies which recognise the union's shop stewards and negotiating rights. To date FOSATU have obtained, or are negotiating, over 130 company recognition agreements.

At its inaugural congress in April 1979, FOSATU adopted a programme of objectives which indicate the union's basic policy positions. FOSATU has attempted to achieve:

- a strong democratic factory floor organisation;
- a united labour movement, independent of race, colour, creed or sex;
- national industrial unions;
- an ongoing worker education programme;
- social justice, decent standards of living and fair conditions of work for affiliates and for the working class as a whole.

(Source: Introduction to FOSATU Annual Report 1981).

FOSATU's affiliates are particularly strong in the heavy industrial sector, organising car workers, metal workers, food workers, transport workers, and textile workers among others. The membership is predominantly black although the union is committed to a non-racial policy.

As the largest of the independent unions, FOSATU has assumed a key role in the emerging structure of the independent South African Labour Movement. The union has continued to grow despite consistent state harassment. In 1980, for example, the South African government

prohibited "the collection of contributions by or for or on behalf of Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU)". The ban not only prevents FOSATU from obtaining funds inside South Africa, but seeks to block funds going to the Federation from the international labour movement, a development condemned by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) as "contrary to accepted international labour standards".

The FOSATU unions have also had to contend with the drive by the TUCSA 'parallel' unions to recruit black workers. In response FOSATU has fiercely attacked the parallels as being organised in connivance with management, as condoning the state structure of racially exclusive unions, and of seriously assisting black workers only in the face of competition from the independent unions.

Following the legislation introduced as a result of the Weihahn Commission, the FOSATU unions opted to apply for registration. FOSATU believes that advantages can be gained that would compensate for the controls that the government imposes on registered unions. They argued that company recognition agreements would be easier to obtain, that registration would offer some protection from state repression, and provide unions the benefit of subscriptions checkoff. However, FOSATU has insisted on seeking registration on a non-racial basis. As a consequence of this commitment FOSATU unions have faced difficulties in registering. In 1980, for example, the FOSATU affiliated Metal and Allied Worker Union applied for registration stressing their wish to organise on a non-racial basis. The Government responded by providing MAWU with a registration certificate but only to represent African workers, a position which MAWU has refused to accept.

Another controversial issue for FOSATU is the system of Industrial Councils which are at the centre of South Africa's labour relations structure. The Councils have traditionally been viewed as a device to separate negotiations from the shop floor favouring the interests of the minority of workers at the expense of the black majority. In addition the Council's lengthy disputes procedures inhibit the legal right to strike. FOSATU are campaigning to remove the existing Industrial Council system in favour of one catering for plant-level bargaining.

In April 1982 FOSATU held a second Congress to review the achievements since the inauguration in 1979. The Congress was held at Hamanskraal, near Pretoria, and resulted in an important statement of FOSATU's policies and objectives. In an address to the Congress, FOSATU's General Secretary, Joe Foster, spoke of the need to build an

independent worker movement which would ensure that workers "control their own destiny". Describing past popular and worker struggles in South Africa, Foster explained that until now the creation of a workers' movement had been impossible. "Progressive and militant unions were continually the subject of state harassment . . . Whilst the unions were often prominent they were always small and weakly organised both nationally and in the factories". Foster believes that the environment today is different. Changes in the economy and in black workers' levels of skill and education allow the creation of a powerful worker movement.

Under these conditions Foster says that FOSATU must concentrate on building factory floor support in the major industries. Although praising the role of the liberation movements and the African National Congress in particular, FOSATU will remain independent from any political organisations. FOSATU does not regard itself as apolitical, but rather that the establishment of a worker movement is in itself a political task. According to Joe Foster "workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of a wider popular struggle".

At the conclusion of the Hammanskraal Congress a resolution was adopted calling for one-man-one-vote and deploring the Bantustan policy "whereby South African citizens are stripped of their birthright and declared foreigners in the country of their birth". The resolution stated that FOSATU will engage in struggles "to secure a better standard of living, social justice, social security and the political emancipation of workers in the community where members of its affiliates live". FOSATU also added that "an essential prerequisite" for change is to develop at the factory level an "unshakeable unity based on effective organisation".

## CUSA

The second trade union centre of independent unions is the Council of South African Unions (CUSA). It was created in September 1980 after the failure of its unions to resolve differences with the FOSATU national centre.

The principle difference between the two is over the question of race in the short and medium term. Both unions share the goal of the creation in the long term of a non-racial labour movement. FOSATU believes that this can only come about by pursuing a non-racial policy from the outset.

CUSA is closer to what is commonly termed the 'Black Consciousness' philosophy which encourages a positive effort to construct an exclusively black leadership. Both federations are open to unions of all races, but CUSA's affiliates are only black unions.

CUSA consists of eight unions with approximately 45,000 members and is mainly based in the Transvaal area. Unlike FOSATU's tightly disciplined unions, CUSA is a loose federation which seeks only to coordinate affiliates on certain principal issues. CUSA has not advocated registration or non-registration to its affiliates. Rather it has pointed out the advantages and disadvantages of both actions. Currently two CUSA affiliates have been permitted to register.

CUSA has established strong links with the international labour movement, particularly via the African American Labour Centre\* in Botswana and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), to which CUSA is affiliated.

#### Other Unions

Apart from the two national federations, FOSATU and CUSA, described above, there are a group of significant independent, individual unions. These unions include the African Food and Canning Workers' Union, the Black Media Workers' Association, the General Workers' Union, the Black Municipal Workers' Union, the Motor Assemblies and Components Workers' Union and the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU). From this group the most important are SAAWU and the Cape Town area unions — the General Workers' Union and the African Food and Canning Workers' Union.

#### SAAWU

The most overtly political of the independent unions is the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU). Based in the East London area, SAAWU was established in March 1979 following a split in the black consciousness inspired Black Allied Workers' Union. The breakaway group established SAAWU and committed the union to a policy of non-racialism. The union's President, Thozamile Gqwetha explains that "we believe the country has a non-racial future and therefore we must be totally non-racial".

SAAWU claims a membership of 50,000 and has been described as "as

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\*The AALC is a body established by the American national union centre, the AFL-CIO which fosters links between unions in South Africa and the American labour movement.

much a mass movement as a union", but one researcher suggests that a membership of 20,000 is a more realistic estimate. Committed to a policy of mass participatory democracy, SAAWU has sought to establish a strong relationship with the black community. A union spokesman explains that "SAAWU is a trade union dealing with workers who are part and parcel of the community. Transport, rents to be paid, are also worker issues. The problems of the workplace go outside the workplace".

As a result SAAWU has become heavily involved in political issues beyond conventional factory disputes. SAAWU says that "there can be no normal unionism in an abnormal society". The union has challenged the South African's homelands policy and, in particular, opposed the so-called 'independence' of the Ciskei bantustan in which many of SAAWU's members live. The Ciskei gained 'independence' from South Africa in December 1981 and SAAWU's activities have seriously challenged its legitimacy.

In contrast to the FOSATU unions, SAAWU has totally rejected registration with the government and ignores the official bargaining system. SAAWU has stated that it will not register unless the basis of the apartheid system is removed; that is the abolition of such racial legislation as the pass laws and the Group Areas Act.

Despite SAAWU's militant posture, the union has been able to gain a number of company recognition agreements. Notable recognitions have been obtained from South African Chlorides, Johnson and Johnson, and KSM Milling. Such agreements were reached after representative elections showed that SAAWU had majority support on the shop floor. The personnel director of Chlorides, Mr Theo Heffer, believes that "to refuse to deal with a representative union, even if it is not registered, would, to my mind, fly in the face of reality. We are concerned with representation not registration. If a union reflects the true representation of the workers, then one is courting disaster to refuse to deal with that union".

Such a liberal approach by management was notably absent in the South African subsidiary of Rowntrees-Mackintosh. In February 1981 500 black workers and SAAWU members were sacked from the Wilson-Rowntree factory in East London after a strike over unfair dismissals. The management refused to recognise SAAWU and maintains its long-standing relationship with the docile TUCSA affiliated Sweet Workers' Union. SAAWU have responded by launching a boycott of Wilson-Rowntrees products. Leaflets printed with the slogan 'Spit out that fruit

gum chum' have been circulated by Boycott Support Committees causing an estimated 25 per cent loss of business for the company. However, more than any other independent union SAAWU has been subject to severe state harassment. The union's participatory and community orientated political stand has antagonised the South African government and the authorities of the Ciskei. Scores of SAAWU members were detained by the Ciskei police in 1981 and the South Africans have assisted the homeland administration in union bursting techniques. Leaders of SAAWU have been subject to long periods of detention during which at least one of them had to have hospital treatment. Currently the Union's president, Thozamile Gqweta, the General Secretary, Sam Kikine, and National Organiser Sisa Njikelana are facing charges of contravening the Terrorism Act (see Section IV).

The problem facing SAAWU is whether it can retain its militant posture, and inevitably endure further repression, without losing its membership. Resistance by employers also weakens SAAWU's support since repeated strike action defeated by scab labour leaves many of the union's members unemployed. To try to counteract this trend SAAWU established an unemployed workers branch, but met with little success. There is a danger that SAAWU may suffer the fate of the black unions operating in the period up to the early sixties, which were crushed through a combination of weak organisation and repression. At present SAAWU appears to be surviving although membership has dropped slightly in the East London area, where state harassment has been most intense. Growth is continuing in Natal where Company recognition agreements have been negotiated.

### Cape Unions

The Cape Unions share a common commitment rather than a formal organisation. The African Food and Canning Workers' Union and the F & CWU were two of the few unions to survive the repression of the 1960s. Both were affiliates of the exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), the national centre that is associated with the African National Congress. They have a close working relationship to the General Workers' Union, which was founded in 1978 as the Western Province General Workers' Union.

The three unions share a commitment to non-racialism but have a predominantly black membership. The General Workers' Union established itself as a 'general' union rather than an industrial union due



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to the small percentage of blacks in the workforce of the area. In Cape Town, the state designated the region as a 'Coloured Preference Area' which requires employers to hire blacks only when no 'coloureds' are available. As a result the 'coloured' workers dominate the skilled job sector with blacks concentrated in the low paid and unskilled jobs.

The union is particularly strongly organised among the stevedores at South Africa's major ports. On 21 June 1982 it concluded a recognition agreement with all the port employers giving the union full bargaining rights for stevedores in Cape Town, East London, Port Elizabeth and Durban.

Like SAAWU, the Cape Unions have rejected registration on the grounds that it could compromise their non-racial commitment, but recently they have become more flexible on this issue. Similarly they have identified with SAAWU's activist approach to political and community issues.

### Unity

Although the growth of the independent unions has been swift and substantial many obstacles confront them. Apart from the heavy burdens of state repression in the form of violence and legal control, the unions themselves have differences in policy and principle which at least potentially constrain their ability to grow. The diverse structure of the independent unions make it inevitable that establishing areas of co-operation is difficult, given the differing levels of organisation and political perspective.

Over many crucial issues the independent unions have engaged in lively debate. Notably, the questions of registration and participation in Industrial Councils have been controversial matters. Some unions, such as SAAWU, are adamantly opposed to any involvement in the state's regulatory system, whilst FOSATU takes a more pragmatic approach. Again the tactics and strategy of 'community' as opposed to 'factory-based' organisation are a subject for discussion by the independent unions.

Yet the independent union movement recognises above all the need to promote co-operation and unity and has taken concrete steps to build union solidarity. In August 1981 a historic summit of leaders and representatives of some 29 independent unions was held in Langa, Cape Town; the first in a series of unity initiatives.

The Cape Town summit was attended by over 100 delegates, including

representatives of FOSATU, CUSA, SAAWU and the Cape Unions. The meeting's primary purpose was to formulate a united response to the Government's Labour relations legislation. However, resolutions on several other issues were discussed and agreed.

Four summit resolutions were passed, concerning Industrial Councils, the Ciskei homeland, Detentions, and Solidarity Action. On industrial councils, the summit rejected the present system as an "acceptable means of collective bargaining" and recommended that unions not members of ICs should not enter. The summit expressed concern about harassment of unions in the Ciskei and also resolved to resist the wave of banning and detention in "any way possible". Lastly, the unions agreed to establish ad hoc solidarity committees to encourage co-operation.

The meeting also issued a statement which stated that the independent unions will "resist and reject the present system of registration insofar as it is designed to control and interfere in the internal affairs of the union". (See Appendix No.I for full text of summit statement/resolutions.) The summit closed with a commitment to meet again.

The second unity summit took place on 24-25 April 1982 in Johannesburg. On this occasion the task of the meeting was to outline a basis for establishing a permanent working alliance for the unions. All the major independents took part and the summit agreed to aim to create one unified movement. The largest independent, FOSATU, presented a proposal for a tight federation based on "disciplined unity" in which there would be binding policy on affiliates and joint organisational machinery. Reservations from other unions prevented the acceptance of the FOSATU plan, but it was agreed to hold unity discussions in regional solidarity groups. Having held such a consultation it was suggested that a 'mini-summit' of small delegations should be arranged to review progress.

A further impetus towards unity are the attempts to end inter-union rivalry. Shortly before the 'mini-summit' held in July 1982, the General Workers' Union announced it would stop recruiting members of 'progressive rivals'. It was also announced that the GWU will attempt to reach an agreement with the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) to co-operate rather than compete.

The 'mini-summit' itself produced what may prove to be a division in the non-racial union movement. While FOSATU, the GWU and the Food and Canning unions had a productive meeting, resolving some of their differences, there was a walkout by a number of unions. Led by the Port Elizabeth based Motor Assembly and Components Workers Union

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(MACWUSA), the group included SAAWU and the Black Municipal Workers Union. This group demanded that the unions make non-registration and boycotting of the industrial councils an issue of principle. They also called for a loose unity between the unions, as opposed to the tight federation proposed by FOSATU.

FOSATU and the Cape Unions rejected their stand and the unions walked out. Just how deep this rift is, and how long it divides the movement, remains to be seen, but it illustrates the diversity of the non-racial unions.

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## *Strikes*

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Aside from the growth in membership, the most impressive indication of the power of the independent unions is the dramatic increase in the incidence of strikes and work stoppages. The first few years of the 1980s have witnessed a return to the degree of industrial unrest experienced at the time of the 'Durban' strikes in 1973-74. Strikes by black workers in 1979 cost 67,000 work days, followed by 175,000 days lost in 1980 and yet another increase in 1981, with 226,500 work days lost. Indeed in 1981 there was a 65 per cent increase in the number of strikes and stoppages, reaching a total of 342 against the 1980 figure of 207 (see Table 2).

The notable feature of the current wave of industrial unrest is that it represents a much broader pattern of strike action than occurred during 1973-74. During that period the unrest was concerned primarily with wages and was confined to Natal and the Eastern Cape area. Today's pattern of industrial action is quite different. In a Report to the 1982 International Labour Office (ILO) annual conference it is noted that in the period 1980-81, "strikes were widely spread, both geographically, affecting all industrial centres, and in terms of issues, which included impending pension legislation, union recognition, dismissals, wages, working conditions, and demonstrations of solidarity".

Since all these strikes were illegal and picketing is also outlawed, solidarity is particularly important. Many strikes in recent years have relied on united action between workers and the black community. Links built with community organisations have resulted in boycotts of company products which have strengthened workers' action. Over the last few years such boycotts included meat and pasta (in Cape Town), sweets (throughout the Republic) and toiletries (in the Transvaal).

**Table 2**  
**Strikes by black workers: 1945-1981**

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Disputes</i>	<i>Black workers on strike</i>	
1945	63	13,228	
1946	53	84,232	
1947	64	5,865	
1948	44	2,815	Post War Period
1949	37	5,141	
1950	33	2,399	
1951	36	7,204	
1952	54	5,963	
1953	30	1,479	
1954	60	4,660	
1955	102	9,479	
1956	105	9,641	
1957	119	8,970	
1958	74	7,529	SACTU: the Second Wave of Unionisation
1959	46	3,604	
1960	42	5,266	
1961	81	4,662	
1962	56	2,155	
1963	61	3,101	
1964	99	4,369	
1965	84	3,540	
1966	98	3,253	
1967	76	2,874	Virtual Destruction of the Movement
1968	56	1,705	
1969	78	4,232	
1970	76	3,303	
1971	69	4,196	
1972	71	8,814	
1973	370	98,029	
1974	384	58,975	
1975	276	23,295	'Durban' strikes lead to the Third Wave of Unionisation
1976	248	26,931	
1977	90	15,091	
1978	106	14,088	
1979	101	17,323	
1980	207	56,286	
1981	342	84,705	

Sources: South African Statistics, Dept of Statistics, Pretoria, 1968, 1980. Statistical Yearbook, 1964, Bureau of Statistics, Pretoria. ILO Report 1982, Geneva.

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To illustrate the varied nature of the current industrial unrest in South Africa and the role of the independent unions some specific examples of disputes are examined. Two are accounts of individual strikes focusing on, respectively, international solidarity action, and Industrial Councils. Lastly the wave of strikes around the pensions issue are explained. All three disputes resulted in remarkable victories for the independent unions.

### Volkswagen

In June 1980 a three week strike by 3,500 black and coloured workers at Volkswagen's Uitenhenge plant resulted in the unions winning wage increases of up to 40 per cent and shop steward rights. The outcome has benefited workers throughout the industry and illustrated the effectiveness of international solidarity in dealing with management.

The unions involved were the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers and the United Automobile Workers of SA. Originally the wage negotiations were proceeding without industrial unrest. However, following a meeting to discuss the negotiations, a strike was launched. At its height the dispute involved some 7,500 workers in 11 factories and a mass march was broken up by riot police firing shotguns and tear gas. The strike also cost Volkswagen Rand 20 million in lost production and sales.

Meanwhile, a link was established between the unions in South Africa and the West German union IG Metall, which applied pressure on the parent Volkswagen company in Wolfsburg. The Geneva based International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) launched an appeal for a strike fund from among its affiliates and raised some £38,000. However, the South African government responded by warning the striking unions that they could not receive such donations which were intended to make up the workers lost three weeks wages. The IMF have since confirmed that they would find a way to send the cash to South Africa, for distribution to the workers.

In addition the IMF sent a senior official to South Africa to advise the unions. Help was provided to the unions during the negotiation and in preparing their claim for a living wage index to replace the previously applied minimum standard of living index.

As an outcome of the strike the workers gained a wage increase of up to 40 per cent and Volkswagen and the other companies in the industry agreed to continue talks on the unions' proposals for a new living wage

index. The number of wage categories was reduced and Ford and General Motors agreed to the same scales.

Another important result concerned trade union rights at plant level which led to the recognition of paid shop stewards and in-plant training for black and coloured workers. Subsequently three full-time shop stewards were elected becoming full-time worker representatives while still being on the company payroll. The elections were the first of their kind in South Africa.

After the dispute the General Secretary of the IMF, Herman Rebhan commented: "The pressure our affiliates applied, not just in West Germany on Volkswagen, but in letting the South African workers know that they had support outside their country was important — we shall maintain that international solidarity no matter the obstacles put in our way by the South African government".

### **Colgate Palmolive**

In May 1981 a dispute occurred between the FOSATU affiliated Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the management of a Colgate-Palmolive plant in Boksburg. The strike witnessed a remarkable victory for the union and for FOSATU's opposition to the system of Industrial Councils.

The dispute, which lasted about 14 months, began over a recognition agreement. Colgate-Palmolive refused to recognise the CWIU on the grounds that it was unregistered, despite the fact that the union had the support of the majority of the workforce. Eventually Colgate gave in to the CWIU's demand for recognition but on condition that the union should negotiate on wages and conditions at an industrial council.

Without hesitation the CWIU refused to accept this condition and launched a two-pronged attack on the company. Firstly the union launched a consumer boycott of Colgate products and then began the process to declare a 'legal' strike. In South Africa holding a legal strike is a lengthy and cumbersome business. The CWIU had to apply to a Conciliation Board which found it could not resolve the dispute. After the Board, the union had to observe a 30 day 'cooling-off' period after which a strike could be legally declared if a ballot of the workers agreed — which they did, voting 93 per cent in favour of a strike.

Meanwhile the FOSATU-organised boycott of Colgate products gained momentum. Within two weeks thousands of workers were going to work with boycott stickers on their overalls and posters supporting the

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CWIU appeared in workers hostels. Traders in East Rand and elsewhere agreed to remove Colgate products from their shelves and whole communities became mobilised behind the boycott call. Other employers began to fear that a wave of sympathy strikes would occur. "What is clear", remarked the *Rand Daily Mail*, "is that workers in other East Rand factories as well as black community organisations were rallying behind the boycott".

Under such extreme pressure and just two days before the strike was due Colgate-Palmolive relented and agreed to negotiate with the CWIU outside of the Industrial Council. Colgate said that it had to "recognise the reality of the situation", and FOSATU hailed the settlement as an important victory. In its Annual Report FOSATU commented that "the Colgate-Palmolive dispute was a turning point in South Africa's industrial relations. It punched a great hole in the collective solidarity of employers . . .". The dispute also clearly indicated the power of boycott actions. "It was", says FOSATU, "a planned boycott and not one organised after a defeat had already taken place".

### **The Pension Disputes**

Proposed state legislation designed to control company pension schemes may appear an unlikely candidate for a major cause of strikes, yet in 1981 the government proposals sparked off a wave of strikes that rippled on into 1982. At the height of the controversy a total of 62 strikes occurred relating to the Pensions Bill in Natal alone, and by the end of 1981 the government had been forced to drop the Bill altogether.

The state had proposed to introduce the "Preservation of Pensions Bill". This seemingly innocuous legislation was to have ensured that companies continued to administer the pensions of their employees after they had left their employment — effectively locking in the pensions until the worker retired at 65.

Black workers' hostility to the proposals arose from a very real fear that once they left a company they would never see their contributions again. Given workers experience of the almost insuperable difficulties of claiming money from the government's unemployment insurance fund (to which they also contribute) this is hardly surprising. There was also a belief that by 'preserving' pensions the state would shed its obligation to pay even the below subsistence pension that it pays at present to black workers.

Most important of all there was the fact that most workers see their

pension contributions as a form of savings to be used when they lose their jobs. It is about the only form of security that they possess. Certainly black workers were incensed that the state should be tampering with their finances without even bothering to consult them.

Table 3  
The Pension Gap: Monthly pensions 1980

White	Coloured and Asian	African
R109 (£55)	R62 (£32)	R33 (£17)

Their response was not only to strike, but to demand the immediate payout of their contributions. Company after company was forced to comply, with a devastating effect on finances, which had relied in part on the pensions to fund company operations. Transvaal clothing workers alone were reported to have withdrawn over £500,000 of their pension contributions.

Management suggested that the whole matter was a 'misunderstanding' and said that if only the Bill was explained to workers it would be accepted. This was refuted by a FOSATU spokesman, saying "They understand the Bill . . . and they don't accept it. Workers have got pretty good reasons for not liking the Bill". Such was the opposition that on 6 November 1981 the Director General of Manpower was forced to announce that the Bill was to be withdrawn for consultation, and thereafter it was abandoned.

Despite the government climbdown workers' interest in the control of their pensions has been awakened, and the first six months of 1982 saw a further 27 strikes on this issue in Natal. In July this came to a head with 3,000 workers on strike in Richards Bay. Workers are simply no longer willing to allow companies to use their money for whatever they like, and are demanding a say in its allocation. A FOSATU organiser said "Pension fund trustees, who have negotiated on several issues, seem to be missing the main point — that is that the people here in Natal don't seem to want a pension fund. They would rather have the money now and use it for the education of their children".

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## *Repression*

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The previous chapters have discussed the growth and organisational strength of the independent unions, and also illustrated the successes



won through industrial action. Against this encouraging background there always hangs the dark cloud of state repression. Ultimately the South African Government will use any means at its disposal in the attempt to ensure the survival of white rule and the suppression of the black majority.

Trade unionists have long been a major target of repressive governments throughout the world and in South Africa there have been repeated and systematic attempts to destroy independent worker organisations. Today the South African Government is increasingly resorting to the tactics of brutality and harassment.

The growing industrial unrest in the last few years has been met by the increased use of security legislation, arrest, detention without trial, and police involvement in labour disputes. The following table — quoted in the ILO's Special Report on Apartheid to the 1982 Conference (p.18) — indicates the number of trade unionists arrested and the level of police involvement in labour unrest. Averaged over the two years 1979-80 police were involved in labour disputes and strikes once every three days.

**Table 4**  
Number of occasions police called

	1974	1980
(a) to a labour dispute	38	52
(b) to a work stoppage	14	20
(c) to a strike	51	94
Number of black workers arrested for striking illegally	214	294

Similarly the incidence of detention of trade unionists has increased. According to figures compiled by the Institute for Race Relations in South Africa, between November 1980 and November 1981, 280 union members had been detained and the majority were not charged with any offence. In early 1982 the repression became all too brutally clear with the death in detention of the trade union official Dr Neil Aggett. The details of his case and the detention and harassment of Thozamile Gqweta the President of South African Allied Workers Union SAAWU described below provide a chilling account of the nature of the struggle for an independent workers movement in South Africa.

#### Neil Aggett

At 1.30 am on the 5th February 1982 Dr Neil Aggett, 27, a leading official of the Food and Canning Workers Union was found hanging in

his prison cell at police headquarters in Johannesburg. He is the first white and the 51st detainee to have died while under police custody in South Africa since 1963.

Neil Aggett was detained by the security police on the 27th of November 1981. Seventy days later the authorities alleged that he had committed suicide. Aggett's union and family refuse to accept the police explanation. "He took his own life, so the police say. We say he was killed. Nothing the authorities say to clear themselves of complicity in his death can convince us otherwise".

In the South African Parliament on 16 February the opposition MP, Helen Suzman, quoted an account by a fellow detainee of Aggett's interrogation. Aggett was: "Interrogated by approximately six guys. Some left and three remained. He was left standing all the time. Later he was still standing except he was naked. He was made to do push-ups — a substantial number. He was hit with either a belt or a rolled-up newspaper while doing them. Then he had to get up and run on the spot, arms outstretched in front of him. Every so often he was made to lift his legs up high while running, and all this was interspersed with more push-ups".

"All the while he was being interrogated the hitting with the newspaper went on, especially if his arms sagged. He was sweating profusely and when once he nearly fell over a chair with exhaustion he was further harassed". Having read the account Mrs Suzman called for an investigation. The Minister of Police denied the allegations but agreed to an inquiry.

In response to Aggett's death the independent unions called for a nationwide half-hour strike call. The Federation of South African Unions called meetings of its shop steward committees around the country to plan the stoppage. The Council of Unions of South Africa — a federation of unions generally suspicious of the role of whites in union leadership — unhesitatingly backed the call. Their statement spoke of the "spontaneous reaction of anger and grief from our factory committees". Even employers' organisations such as the Federated Chamber of Industries instructed their members not to obstruct the stoppages.

The day of the strike action, 11 February, gained massive support. In all some 100,000 workers participated. In Boksburg workers from a chemical plant marched and chanted around their administration building. In the Eastern Cape workers stood silent and still beside their benches. Others, under threat from their employers, simply wore black arm bands. Two days later at Aggett's funeral 5,000 mourners attended

the service at the Anglican Cathedral of Johannesburg.

When the service ended the mourners walked six miles to the graveside. The hearse was surrounded by a crowd that grew as it marched, with the flag of the African National Congress in the centre of a host of union banners, borne aloft through the centre of the city.

### **Thozamile Gqweta**

Thozamile Gqweta has been described as South Africa's most harassed black trade union leader. President of the East London based South African Allied Workers' Union, the 29 year old, Gqweta has been the target of the South African state security and the administration of the so-called 'independent' homeland of the Ciskei (where many SAAWU members live). Currently he is facing charges of contravening the Terrorism Act in the company of SAAWU's general secretary Sam Kikine and national organiser, Sisa Njikelana.

Since the founding of SAAWU Gqweta has been detained five times and was held in the notorious John Vorster Square prison where Neil Aggett died. During his fifth period of detention, in February 1982, Gqweta was transferred to the psychiatric ward of Johannesburg hospital. After a visit by relatives it was reported that he was suffering from a severe headache, depression and anxiety, difficulty in speaking, partial memory loss, as well as a dramatic loss in weight.

In March 1981 Gqweta narrowly escaped assassination when his house was destroyed by arsonists. He survived by climbing through a window as the door had been wired up to prevent his escape. In November the same year, his mother and uncle were burnt to death when their house was similarly burnt down. At their funeral a few days later there were clashes between the Ciskei homeland police and the 3,000 mourners. During the violence, Gqweta's 20 year old girlfriend Deliswa Roxiso was shot dead.

In December 1981, Thozamile Gqweta was asked if he was afraid of the police repression. He replied: "Police tactics are to make you scared, but they won't succeed. If anything they have made me more determined. But these latest incidents have changed me. I used to laugh a lot. Now there is a great anger inside me".

The onslaught against Gqweta and SAAWU represent an attempt by the South African and Ciskei authorities to destroy the union. SAAWU has been adamantly opposed to the 'independence' of the Ciskei, granted by South Africa in December 1981. The Ciskei's 'President', Lennox

Sebe, is committed to crushing SAAWU in the belief that independent unions are unnecessary since the "Ciskei itself is a trade union looking after workers' interests". Sebe's brother, Major General C. Sebe, is head of the Ciskeian security and in September he organised the arrest of some 205 members of SAAWU in Mdantsane on charges of 'riotous assembly' for singing and chanting political slogans.

Co-operation in union busting between Ciskei and the South African security has been explicit. A document written by an officer in the Security Branch of the South African Police on how to break the power of SAAWU was circulated to companies in the area. It proposed the encouragement of TUCSA unions and the creation of lists of unemployed workers to be used to recruit labour for replacing dismissed SAAWU members. In October 1980, the Minister of Manpower Mr Fanie Botha held a meeting behind closed doors with East London employers urging them to hold out against SAAWU. Equally the Ciskei police have publicly acknowledged their relationship with the South Africans. Major General Sebe said that a team of six specially selected men from the South African and Ciskeian security forces were working together investigating the 205 unionists arrested in Mdantsane.

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## *Solidarity*

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Given the background elaborated in the previous chapters it is clear that valuable support and solidarity can be offered to the independent unions of South Africa in their struggle for the democratic and trade union rights so frequently taken for granted in Britain. The unique involvement of Britain with South Africa in the past and the heavy investment by UK based companies today ensure that solidarity action taken by British trade unionists in sympathy with black workers in South Africa can be of crucial significance. Whilst the essential component of the battle against the apartheid system is the action of black workers themselves, British trade unionists can make a legitimate contribution in defence of the demands of South Africa's independent unions.

The value of solidarity action has long been understood by the trade union movement, both nationally and internationally. At all levels of the labour movement strategies for assistance and support of the rights of trade unionists throughout the world have been discussed and policies outlined. South Africa is no exception and rarely does a conference of

trade union members occur in which condemnation of the apartheid system is not high on the agenda of international issues.

Bodies such as the International Labour Office (ILO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) have formulated comprehensive programmes to encourage international action in support of black workers' rights. At a conference in November 1980 held in the TUC's headquarters in London, the ICFTU proposed a plan of "internationally co-ordinated action . . . to prevent the black South African union movement from strangulation". The programme offers assistance to black trade unions in the forms of "financial, technical, legal and relief aid, as well as political support". The ICFTU urged its affiliates, the International Trade Secretariats, individual unions and shop floor workers to support the struggle of black workers to gain recognition agreements for their unions, and during labour disputes in South Africa "by appropriate solidarity action e.g. intervention with headquarters management, boycotts, etc."

In response to calls for assistance from the independent unions, and guided by 'Action Programmes' such as the ICFTU's, the labour movement has illustrated the ability to defend black workers' rights. The Volkswagen dispute described earlier provides one example of concrete achievements gained through international solidarity. In 1981 similar support was gained by workers in British Leyland's South African subsidiary. An attempt to dismiss 2,000 workers at Leyland's plants in Cape Town resulted in the intervention by British trade union officials. At a meeting with the parent company in Britain, Alex Kitson, Deputy General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers' Union and Terry Duffy, President of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, protested to the management about the behaviour of the South African subsidiary. The intervention was successful and subsequently many of the dismissed workers were re-employed. In 1982 action in support of the South African Allied Workers' Union's claim for recognition with the South African Rowntree's Mackintosh subsidiary has occurred at all levels of the British labour movement, with statements by TUC General Secretary, Len Murray, and local action with shop-stewards at Rowntree's headquarters in York.

Less news-worthy but equally important is material assistance to the independent unions. The importance of financial assistance is made all the more obvious given the South African Government's attempts to curb the flow of external funds to the independent unions. As described earlier FOSATU has been banned from receiving donations and is thus

forced to rely only on membership subscriptions. Similarly the International Metalworkers' Federation has been forced to overcome obstacles erected by the Pretoria regime in order to supply finance to a strike fund.

At its most basic level solidarity action is the abhorrence of the cruel tactics employed by the South African State in defence of white suprematism. Every year communications appealing to the United Nations, or protesting to the Republic's Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, are sent from the trade union movement, internationally, nationally and locally. With tragic regularity pickets are held outside the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square, London. In 1982 further need for such solidarity has occurred; the death of Neil Aggett and the detention of SAAWU's leadership are examples of a wave of recent repression. Protests by telegram may seem futile but to a detainee they are a source of invaluable encouragement and continue to embarrass the Pretoria regime.

Contacts established through international solidarity can also provide unexpected benefits to the independent unions in South Africa. In May 1981, the International Metalworkers' Federation held its 25th Congress in Washington. Delegates from the independent unions in South Africa attended and during the Congress held a lengthy meeting with the delegation from Poland's independent union movement Solidarnosc. The meeting resulted in a thoughtful discussion of the struggle for trade union rights in two countries with strikingly similar problems. More controversially, perhaps, visits of trade unionists to South Africa can provide benefits; witness the visit by a German trade union official in the Volkswagen dispute in 1980. Other visits such as that proposed involving Terry Duffy of the AUEW and Bill Sirs of the Iron & Steel Trades Confederation have excited more argument. In any such debate the views of the independent unions in South Africa directly involved must be considered. A statement by the major black unions in the motor industry\* explains their attitude to fraternal contacts: "We strongly favour fraternal contact between workers in South Africa and workers in other countries, at all levels, provided this is guided by the interests and requirements of workers. The aims of these visits should be to strengthen fraternal ties between organised workers in different countries and to carry forward the struggle for workers in South Africa to win the same

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\*Statement 22.10.81 by the Metal and Allied Workers' Union, Engineering and Allied Workers' Union and the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of SA.

rights as have been won by workers in other countries”.

The instances of solidarity action described above are only a few examples and have been chosen largely because they represent a degree of success. Doubtless it is easy to list the failures, the disappointments and the unfulfilled expectations. However, the call for assistance in defence of trade union rights and the urgency for response is ever present. As the trade union movement worldwide struggles to maintain its strength, the need to gain confidence from success is paramount.

In South Africa, the independent unions are growing and challenging apartheid's denial of their democratic rights. Opponents of that 'crime against humanity' must offer their commitment and support to the independent unions. The battle they are engaged in, as Joe Foster, General Secretary of FOSATU, comments "is part of the wider struggle". In South Africa, as elsewhere, an independent and democratic trade union movement and a repressive state are fundamentally incompatible.

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