The Trade-Union Left and the Birth of a New South Africa

Claude Jacquin
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**THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA**

**Claude Jacquin**

translated by Raghu Krishnan

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Foreword

Recent Notebooks for Study and Research have focussed on different aspects of the globalizing world: its effects on women; the ideology and reality of new production systems; and the role of the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization. This Notebook looks at the social and political impact of these changes on a particular country: South Africa.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a new working-class generation took shape in South Africa under the impact of rapid industrial growth. Just as in Brazil, though on a smaller scale, several industrial sectors took off thanks to the investment of mining profits or simply because of foreign investment. As this development occurred, the Black working class mushroomed. As a result, the new wave of industrialization in the Third World contributed in the 1980s to the greatest political and social mobilization in South African history, of which the trade-union movement was one of the central driving forces. This period saw the emergence of a particularly interesting national working-class current: the current that was behind the foundation of the trade-union federation FOSATU (Federal of South African Trade Unions) in 1979.

The author of this Notebook, Claude Jacquin, covered South African events during this period for the fortnightly International Viewpoint under the pseudonym Peter Blumer, and carried out research and studies during ten visits to South Africa between 1982 and 1992. Jacquin calls the core group that founded and led FOSATU “the independent trade-union Left”. He shows that it was one of the most noteworthy political/trade-union tendencies of the period beginning in the mid-1970s and ending at the beginning of the 1990s, the period covered by this study. It emerged and developed in close relation with the structural changes that appeared in South Africa as early as the mid-1970s. Through a study of this trade-union current, Jacquin simultaneously follows the political, social and economic changes that ultimately brought an end to the apartheid system as it had existed until the early 1990s. Indeed, the current partially changed its initial project and then went on to play a role in negotiating the reform of South African society.

In describing this evolution, Jacquin raises two questions: the first concerning trade-union practice in a society and a world undergoing dramatic changes; the second concerning the link between trade unionism and politics in the very specific context of apartheid’s social structure and later of post-apartheid South Africa. The changes in South African society were of a contradictory nature, Jacquin contends. The main issue raised for the Left was how to combine “democratic” emancipation and social
Liberation: what the specific, political and ideological contribution could be of trade-union currents organized fundamentally at the level of single firms. In fact, a fusion between national liberation and social liberation does not only require a certain level of economic and social development, he shows. Nor does it simply depend on the objective existence of a social force in whose interests such a double liberation would be. It necessitates as well a certain number of initiatives, challenges and political projects. It cannot happen without organized forces that prove able to push through the spontaneous social dynamic.

Jacquin describes the many obstacles that emerged to block this road. The world political environment in the mid-1980s was no longer propitious for radicalizing programmes. Neo-liberalism was all the rage; strategic doubts infiltrated the ranks of the most radical. Above all, South Africa’s complex social formation meant that any organized socialist project would necessarily confront other currents identifying with national liberation alone and pure democratic reconstruction. There was no open motorway to the post-capitalist promised land; a new society was not going to be “objectively” or spontaneously ushered in by the social reality of proletarian development. The way to a new society had to be charted, promoted and built, not just preached. But all the forces, trade-union or political, that made the attempt ultimately failed, for a multitude of reasons that this study tries to show. This failure does not make the current ANC government’s choice for neo-liberal management of South African society any more “realistic”: this choice is very remote from any idea of “national democratic revolution” put forward as an alternative to socialism in the debates of the 1980s.

This Notebook was first published as a book in French under the title Une gauche syndicale en Afrique du Sud by L’Harmattan (Paris) in April 1994. Most of the French text has been included in this Notebook. The structure has been slightly modified, however, and the parts concerning theoretical controversies over the nature of apartheid and the country’s economic development in the 1970s and 1980s have been considerably abridged. Thanks are due to Fiona Dove for her critical comments and corrections, though she bears no responsibility for any remaining errors of fact or interpretation. Quotations have been given in the original English. Jacquin takes care not to “call up” texts simply to prove a point: all the quotations used here illustrate arguments or facts that can be found in numerous documents from the period under examination. The results should contribute to lively debates both in South Africa and internationally.
### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>ACTWUSA</td>
<td>Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union of South Africa</td>
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<td>AFCWU</td>
<td>African Food and Canning Workers Union</td>
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<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
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<td>AZAPO</td>
<td>Azanian People’s Organization</td>
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<td>AZACTU</td>
<td>Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions</td>
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<td>BAWU</td>
<td>Black Allied Workers Union</td>
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<td>BCM</td>
<td>Black Consciousness Movement</td>
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<td>CCAWUSA</td>
<td>Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa</td>
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<td>COSAS</td>
<td>Congress of South African Students</td>
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<td>COSATU</td>
<td>Congress of South African Trade Unions</td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td>Conservative Party</td>
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<td>CTMWA</td>
<td>Cape Town Municipal Workers Association</td>
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<td>CUSA</td>
<td>Council of Trade Unions of South Africa</td>
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<td>CWIU</td>
<td>Chemical Workers Industrial Union</td>
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<td>DP</td>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
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<td>FAWU</td>
<td>Food and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<td>FCWU</td>
<td>Food and Canning Workers Union</td>
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<td>FOSATU</td>
<td>Federation of South African Trade Unions</td>
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<td>GAWU</td>
<td>General and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<td>GWU</td>
<td>General Workers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICU</td>
<td>Industrial and Commercial Union</td>
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<td>IFP</td>
<td>Inkatha Freedom Party</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Metalworkers Federation</td>
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<td>LERC</td>
<td>Labour Education and Research Centre</td>
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<td>MACWUSA</td>
<td>Motor Assemblers and Component Workers Union</td>
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<td>MAWU</td>
<td>Metal and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<td>MDM</td>
<td>Mass Democratic Movement</td>
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<td>MICWL</td>
<td>Motor Industries Combined Workers Union</td>
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<td>MWASA</td>
<td>Media Workers Association of South Africa</td>
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<td>NAAWU</td>
<td>National Automobile and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<td>NACTU</td>
<td>National Council of Trade Unions</td>
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<td>NENF</td>
<td>National Economic Negotiating Forum</td>
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<td>NIC</td>
<td>Natal Indian Congress</td>
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<td>NF</td>
<td>National Forum</td>
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<td>NMC</td>
<td>National Manpower Commission</td>
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<td>NP</td>
<td>National Party</td>
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<td>NUM</td>
<td>National Union of Mineworkers</td>
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<td>NUMSA</td>
<td>National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa</td>
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<td>NUSAS</td>
<td>National Union of South African Students</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Pan-Africanist Congress</td>
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<td>PFP</td>
<td>Progressive Federal Party</td>
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<td>SACCOLA</td>
<td>South African Consultative Committee on Labour Affairs</td>
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<td>SACP</td>
<td>South African Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACTU</td>
<td>South African Congress of Trade Unions</td>
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<td>SANCO</td>
<td>South African National Civic Organisation</td>
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<td>SAYCO</td>
<td>South African Youth Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFAWU</td>
<td>Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUACC</td>
<td>Trade Union Advisory Co-ordinating Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>TWIU</td>
<td>Textile Workers Industrial Union</td>
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<td>UDF</td>
<td>United Democratic Front</td>
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<td>UM</td>
<td>Unity Movement</td>
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<td>UWUSA</td>
<td>United Workers Union of South Africa</td>
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<td>WOSA</td>
<td>Workers Organization for Socialist Action</td>
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THE TRANS-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA • CLAUDE JACQUIN
Introduction

During the 1970s in South Africa, several trade-union currents emerged and progressively developed their own identities in a context of renewed social conflict. Their histories intertwined through a process of splits and fusions. Three different trade-union projects emerged on the basis of some distinct political and ideological considerations. The first of the three was established (or re-established) around the trade-union tradition of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and its link to the African National Congress (ANC). The second was based on the Black Consciousness Movement. It set up the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA).¹

The third appeared without any apparent link to a known political current. In 1979, it established the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). In 1985, this current provided a substantial segment of the forces for the new unitary federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

In addition to these three fairly well-defined currents, there were other trade unions that played a significant role in certain branches and regions. Some played an important role in the trade-union debates of the early 1980s. In this context, which current was identified with a “trade-union Left”? For the most detached observers, it could be seen in all these examples of independent trade unionism, whatever the current, since all were opposed to the trade unions integrated into the apartheid system and dominated by organizations of white trade unionists. According to this approach, it was this opposition to the state and to racial trade unionism that characterized the “trade-union Left”.

But for others (for example, journals and researchers who at that time worked in connection with the anti-apartheid social movement) this terminological question was not so easily resolved. It was also necessary to examine the various trade-union projects in relation to the dominant political current, the ANC, and in relation to the legacy of the past. The question of trade-union independence and ideological alignment was not an issue only in relation to the state, but also in relation to the entire history of the political movement for Black liberation.²

In this way, both the press and academic journals came to recognize the existence of a specific “trade-union Left”.

The specific nature of FOSATU

This study focuses specifically on the FOSATU trade-union current, for a number of reasons:

1 A certain number of CUSA leaders were linked to the political group Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO).
2 We are using the generic term used by South African opposition movements. “Black” refers to all those who are not white—whether classified as “African”, “Coloured”/“mixed-race” or “Indian”/“Asian”—in order to conceptualize a category of all the oppressed against apartheid’s racial categorization.

The Trade-Union Left and the Birth of a New South Africa • Claude Jacquin
• FOSATU established the main industrial unions (except in the mines), including in the automobile, steel, chemical and textile sectors.

• At the beginning of the 1980s, it developed an original trade-union project based on an explicit conception of independence from the country's main political forces.

• It corresponded to a major social and economic change in the country, and went hand in hand with the progressive transformation of the organization of the labour market.

• It was in the forefront of those calling for socialism in the 1980s, while later giving birth to one of the major actors in the negotiations process that began in the early 1990s.

Research for this book was undertaken with the following questions in mind: What was the link between the socio-economic changes in the country and the building of FOSATU between 1979 and 1985 (when a large number of trade unions united to form COSATU)? And what exactly was the strategic project of the small, heterogeneous core group that thus found itself at the head of tens of thousands of Black workers?

A parallel examination of the economic and institutional environment gives a better understanding of the objective conditions in which this trade-union current developed its founding orientation, in response to the following four questions:

1. The question of the form of unionization (unionization by industry; internal functioning based on the factories and networks of delegates; the use of new forms of negotiation with the employers and the state).

2. The question of relations with existing political forces, beginning with the African National Congress, i.e. all the issues associated with a long-term trade-union project.

3. The question of trade-union unification with the other two aforementioned currents (leading to the founding of COSATU in 1985).

4. The question of ties to the "civics", the other form of basic social organization in the neighbourhoods and "townships".

These four main debates, which unfolded in various forms between 1982 and 1987, accompanied the slow transformation of the South African political and social landscape. An initial phase came to an end with the founding of COSATU in 1985 and the end of the independent existence of the trade-union current that particularly interests us. However, this current survived as a pole within the new federation, above all through its leadership of the unified autoworkers and steelworkers union (NUMSA). Between 1985 and 1991, it gradually shifted its stance on the following issues:

1. Its strategy for a break with apartheid and the question of the state.

2. Development strategy in a so-called "post-apartheid" society.

3. The choice between confrontation or social pacts with the employers.

It was at the end of this new phase that the leadership group—still at the head of the main constituent organizations of COSATU—finally joined the ANC and the South African Communist Party, on the eve of the opening of constitutional negotiations.

In this way, in less than ten years a group of (usually white) intellectuals and Black workers created a new form of trade-union organization, which emerged as a reference point independent from the ANC and radically opposed to the Communist Party. It led a large number of the strike movements of the 1980s. And it ended up by joining the leadership of the political current that it had widely helped to challenge a few years earlier.

The reasons for this course must be sought through an examination of the events in the

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3 Black residential areas surrounding the main urban centres, reserved for "African" and sometimes for "mixed-race" populations, according to classifications imposed by the Group Areas Act.
context of the evolution of forms of social regulation in South African society, the evolution of the economic crisis, the restructuring of enterprises, and finally the evolution of the political projects of the South African government and the employers as well as of the ANC. History changed course during these events, heading off in directions that no one could have expected a few years earlier. The trade-union Left, or at least those who had made up its leaderships, took over the neo-liberal management of the country after years of opposing the ANC from the left. A shift like this must be explained first of all on the basis of South African factors. But it also involves international parameters. We must not forget that very similar swings took place in the same period among the Sandinistas, in a part of the Salvadoran FMLN, in certain currents of the Brazilian Workers’ Party, and so on: waves of realism in the Third World’s vanguards at a time when nothing of interest seemed to be ahead in the major imperialist countries.
Chapter 1
Economic transformations and the rise of the trade-union Left

Objective developments can never by themselves explain the course of political events. But they shape the long historical cycles, in particular by forging the grillwork of social relations. The period that we are examining was one in which the socio-economic structure of South Africa gradually mutated. In the process relationships among classes began to change, and the racial system sprang leaks from all sides.

Controversies over apartheid

Why did a semi-industrialized country like South Africa undertake the "adventure" after 1947 of aggravating a system of racial segregation produced by colonialism, at a time when new forms of political and economic control over empires were being posed? To what degree did this system meet the real needs of a South African capitalist economy still terribly dependent on its export of primary goods, and whose prices were determined by the world market?

In fact there was furious debate among South Africa's white elites after the Second World War about how best to overcome the contradictions at work, namely economic exhaustion and the crisis of the system of control over the Black populations drawn temporarily from the "reserves" in order to work in industry.1 These problems were amplified by the end of the war and the recovery of world trade. The danger of new resistance from Black workers had been demonstrated by the 1946 strike of African miners. Although this strike was defeated, and attempts at developing solidarity among urban workers had failed, the state needed to find a long-term solution to the problem of social control. In the same way, problems raised by the revival of competitive industrial production in Europe were deepened by the rise in import bills and the balance of payments crisis.

Some sectors of the elite argued for gradually abandoning the migrant labour system. Others said that the best way to maintain a low-cost workforce while avoiding any disruption of the political system was to reinforce the mechanisms of racial constraint.2 The electoral victory of the National Party in 1948 confirmed the victory of these latter sectors, opening up a new period of South African history that was to last until their approach progressively ran out of steam during the 1970s.

"What state policy in effect did was ... to encourage a particular form of industrialization based largely on labour-intensive methods of production".3 The cumulative effects of what could be compared to a type of "industrialization through import substitution" (by analogy with Latin American countries) began to change the structure of South African capitalism. In 1946, the share of

1 These became the bantustans under different racial terminology.
manufacturing in the GNP overtook that of mining for the first time. Mining remained, and by a long shot, the main source of export earnings, which allowed for the import of machine goods for the secondary sector. The state was still intervening strongly in the country’s economy, primarily through a protectionist policy, a strong nationalized sector and, obviously, a highly coercive control of the labour market. During the 1940s, it stepped up this intervention.

At the end of the 1940s and in the beginning of the following decade, most of the profits from the gold mines were still being used for mining development. However, there was already growth in industrial and financial placements. From this point onwards, a group such as Anglo-American played an important role. This group also played a leading role in the development of a local financial market. In 1935, it established Union Acceptances Ltd, along the lines of a London commercial bank, supported by establishments such as Lazard Brothers and Barclays Bank. In this way, the strongest mining sectors began to diversify. But growth in manufacturing investment was accompanied by a new dependence on technology imports and foreign investment: according to Prime Minister Verwoerd at the end of the 1950s, “Desirable development will not take place without the technical knowledge and business skill which accompany foreign capital.”

The productivity levels of the gold mines show that production increased substantially and regularly from 1952 to 1970, with only a small drop in 1967. State income from the gold mines and uranium stagnated around £17 million until 1959 but increased to nearly £27 million in 1960, to more than £36 million in 1961, and climbed up to £60 million in 1965.

Reinvestment by mining companies grew and was increasingly directed to the manufacturing and financial sectors.

Difficult change for the Black opposition

Throughout this period, crucial sectors of the Left were held back by an analysis of apartheid that described it as an “anachronism” and therefore misjudged the stability of the regime. ANC leader Chief Lutuli declared, “Oppression in any guise cannot pay any country dividends… Industry and Commerce are beginning to squeal.”

Important cadres of the Communist Party had the same interpretation: “Industrialisation is incompatible with … group or class monopoly of political (and ultimately of economic) power… This type of despotism [is] a freak, an anachronism which cannot much longer survive.”

Based on this analysis, the ANC and the Communist Party developed a strategy of pressure, to demonstrate the force and desire of Blacks to achieve dignity and civic equality. Campaigns such as the one waged against the pass laws were essentially seen as a way to divide a regime whose policies were not in keeping with the objective needs of a modern economy, especially in a world in which decolonization was on the agenda. Liberal democratic sectors, Anglophone by and large, were to be partners in this approach; it was necessary to show them how apartheid was inadequate, thereby nurturing their disidence in relation to the regime.

4 In 1946, the share of GNP for industry was 17 percent, for construction 2.2 percent, for mining 11.9 percent and for agriculture 13 percent. Duncan, op.cit., p. 264.
5 Innes, op.cit., pp. 175-84.
8 Statistical Year Book, 1964, quoted in Innes, op.cit. In South Africa, uranium is a by-product of gold extraction.
9 Presidential address in the annual report of the National Executive Council of the ANC, 1959.
11 “Pass”: Internal passport for people classified as “African”, and therefore deprived of South African citizenship under apartheid.
The repression in Sharpeville and Langa in 1960 ended a number of illusions. Following upon a series of defeats, with disoriented leaders and a greatly weakened social and trade-union movement, the ANC decided to turn towards armed struggle. Here again, however, decisions were made "not so much from an accurate reappraisal of the strength and indivisibility of white South Africa ... but rather from an illusion of its vulnerability."12

This illusion was enhanced by the fact that the violence of 1959-60 sent foreign capital fleeing from the country, thereby feeding recessionary tendencies. But the effects of apartheid (as a way to organize the work process for Blacks) and political defeat reversed these tendencies. The country once again restored the confidence of domestic and foreign investors and produced the industrial boom which, in ten years, dramatically altered the composition of the Black working class, its skill levels, its concentration and its ability to organize.

Investment cycles and the evolution of industrial employment

The structure of capital during the 1950s, coupled with the weakness of the internal market and the high level of protectionism, determined the particular make-up of the country's industry. The great majority of industrial establishments were small firms: in 1953-54, 65 percent of firms employed fewer than nine workers, and 92 percent employed fewer than 49.13

But the evolution of capitalist accumulation from the 1960s slowly changed the basic character of the South African proletariat. The growing share of profits reinvested by foreign firms (largely British and US)14 encouraged these social changes and capital accumulation generally: from 1965 to 1970 the surplus of capital entering the country remained at a high level. The state did not remain on the sidelines: its share in the stock of capital actually grew faster than the private sector's until the end of the 1970s.15 The 1960s saw the fastest growth in employment, for all racial categories. While the secondary sector held 17 percent of jobs in 1960, this figure rose to 24 percent in 1970. From 1960 to 1970, the number of people employed in industry grew by 63 percent. Between 1963 and 1968, the volume of production grew by 8.4 percent per year on average. Production by private industry grew by 157.6 percent over the decade. The share of industrial manufacturing and construction in the GNP hit 28.2 percent in 1970, as opposed to the mining sector's 10.5 percent. As a result, the "African" manufacturing workforce grew from 357,000 in 1960 to 708,200 in 1976.16 African workers went from 13 percent to 33 percent of the foundry workforce between 1969 and 1971, and went on to make up 44 percent of this same workforce by 1979.17 "One of the most striking changes was the movement of African workers into semi-skilled and skilled jobs during the 1970s and 1980s... It would seem that this new semi-skilled proletariat has superseded the unskilled African proletariat as the numerically dominant stratum of the African working class."18

In the face of these changes, the state and various sectors among employers sought out legal and institutional ways to integrate these new developments into their immediate political and economic strategies. There began a conflict-ridden dialogue between the state and business sectors over the nature and scope of a reform of the system of control over the Black workforce. The debate

came up against the chasm which separated the evolution of capital's objective needs and possibilities for change in the political and institutional arena.

These changes affected the reconstitution of the working-class movement, but also contributed in varying ways to the emergence of different kinds of trade unionism. The different trade-union currents determined their approach in a more or less empirical and doctrinal way, based on their own experiences and depending on the sectors to which they addressed themselves. This is true in particular of the current that we will call the "trade-union Left", which played a key leadership role in 1979-85 in the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and after 1985 in the unified Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

**The political thinking of the trade-union Left and its relation to the economic sectors of its base**

A description of the forces making up the trade-union Left could have extended to all those who—from one union to the next—individually identified with positions known as "workerist". We have decided to reject this description for two reasons. First, no broad "workerist" current ever existed as such. Second, the motivations of the people in question could well have changed from one period to the next. Some may have adopted one position or another in their trade union as a result of their membership in a specific political group.

So instead of looking at some vague constellation of "workerists", we set out to study a trade-union current that was rather well-defined from the start and continued to influence events for many years based on this original clear delimitation. The current's main leaders were members of no party or political movement.

This raises the question of the possible relationship between the formation of this current and the economic sector in which it grew. These sectors, it should be recalled, were auto, steel, textiles, chemicals, and Cape region municipal workers. The case of the municipal workers is specific, in that a part of the union leadership was initially influenced by a political current—the Unity Movement—which it left to work alongside the FOSATU leadership.

We are thus dealing in the main with four industrial sectors. All four experienced similar development through the 1970s: a growth in fixed investment and in the number of workers, greater labour contract stability, and a gradual advance in the skill levels of Black workers. These four industries (along with commerce and the food sector) best exemplified changes in South Africa's industrial apparatus. Further, unlike the commercial and food sectors, the four sectors are striking for the size of companies and concentration of the work force.

It should therefore be kept in mind that the political thinking of the trade-union leaders in question could well have been grounded in the specific characteristics of these sectors: the opportunities they offered, the organization of work and perhaps even the specific needs of the employers. The ideas of "working-class", "workers control", "working-class movement" and "socialism" advanced by this current were largely influenced by its specific characteristics.

**The ideological choices of the trade-union Left**

Several of the main FOSATU leaders did not come from a working-class background and were white intellectuals. The training of these leadership teams, like that later of the rest of the FOSATU apparatus, allowed for this kind of "co-optation", which was actually severely criticized by the political currents in the rival federation NACTU. It helped foster leaders' identification with a specific tradition within the South African Left, a tradition with several decades of history behind it.

Political struggles in South Africa always
combined two elements. On the one hand, there was the broad democratic struggle against racism and for civil rights. On the other hand, there was the struggle between the Black masses—proletarianized in conditions of racial segregation—and public and private employers profiting from this arrangement. The relationship between these two forms of action and demands was not unfolding. It evolved in tandem in South African society, its social formation and economic structures. The complex social structure of the country produced a diversity of experience, of circumstances and political projects. Changes in the political and racial system added to this complexity by nourishing a wide array of political analyses and positions.

There are no societies whose social formation and institutional make-up lead to or justify the emergence of a monolithic “national liberation movement”. There were even less grounds for the existence of such a movement in South Africa. Of course, this is related to what one makes of the relationship between the national and racial question, on the one hand, and the social question on the other. The African tradition of “national liberation movements” relied upon the idea of a single political movement representing the totality of the nation in formation.

This debate existed in South Africa from the 1920s on. As we shall see further on, the ANC was always guided by the idea that the anti-apartheid struggle was the founding moment of a new nation and that, as a result, the ANC claimed to be, along with its allies, the sole legitimate representative of all oppressed sectors. For a whole period, the ANC did indeed put itself forward as the movement of the Africans, with allied organizations among the Indians (SAIC) and the “Coloured” population (CPC), to which were added the SACTU trade union and the Communist Party. Later, especially from the 1980s onwards, the Communist Party was increasingly described as the main “ally” of the ANC, while the “Coloured” organization had disappeared and the Indian organization was being marginalized. The ANC—thereafter officially open to all “races”, including in its leadership—set up a bloc made up of itself, the Communist Party and COSATU. Despite these changes, monolithic centralization was maintained, on the grounds of the overriding demands of the anti-apartheid democratic struggle.

But history belies this approach. For example, during the short history of the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), between 1919 and 1932, there had been a certain degree of political pluralism. In addition to the leadership headed up by Clements Kadalie, there was a current linked to the Communist Party. This current was expelled from the ICU in 1926. Near the end of the 1920s, Communist Party members supportive of Trotskyist criticisms left the party. Some of them were leaders of a rather broad movement in the 1940s known as the Unity Movement. Indeed, a well-known trade-union leader of the 1930s and 1940s, Max Gordon, was a Trotskyist.

This current split apart and was greatly weakened by the end of the 1950s. But these groups still had a strong presence during the 1970s in the Cape Town region, especially among teachers and young “Coloured” activists.

There was thus a (very divided) political current on the South African Left that considered itself socialist while being very critical of the history and line of the Communist Party. While it is not within the scope of this work to examine the past links of each trade-union leader with these groups, it is nonetheless the case that these leaders had a common political approach to the ANC, the

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19 Many prisoners at Robben Island in the 1960s came from this current, alongside those from the ANC and PAC.
Communist Party and the debates relating to them. Their personal political thinking, for example on the South African national question, clearly marked the history of the trade-union Left. A section among them were connected to what Jeremy Cronin called “the emergence of a very vibrant historical materialism, the academic Marxism which arose much at the same time as, and was often interrelated with, the developments on the union front”. A key factor for this generation of radical intellectuals was the development of a renewed Marxist analysis of apartheid and its relationship to capitalist production, by people like Martin Legassick. In this way, an alternative theory to that of the Communist Party gradually emerged.

The representatives of the trade-union Left

Before going any further in the study of FOSATU’s political and organizational trajectory, it is necessary to look more closely at the individual political profiles of a certain number of the federation’s leaders. The first thing that stands out is the key role of white leaders:

- Alec Erwin says he was initially influenced by the French theorists Louis Althusser and Nicolas Poulantzas. He says that the 1960s debate in Great Britain on shop stewards—on grassroots workplace delegates and organization—had been important for people like him. He notes that around that time he and his colleagues decided it was premature to found a new party, and that they were appalled by the division and sectarianism of the British far Left. In 1978, he was a lecturer at the University of Natal, before starting work at the Trade Unions Advisory and Coordinating Council, which brought together the unions that went on to found FOSATU. He also worked with Eddie Webster in the Institute for Industrial Education and with the Wages Commission, which worked with the 1973 strikers. He was the general secretary of TUACC and then of FOSATU, elected in 1979 and based in Durban. He then became a leader of the metal workers union before taking charge of education for the whole federation. Erwin’s case is certainly, along with that of Bernie Fanaroff, an exceptional one, given the extent of his responsibilities in NUMSA and his influence over the union’s positions at different times.

- John Copelyn was a student in Johannesburg when he joined the trade-union movement in 1973. He was a union organizer until 1976, at which point he was “banned” for more than three years. He used this time to become a lawyer. He then went back into trade unionism in the textiles sector, in which sector he went on to be one of the main FOSATU leaders, based in Durban.

- Rob Crompton was leader of the chemical workers union, based in Durban.

- Bernie Fanaroff, an astrophysicist by training, was leader of the steelworkers union, based in Johannesburg.

As we shall see, these leaders did not on their own make up the “leadership group” of the federation. But there can be no denying the political contribution of people who did not have a working-class background, former—white—students and professors who got involved in trade-union activity in the 1970s. So from the beginning of the 1980s onward, one could find a significant number of white activists in either the elected leadership of FOSATU unions or in their apparatus (administration, printshop, education). Indeed, a number of young white activists looking for areas of political activity got involved in FOSATU thanks to this direct (unelected) recruitment for carrying

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21 During the course of interviews carried out in Cape Town in 1982 and 1983, we were able to confirm that the leader of the municipal employees union, John Erentzen, had been a member of the Unity Movement. Before becoming a leader of the miners workers union, Mace Golding had belonged to a small Trotskyist-inspired study group. It should be noted, however, that by the beginning of the 1980s these trade-union leaders considered these groups to be sectarian and outmoded.

22 Interview with author in 1993.

23 Depending on the sentence, “banning” could mean prohibition from speaking at public meetings, from having more than two people over to one’s home, from being quoted in the press, from appearing in print, and so on.
out specific tasks in the trade-union apparatus.

It is perhaps necessary to distinguish figures with high-level responsibilities like Erwin, Copelyn, Crompton or Fana-roff from another layer of cadres, who also had university backgrounds and were white but who only played a major role in the educational departments of the unions and in the elaboration of the union's "theory". But in any case, these people's personal histories and social roots were different from those of Black leaders like Moses Mayekiso and John Gomomo. Mayekiso was a worker from 1973 onwards. He joined the MAWU in 1977 and entered into its national leadership in 1979. He had regional responsibilities (in the East Rand) and played a leading role in the Alexandra township, where landed him in prison. Gomomo had a similar background. He became a union officer and later NAAWU vice-president.24

Our desire is not to explain the trajectory of different individuals based on their past and their social origins. In any event, there is too much dissimilarity. It is not possible to find some pattern wherein there is a group of Black trade unionists with working-class roots on the left and another group of white trade-union leaders from the middle classes. But these white cadres' past quickly gave them a key role in the fashioning of trade-union policy. This raises the problem of how leadership teams are created and how some cadres and full-timers can join the apparatus without any experience working on the rank-and-file level. The same pattern could be seen in all COSATU unions; but the trade-union Left had more white leaders than did the other sectors. This was one element in the make-up of this trade-union current.

This alone does not explain the nature of the FOSATU leadership. The strong presence of these white activists is more a consequence than a cause of the nature of this leadership. It is also because FOSATU (and the GWU) identified themselves as "non-racialist" that many white activists decided to get involved.25 In general, they got involved in trade-union activity based on a strong political commitment to building a specifically "working-class" entity for the anti-apartheid struggle.

It is therefore necessary to examine the leadership group and its contacts in a different manner. It is, for example, very significant that Joe Foster—the second FOSATU general secretary, based in Cape Town—worked closely with John Erentzen, general secretary of the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA). At the time, the CTMWA was the majority trade union among municipal government employees in the Cape Town region. The CTMWA, however, was not part of FOSATU, but an independent union. Despite this fact, all through the period 1981-85 there was close cooperation between the CTMWA and FOSATU leaderships, with respect to both the formation of a big national federation and relations with the current influenced by the ANC and the United Democratic Front.

One can also point to the wide-ranging cooperation between Alec Erwin and the Durban-based academic Enver Motala, who ran the local branch of SACHED-Lacom, an independent and federative body providing publications and training for social movements. Motala worked with Erwin on an educational programme for FOSATU cadres. This programme contained, not without ulterior motives, a section on the crisis of the bureaucratic system in the Soviet Union. In 1987, it was the Durban branch of Lacom that published a book on the history of the trade-union movement that was very close to the positions of the former FOSATU. Although the authors of this pamphlet were independent up to a certain point, it is not

24 We have not raised the case of Maxwell Xulu, another important radical figure in NUMSA. He went on to become its president. At the end of 1991, he was expelled from the trade union for having worked with the political police.
25 Proponents of "non-racialism" distinguished themselves from supporters of a "multiracial" project, which took people's racial origin into account while guaranteeing equality between the races—along the lines of the Freedom Charter, for example. As such, "non-racialism" was opposed to any consideration or notion of "race".
very likely that it was published without Motala's agreement and without consideration of the specific aims of the trade-union Left. Indeed, there were many such publications during the period in question.

It is remarkable to see the way in which these different individuals were brought together in a project as complex as the building of a trade-union federation. The leadership team of the trade-union Left functioned neither as a political party nor as an elected trade-union body acting in line with the statutes of FOSATU and, later, COSATU. But the leadership group did indeed exist and debated its positions. It worked in concentric circles. In our opinion, the central core never included more than 20 people. Outside of this "centre", its structures were those of the trade-union movement. Political debates and decision-making were laid out along the lines of networks of personal confidence and camaraderie, to the most politicized layers of the shop stewards networks.

Is it possible to pinpoint a collective approach among them? A common paradigm? In any event, the following positions recurred frequently within their ranks:

- opposition to the ANC based on a critical reading of the Freedom Charter, which was seen as a "nationalist" document that did not identify the diverging interests of social classes within the liberation struggle;
- opposition to relations with white liberals such as the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), sometimes including the democratic, mainly white students' association NUSAS in their criticism;
- stress on the central, even exclusive, role of the working class in struggles of liberation and to transform society, as opposed to ANC and Communist Party strategy;
- a critique of the Communist Party as a pro-Soviet, sectarian and "Stalinist" current.

At the beginning of the 1980s, it was FOSATU that emerged as the only genuine attempt, of a broad and representative nature, to put this political identity into practice. We shall see how this manifested itself in trade-union debates and, then, how these political positions evolved.

**The birth of FOSATU (1979-80)**

FOSATU's birth in April 1979 signalled the reappearance of a federation composed in the majority of trade unions that were not integrated into the officially system of legally registered, racially segregated unionism. It was the fruit of a slow process of trade-union recomposition that had begun in 1973. 26

In 1977, a certain number of trade unions and coordinating structures had initiated a committee for the building of a unitary federation. This group was composed of the National Union of Motor and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA), a union formerly affiliated with the reformist, white bureaucrat-controlled Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA)—and its "African" counterpart, the United Automobile Workers (UAW)—and several independent Black trade unions that had grown up since the early 1970s, including several linked to the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC). 27

Talks were chaotic. The TUACC pushed for the building of an active and structured federation, which worried some of the weaker unions. There were also the political prejudices of the different currents. Some thought it premature to start up a federation. In the end there were splits among the independent Black unions, with only some going all the way into the future FOSATU.

When it was launched, FOSATU claimed 45,000 members in 12 unions. Of these unions, only two dated from the period before 1973-74, the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (1967) and the Jewellers and Goldsmiths Union (1939). 26 On these years of debate, see Phil Bonner, "Focus on FOSATU", Johannesburg, South African Labour Bulletin vol. 5 no. 1, May 1979. 27 NUMARWOSA and UAW then fused to form the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU).
The first general secretary was Alec Erwin, a white man. The general philosophy of FOSATU included: "Non-racialism, worker control, industrial unions, shop-floor organization, workers' independence, international workers' solidarity, trade union unity."

The application of this programme signalled a clear stance in relation to a number of problems and debates faced at the time by all of the trade-union and anti-apartheid movements taken together.

The building of "non-racial" trade-union organizations meant first and foremost a break with TUCSA trade-union practice, i.e. a break with a corporatist trade unionism organized in racially segregated structures (and of course dominated by white leaderships). But it was also a way to distinguish FOSATU from the trade unionism inspired by the Black Consciousness movement and meant only for Blacks.

The notions of "workers' control" and "shop-floor organization" were, at that stage, essentially clauses on internal democracy and for the accountability of elected representatives. They did not imply the idea of workplace control or self-management.

The idea of building unions by industry and workplace clearly demarcated FOSATU from the general unions. The main reasons advanced for this decision were: the need for a stable and identifiable work force to organize the union, and to make sure it operated democratically and that it could be consolidated based on partial gains stemming from the specific relationship of forces on the workplace or branch level. Later, we will examine the consequences of this decision.

In this respect, the resolution of the first congress stipulated that: The Federation will be composed in the main of industrial unions, believing that within the existing industrial relations structures this is the best way of promoting workers' unity and workers' interests and believing that this is the best way of focussing on areas of workers' concerns. This does not however reflect a belief in the ultimate desirability of the present industrial relations structures.

On the other hand, the idea of working-class independence stemmed implicitly from that of specific class interests. In 1979, this position was still very formal. Its target was probably liberal political forces like the moderate white Progressive Federal Party on the one hand and unionists linked to the Black Consciousness movement on the other. But a few years later this political notion took on an entirely different meaning. At one and the same time, it expressed both the desire for independence from all political movements, such as the ANC, and the quest for an independent strategic project bringing together the working class, the working-class movement and the trade-union movement.

One of the original premises for the trade-union Left was the need for a rigorous trade-union democracy, based on networks of shop stewards and the principle of accountability, to defend the class autonomy of the trade-union movement. At the start, a widely shared sentiment among the members of this current was that trade-union organization was by nature a better democratic instrument than any political organization. The trade-union Left from the start had a very clear conception of the socio-economic mechanisms of bureaucratization in the history of the Communist Parties, social democracy and European trade unions. One of the Left's most unwavering positions in the 1985-87 period was that the idea of a "political party" was by its very essence a source of arbitrary division of the working class. People like Alec Erwin systematically criticized the SACP and smaller organizations for their reference to the notion of "political vanguard".

From the beginning, FOSATU insisted on the importance of regional structures coordinating the activity of different industrial unions. In this respect as well, the founding documents were very clear about the link between solid structures and internal democracy—establishing an implicit oppo-
sition to what was seen to be the loose functioning of certain general unions. This orientation and the specific decisions taken stemmed directly from debates underway in trade-union circles. So much so that in the South African Labour Bulletin article on the founding congress of FOSATU, we find the following passage:

It should be apparent from the foregoing account that many of the criticisms levelled against FOSATU do not hold up. Rather than creating an unresponsive bureaucratic structure, it is organised in such a way as to concentrate most decision making and activities in the regions, where workers can exercise maximum control...28

Throughout the years that followed, FOSATU leaders insisted on internal democracy, shop-steward networks and leadership accountability—in order to highlight the differences between their trade-union project and others'.

At first glance, FOSATU would seem to have replicated a number of European trade-union practices, from France and Germany, for example. The federation was highly centralized according to industrial sector and regional inter-sectoral bodies. It is possible that these traditions held sway when the new federation came into being, as something of a sort never before seen in the South African working-class movement. FOSATU was based in those sectors of industry characteristic of the recent evolution of the country's economy: the steel sector with the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU); and above all the auto sector with the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU). Both sectors had a higher workforce concentration. The textile sector (NU"W), food processing (SFAWU) and chemicals (CWU) also saw a rise in the total number of workers and, to a certain degree, in their workers' level of qualification.

But the real question concerns the link between the nature of these industries and the form of trade-union organization. It makes greater sense to understand the relationship between trade-union structures and the different types of industry than to seek out a straightforward imitation of a "classical European model". That being said, the course pursued by FOSATU was at loggerheads with other trade-union projects of the time. These other projects had themselves developed out of other experiences (small and medium-sized companies, regional peculiarities) and taken root in other sectors of the economy (mines, building, docks).

A "new working-class movement"?

The debate heated up from the beginning of 1982 onwards. In April 1982, FOSATU held its second congress. A general political report was prepared by the core leadership and presented by Joe Foster. This report was subsequently distributed widely as a FOSATU pamphlet, and became the subject of extensive commentary in publications interested in the trade-union movement.29

The report takes stock of the social changes to have taken place in the country. It posits the advent of a new situation for the working class and concludes with the need to build a specifically working-class movement going beyond purely trade-union tasks. Foster explains the term "working-class movement" in a way that signals a broad political movement of the working class. He insists on the fact that, according to FOSATU, this "working-class movement" has never really existed and therefore remains to be built. This assertion implies an historic break between the political and trade-union movements of the past and what is in the process of being built. According to the Foster

28 Phil Bonner, South African Labour Bulletin, May 1979. The author of this article makes a very harsh critique of the non-participation of trade unions influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement and linked to the UTP through the "Consultative Committee". He writes: "It must be considered a pity, in this context, that at or shortly after a meeting called by the African American Labour Centre in Botswana on 21-22 October 1978, the Consultative announced a decision to set up a black counter federation, and so sabotaged any hopes of wider trade union unity."

29 The report is reprinted in the French edition of this work.
The congress report does not go much further. It does not specify the possible or desirable forms such a representative working-class political movement should take in FOSATU's view. In the event, the core leadership of FOSATU never moved beyond the April 1982 congress in the definition of its project and ambitions. Thereafter its more openly political positions were expressed more tacitly and, undoubtedly, with greater caution.

However, a few months before the 1982 congress, Foster raised the need to build a "workers party" in an interview with the SASPU paper. But this idea was obviously not broached at the trade-union congress.

What can be made of the 1982 report? What were its objectives and scope? A few hypotheses can be put forward, based on interviews carried out in South Africa throughout the 1980s, and by examining the 1982 congress in the light of subsequent developments.

The Foster report appears to correspond to a phase of euphoria within FOSATU. It should be noted that in 1982 the ANC was still a relatively weak force. It had yet to re-establish political hegemony over the apartheid opposition as it was able to do from 1984 onwards. To trade unionists it might even have appeared to be a movement handicapped by having its leadership in exile, and therefore unable to grasp the profound changes that had taken place in the country. The core leadership of FOSATU, for its part, felt it was on top of socio-economic developments in the country: the growing incidence of industrial action, the emergence of a new generation of workers, new experiences of confrontation with employers and the state.

The Foster report highlights the possibility of placing the struggle against apartheid within the framework of "anti-capitalist struggles". This approach was in clear contradiction to the political positions of the ANC and the Communist Party. For FOSATU leaders it seemed logical that such a strategy — which they justified by pointing to objective factors — should find an organized expression of one type or another. Foster raises the idea of "building a working-class movement" (after having spoken of a "workers party") — in opposition to the idea of a liberation movement as embodied by the ANC.

The international context of 1982, characterized among other things by the rise of Solidarnosc in Poland, provided an opportunity for the FOSATU leadership to air its views on "actually existing socialism":

*In the Socialist countries similar battles are being fought. Whilst social, political and economic relations in these countries have been greatly altered and there have been great achievements to the benefit of workers, there is still the need for workers themselves to control their own destiny. So Solidarity was not struggling to restore capitalism in Poland, its struggle was to establish more democratic worker control over their socialist society.*

This is a far cry from the position taken by the Communist Party. But in truth none of this is particularly surprising if one keeps in mind the relationship between a number of FOSATU leaders and the heritage of an independent Left wing of more or less "Trotskyist" inspiration.

**From the drawing board to political practice: the difficult transition**

For the FOSATU leadership, the 1982 congress was a culminating point as far as the

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30 According to our sources, the interview with the SASPU newspaper is not likely to have been discussed collectively, unlike the report to the congress.

31 This was only a de facto heritage, since none of the leaders in question belonged to a Left-wing political grouping in the Cape region.
public expression of its political thinking was concerned. Thereafter it expressed its views less directly and in a much more fragmented manner. The congress report was the last attempt at coherently presenting the entirety of the leadership's political positions.

There are a number of possible explanations for this:

a) The ANC rapidly rebuilt itself from 1983-84 onwards, particularly through the United Democratic Front (UDF). It no longer remained peripheral to the activities and problems of the trade-union movement. The FOSATU leadership was soon confronted with growing sympathy for the ANC in all trade unions, including its own.

b) The positions in the Foster report seem to have reached the outer limits of the thinking of the most active elements of the FOSATU leadership. What would be the form and content of a "working-class movement"? How would it be organized? How would it be possible to build such a movement out of a trade-union organization that saw itself as non-sectarian and pluralistic?

c) From 1985 onwards, the FOSATU leadership played a central role in talks between the different trade-union movements in view of their unification and the establishment of a single big confederation. It was therefore difficult for it to take overly explicit political positions, which might have jeopardized this work.

d) The full leadership of FOSATU was itself quite diverse. The core leaders behind the Foster report were in the federation's main trade unions: steel (MAWU), auto (NAAWU), textiles (NUTW) and chemicals (CWIU). But their positions did not hold sway—on the contrary—among leaders in the food processing (SFAWU) and transport (TGWU) sectors. In other words, FOSATU's pluralism was itself a constraint on the application of a specific political orientation.

e) The community organizations known as "civics" grew rapidly in the townships and residential areas from 1982 onwards. Alongside the trade-union movement, they were another form of expression and organization for oppressed sectors. It was very difficult to link up trade unions and the civics. For the FOSATU leadership, the difficulties were compounded by the fact that the social base of the civics was largely made up of workers (unionized or not), youth, women, heads of households and the unemployed.

Going by the logic of the Foster report, the "working-class political movement" that needed to be built should be based as much on the civics as on the trade-union movement. But FOSATU—like COSATU after 1985, in fact—had no solution to the conundrum of forging unity between two very different types of representation of organization. How to go about making them complementary and avoid conflictual relations? None of these problems was ever resolved by FOSATU. Its task was complicated further by the growing control of the ANC (and the churches) over a majority of civics, signalled by the founding of the UDF.

All these factors clearly limited the possibilities of going further in developing a political project after the Foster report of 1982. Nevertheless, some sectors of the FOSATU leadership pursued the objective of building an independent working-class political project through the trade-union movement until 1987-88 (by then they were in COSATU). We shall see what this meant concretely further on. But for the moment, we can highlight two components of this continuity.

First, there was the idea of establishing a "working-class culture" based on working-class self-confidence and a specific identity. This was reflected, for example, in the 1985 production of a cassette of working-class songs. Another example: between 1983 and 1985, the newspaper FOSATU-Worker News ran a series of 18 articles entitled "the formation of the working class" that described the long process of social differentiation from the very start and the different organizations to have successively come and gone. Further, several pamphlets were published.
in collaboration with SACHED in Durban. These pamphlets sought to relate the formation of a specifically working-class history and consciousness.

Secondly, there was continuity in the level of attention given to experiences in other countries, especially in Poland and Brazil. In both cases, at the beginning of the 1980s, there existed the possibility of building a political formation on the basis of a trade-union movement.

In the case of Poland, the leadership of the Solidarnosc trade union had indeed played a political role in its confrontation with the state, and was thereby able to combine trade-union and political representation for a certain time. In so doing, it was able for a certain period to combine both trade-union and political representation. In October 1983, the newspaper Fosatu—Worker News ran a centrespread article on Solidarnosc and Poland. The central thrust of the article closely resembles the analysis of FOSATU leaders of the situation in South Africa itself: a situation characterized by industrial growth, little improvement in workers’ social standing, repression, a tendency towards social control, internal differentiation within the trade union and the evolution of the Walesa current. The article ends by saying that “the struggle of the Polish workers is an inspiration for all other workers in struggle”.

In Brazil, it had been a team of metalworker trade unionists that, in 1979, had made the call for a workers’ party. They reached this goal by founding a party around Ignacio Lula da Silva, a trade-union leader from the outskirts of São Paulo. In 1985, issues 39 and 40 of Fosatu—Worker News published a long report on the Workers Party of Brazil (PT). Although there is no way for us to know who made the decision to run this piece, it is nevertheless significant that the team in charge of the federation’s central organ was able to run it over two consecutive issues. Of course, the autonomy of editorial bodies should be borne in mind in both these cases, as should the role of writers not centrally active in trade-union activity as such. But there can be no denying that the question of the specifically political responsibilities of the trade-union movement arises in a systematic way throughout.

It is wise here to speak of “inspiration” and not of imitation or of modelling oneself on others. It was clear to all concerned that the South African case was very specific. But a number of FOSATU cadres were probably thinking of moving the trade-union movement towards initiating a political project on the scale of those in Brazil and Poland.

This was the guiding concern for the FOSATU leadership during the big debates between 1982 and 1985, the year when COSATU was founded. There were debates on trade-union unity and the type of trade unionism this entailed; on relations with political organizations, particularly the UDF; on relations with the civics and forms of struggle; on the relationship of forces and the policy of sanctions against South Africa; and, finally, on the Freedom Charter and “the question of socialism”.

There is a lot of overlap among all these debates. In the interests of clarity, however, they will be separated before trying to formulate an overall appreciation of the policies carried out by the FOSATU leadership, on the one hand, and by the ANC and the Communist Party on the other. This will give us a better idea of what the trade-union Left looked like in the mid-1980s.

32 The article on the Brazilian PT is signed David Fig of the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), an independent committee of various publications covering international themes with historical education as its goal.
Chapter 2
The test of events

Aside from FOSATU’s member organizations, there were a whole series of other trade unions with different histories and representation in the working class. While FOSATU’s direction essentially came from the loose political current that we characterize as the trade-union Left, other unions were closely tied to the ANC, the Black Consciousness Movement or other political formations. Like the others, FOSATU built itself on the basis both of the specific situation of the economic sectors it was based in and of a particular political vision and strategy.

FOSATU’s tactics proved successful in the early 1980s, as it grew rapidly in a period of intense class struggles. At the same time, its leaders were convinced that broader trade-union unity was needed to sustain the movement’s momentum. The quest for unity pushed them into difficult debates with other trade-union and political currents. The most prominent issues in these debates have already been mentioned: the issue of legal registration of trade unions; the unions’ relationship with other forms of organizing in the Black townships, and with the United Democratic Front; and whether or not to endorse the ANC’s Freedom Charter. The ultimate stakes in the debates were the kind of movement that could put an end to apartheid and the kind of society that would replace apartheid.

The trade-union Left argued that only the workers’ movement could put an end to apartheid, and that the society that should replace it was democratic socialism. For a time this approach was easily combined with the pragmatic choices made by the major industrial unions that composed FOSATU. But it did not provide an answer to the problem raised by some concerning the principle of non-collaboration with any institution linked to the racist system and the regime. It is easy to see that the FOSATU leadership team was trying to win the whole movement over to a brand of trade unionism that built its credibility on partial victories, on the level of a single enterprise or a sector of the economy. What was needed was some appreciation of the difference between the confrontation with the employers and the confrontation with the state per se. The trade-union Left’s class-struggle tactics passed the test of events well. But as it entered the pluralist framework of COSATU in the mid-1980s, its overall social and political project was less clear.

FOSATU’s rivals

In September 1980, the unions of the Consultative Committee (previously part of the UTP), which had refused to join FOSATU, founded the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). The commercial workers’ trade union CCAWU-SA, however, refused to join CUSA and remained independent.

Then there were the unions more directly linked to the Black Consciousness Movement. The Black Allied Workers Union

1 This involved nine trade unions with 30,000 members.
(BAWU) had been created in 1972 as a general union. It experienced a number of splits. In 1984, there were four small unions belonging to this tradition, as well as a small federation, the National Federation of Workers. In August 1984, the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU) was founded, based primarily in construction, mining and the insurance sector.

Other trade-union forces included a split from the BAWU, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), which supported a non-racial project. The SAAWU was a general union based primarily in the Eastern Cape region. Then there was the General Workers Union (GWU), a general trade union based primarily in the Western Cape region; the Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU), also based primarily in the Cape region; the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) which experienced significant growth at the beginning of the 1980s as the commercial sector became increasingly unionized; the Motor Assembly and Component Workers Union (MACWUSA) in the Eastern Cape region auto sector; and the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA).

Together with a few other small unions, these were the forces that COSATU confronted after 1979 and ultimately joined with in 1985 to found COSATU.

**The growth of COSATU**

The years 1980-82 saw a renewed upsurge in labour conflicts and a strengthening of all the trade unions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>14,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>22,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>61,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>98,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>189,022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1982, most disputes (170) revolved around wage demands, followed by those involving firings and layoffs (56). Only 12 strikes arose over disputes concerning union recognition. COSATU's trade unions were involved in the greatest number of job actions, especially in the steel and automobile sectors. The greatest number of conflicts in all sectors were registered in regions where these industries are most present. The highest levels of strike activity were in the Eastern Cape region, particularly in the cities of Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage. There were 55,150 strikers in this region in 1982, 51,740 of whom were autoworkers. Steelworker strike action was concentrated in the East Rand, with 40 strikes involving 13,884 strikers. Compare these figures to the total 30,773 strikers in all sectors in the Johannesburg region, including the East Rand. Such comparisons give us an idea of the relative strength of COSATU within the independent trade-union movement, and of the authority of the NAAWU and MAWU within COSATU.

There were more strikers in the mining sector alone in 1979 (see table), even though walkouts as such were fewer in number. But these striker totals come primarily from the July action over wages, which hit nine mines in the Transvaal and three in Natal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Number of strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metal industry</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto industry</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mines</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Repression was very severe and many strikers were sent back to their bantustans. This was the biggest miners strike since 1946.

2 The SAAWU had 25,000 members in 1981, but subsequently faced brutal repression that severely reduced this number.


4 Rob and Lynne Lambert, ibid. All non-mining sectors are included in these figures. No figures or regional breakdown were provided at the time of the July 1982 miners strike (see later chapter). Once again, however, the numbers are impressive. Official and academic figures are unreliable. Serious writers usually mention this unreliability. To all these figures should be added those of the "political strike" on the day of Neil Aggett's funeral. Aggett was a white trade unionist in the food processing union (AFCUW) who died in prison. The strike hit 155 workplaces, and involved 101,460 strikers.
foreshadowing the role miners would take in the trade-union movement further down the road.

The stakes of trade-union unification (1981–85)

Discussions between trade-union organizations on attempts to build a single union confederation began in August 1981 at Langa. There are a number of articles in South Africa on the course of these talks and their success or lack thereof.5

This first meeting at Langa was held only two years after the founding of FOSATU, from which it can be concluded that FOSATU leaders thought the regroupment process should occur as quickly as possible, especially in these initial stages of growing prestige for their federation. We have already seen how FOSATU’s main unions had played a key role in labour conflicts, and how FOSATU’s prestige was very much due to its hegemony within decisive industrial sectors. This could not be an adequate basis given the conditions of the time. There was not only unequal industrial development, but also the objective weight of the mining sector, the specific socio-economic traits of each of the country’s four industrial regions,6 the difference in status and hiring conditions for Black workers, the size of the state-run industrial sector, and the considerable number of semi-proletarian and marginal workers in the townships. These features were all related to apartheid and its economic history.

FOSATU’s most dynamic trade unions reflected particular experiences. Better than others, they give one an idea of the changes under way in South African society at the time. But they were unable to win over those who saw the system through other experiences and based on different conditions. As a result, for there to be broader trade-union unity, there had to be a more thorough examination of analytical problems, one that went beyond simple declarations in favour of workers’ unity.

The debate over registration

In the end, it was reforms undertaken by the state that fed conflict and the drawing of lines in the first inter-union debates. In 1979, the Wiehahn Commission set forth an initial set of reforms. At the time, because of their racial composition, “Black” unions qualified for none of the advantages accorded to legal unions. But this also meant that the “Black” unions were not bound by any contractual responsibilities or constraints. Police repression was the only means for exercising some form of control over them. The state, to be sure, was increasingly forced to accept the burgeoning of independent trade-union activity among Black workers. At the same time, however, the state also wanted to enact measures that would limit the political effects of this trade-union radicalization. In order to make it easier for Blacks to join registered trade unions, the notion of “employee” was redefined. This first reform concerned Blacks with a stable urban residence; it did not include migrant workers: the “frontier commuters”7 and workers coming from other countries in southern Africa. But this only created further disarray, especially within each industrial unit.

This cost could hardly be outweighed by the benefits of registration since there were indications that some employers (particularly the multinational ones) would eventually afford unregistered black unions official recognition anyway, and negotiate and conclude agreements with them.8


6 This includes the Transvaal, Natal and both the Eastern and Western Cape. These four regions had different economic histories, a fact which was reflected in the “racial” composition of the workforces. The Cape, for example, was seen as an area for preferential economic treatment of the “Coloureds”.

7 This term applied to the main to Black workers working in white areas and returning every evening or every week to their place of residence in a bantustan. Principally concerned by this category of workers were companies strategically placed near bantustan borders.

Finally, in October 1979, the government applied the notion of "employee" to all Black workers, except for those coming from countries that had never belonged to the Republic of South Africa. Bantustan "citizens" therefore qualified as "employees" from that point onward.

Racially-mixed unions remained illegal, however, unless special permission was obtained from the government. Requests for this permission were so numerous that the government made a number of concessions. Finally, in 1981, an amendment removed all references to race and gave "employee" status to foreign workers.

It was absolutely clear to all the trade-union organizations that the government was trying to manoeuvre and impose a series of legislative responsibilities and constraints—legislation which until then had only applied to very moderate white-controlled trade unions—on independent, radical trade unionism. The attitude taken by each trade-union organization to these developments depended to some degree on their theoretical appreciation of apartheid and on how they perceived their relationship to state institutions generally speaking. After the question of official registration soon came that of membership in the Industrial Council, a sectoral negotiation body. In this case as well, the attitude taken by each union depended on its specific history, its strength and its political evaluation of such negotiation bodies.

The point here is that until the independent unions are strong enough to win effective representation in industrial councils or other industry-wide forums, the possibilities of using this institution to limit managerial powers in the interim are limited. In allowing Africans access to the industrial councils it was intended that industrial conflict would shift towards the regulating structure of the industrial council and away from the shop floor.

When it was founded in 1979, FOSATU was made up of three registered and nine unregistered trade unions. The CTMWA—a non-FOSATU organization, which we group together with the FOSATU current for reasons given above—was also registered, one main reason being that its members were employed by the government.

The situation was similarly mixed in FOSATU's competing federation, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). A few of its trade unions were registered, others not. In 1981, three were members of the Industrial Councils, to which trade unions linked to the Black Consciousness Movement were generally opposed. As for the GWU, it was not registered.

MACWUSA (auto) and SAAWU (general trade union) were also opposed to registration and the Industrial Council. They planned to build themselves both in the workplaces and in the townships. Finally, the food processing workers' trade union, the FCWU, was formally divided between a registered wing and an unregistered ("African") one. The general secretary presiding over both sectors, however, took a position against registration.

These questions of registration and contractual framework provoked what were to become some of the first disagreements that surfaced in negotiations for unification. The debate on registration took the shape of a lively polemic against FOSATU's registered trade unions. The attack came from the GWU, and in a much more aggressive way from the SAAWU. Their arguments were very similar, and centred on the loss of independence in relation to the state and the setback for genuine trade-union democracy represented by the requirement to respect official guidelines and intervention. However, it soon became clear that the trade unions under attack were no more likely to fall prey to these dangers than those who rejected registration.11

9 in principle, registered trade unions had to fulfil a long list of requirements concerning internal functioning and finances.
On the other hand, in our view the argument that the non-registered unions (SAAWU, GAWU, MACWUSA) would be more exposed to repression was not valid. The terrible repression the unions faced had other explanations, such as the links between their leaders and political organizations (the ANC and Black Consciousness Movement) and the weakness of their social roots, which meant they had little influence on their employers. In the case of the SAAWU, its location in the East London region also meant that it was a target for repression from authorities in the neighbouring Ciskei province.

But the polemics over registration touched on another question, that of the possibility of maintaining the legality of militant trade unionism under a regime such as the one existing at the time in South Africa. Even though the question is a legitimate one (and events proved the trade-union Left had the right answers), the debate was largely used by the ANC current to denounce what they called FOSATU’s “legalism” and trite irresponsibility. This flowed from ANC experience in the 1960s, when it decided to pursue an overall clandestine approach. In 1977, a SACTU leader was already spelling out this approach for the nascent independent trade-union movement.

SACTU recognises that there are ultimately only two options open to legal African trade unions: either to advance, taking up political as well as economic questions, and eventually being crushed or driven underground; or for leadership to become co-opted and the unions emasculated—tools in the hands of the employers and registered unions.... Repression of trade union activity means that in the long term, meaningful advances can only be made on an underground basis.12

While registration was seen by FOSATU as an appropriate option as long as the trade union was non-racial, the issue of the Industrial Councils provoked a debate within the federation. In November 1981, the federation took a position against the Industrial Councils. After criticizing the very nature of the council structures and trade unions who would get involved in them, FOSATU decided:

FOSATU resolves:....
1. that the Industrial Council system in its present form is unacceptable.
2. that its affiliate unions should not enter into such Councils on terms which are disadvantageous to them.
3. that FOSATU affiliates should jointly begin to negotiate a system of plant based and industry wide negotiations within the framework of FOSATU’s principles of negotiation.13

The 1982 congress saw a deepening of the debate. There were two positions. The Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU) presented a motion against participation, while the textile union presented an opposite motion. The federation pamphlet issued after the congress reported, “After a long debate on the question no clear consensus emerged ... [and] the matter was referred back to the affiliates for further discussion.” At first glance, supporters of participation had an essentially pragmatic approach. The same pamphlet said:
The larger FOSATU unions have experienced a growing need for larger-scale bargaining structures. MAWU with its 335 factories in the Transvaal has been finding it unmanageable to negotiate separate procedural and substantive agreements in all plants.

The same article reported that the autoworkers and textile unions held the same position. This position was quickly—though inaccurately—seen as that of the whole federation.

Behind what would seem to be the pragmatism of this position, there was in fact a clear conception of the kind of trade-union movement that should be built. The FOSATU position was based in the last analysis on the conception of the trade-union Left; that the workers’ movement would be unified and built as a result of an accumulation of victories in economic struggles. FOSATU’s rival


THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA  •  CLAUDE JACQUIN
unions, linked to other political currents, understood what was at stake.

Attacks on the FOSATU position came from all sides. They came from unions linked to the Black Consciousness Movement, which on principle rejected non-racial confederations with white members. They argued that registration and, especially, participation in the Industrial Councils were the primary reasons FOSATU’s project was vulnerable to “co-optation” and manipulation.

Attacks also came from trade unions heavily influenced by the ANC, such as the SAAWU, which—we believe, and as we shall see further on—used the debate to put forward a seemingly radical argument as a way of challenging the FOSATU leadership’s overall political project.14

Finally, in January 1983, the textile workers union of the FOSATU decided to join the Industrial Council in their sector. The MAWU followed suit on February 20, 1983. A MAWU pamphlet was published by the federation to explain what was going on and to accompany the decision with a parallel strengthening of the shop-stewards’ working bodies.15 Contract gains, secured thanks to a strong trade-union position in the sector and an effective organization of local-level strikes, convinced many other trade-union groups of the correctness of their approach. Other debates were carried out during the course of the negotiations. The FOSATU leadership was most concerned over the shape of the future federation. They had to convince others that the FOSATU model was the most appropriate—with its workplace-level sections, its sectoral trade unions, its regional structures, and its rank-and-file democracy based on the shop stewards networks.

The debate got quite heated, since adapting to this model would involve major changes for some of the non-FOSATU unions. It would mean, for example, breaking general unions into industrial sectors in order to merge with the others. It would also mean clarifying membership data, to determine who was “paid up” and who was merely “signed up”.

The FOSATU leadership managed to win the others over to its specifically trade-union arguments. But it is important to note that unity towards the foundation of COSATU began when the SAAWU charged its position—and it did so, in our view, only when ANC and Communist Party leaders in exile decided to change their position.16 Unity was also given a major boost when the NUM, the mineworkers union affiliated to CUSA—and far and away the federation’s biggest union—decided in December 1994 to break from CUSA and participate fully in the founding of COSATU.17

In our opinion, to understand this development it is necessary to understand the influence of the Communist Party on the NUM leadership, which up until the break had identified with the Black Consciousness Movement. An analysis of the rapid evolution in the views of such a figure as Cyril Ramaphosa—the central NUM leader—may offer an understanding of what was going on at the time.

The question of relations with the civics (1982–87)

One of the main problems the new trade-union movement had to face was the emergence of a new form of organization among the Black population: the “civics”, also

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14 Organizations such as MACWUSA used the registration debate as a pretext for boycotting a number of common meetings. A block formed for some time around the SAAWU and MACWUSA, in opposition to the FOSATU/GWU/CTMWA combine.
16 In its January 1982 issue, Workers Unity, organ of the SACTU in exile, underlined the importance of the unity talks underway, while highlighting SACTU’s role and exaggerating SAAWU’s importance in the country.
17 The NUM was founded in 1982. It grew rapidly after the major strike of July that year. In 1983, it claimed 20,000 members; in 1984, it claimed 110,000. When founded, it too was opposed to registration and participation in the Industrial Councils.
known as community associations. This was often used as an umbrella term for all the community-based groups organized on the township level.

The civics developed quickly in the Cape region at the end of the 1970s. To some degree they represented continuity with the kind of organizations that had emerged in the townships at the time of the June 1976 movements in the Transvaal region.

Each such organization had its own history, emerging in response to the specific needs of a township or neighbourhood. Many appeared as organizing committees for the boycott of public transport against fare hikes or for rent boycotts when rents were increased. Some took the form of political committees, and took up all the problems a community faced. The movement was highly diversified, and included cultural, religious, youth, university and high school student and parent associations, which were all progressively integrated into the civics framework. As a result, there was not just one committee per neighbourhood or per township, but rather a complex weave of activist groups and areas of struggle.

It seems that the civics emerged in the Cape region as a result of the influence of two competing political currents present in the region. These were the independent political Left (loosely identified with the political legacy of the Unity Movement) and the current linked to or influenced by the ANC. The networks of associations were formed along lines of sympathy with one current or the other. Unity Movement activists formed the Federation of Cape Civic Associations with the associations under their control, while ANC and Communist Party activists formed the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC). On the national level this segmentation was increased with the specific activities of the Azanian People’s Organization (Azapo) and of the members and sympathizers of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC).18

Consequently, by the middle of the 1980s most political currents appeared publicly under the banner of the grouping of civics under their control.

It was not easy for the trade-union Left to orient itself in this maze of organizations and organizational forms. It had to deal with the emergence of a form of social organization with potential links to the huge mass of people either not working or in companies inaccessible to the trade-union movement. At the same time, it noticed that these structures quickly became sources of conflict between the different political currents. It also tended towards a kind of systematic mistrust of these community associations, where it saw the co-existence of contradictory social interests.

There were thousands of civics, so it is difficult to come up with an all-encompassing classification. However, as with the trade-union movement, the main activists in many of these associations were people that had a certain degree of social stability and political finesse. Many were teachers, people from the churches, doctors and, generally speaking, people from middle-income families in the different neighbourhoods. It would be difficult, however, to conclude that the base of the civics movement was socially different from that of the unions.

Nevertheless, unwilling to accept the impact of those it called the “middle classes”, the trade-union Left (FOSATU, GWU, etc.) sought to establish its own presence in the neighbourhoods as a way of imparting a kind of “working-class hegemony”. As far as we know, this was the goal of leaders of the trade-union Left, including in the period following the foundation of COSATU. A few examples of areas with strong trade-union influence can be cited: Alexandra in the Transvaal; a few townships in Uitenhage linked to the auto plants; and for some time in the Howick region, in relation to the MAWU strike at BTR-Sarmcol.19

18 Azapo was the political heir of Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Biko was among the first to organize Black students and slum dwellers into health groups.
Our on-site interviews show that there were indeed trade-union efforts to establish a base in the townships, with the goal of asserting the political weight of the working-class movement. Civics were seen either as a complementary force or as competition depending on their links with the trade unions in the region. A variety of conflicts and problems emerged from 1982 onwards over day-to-day tactics and relations with the different political forces.

From 1982 onwards there was a public debate in the Cape region between the associations linked to CAHAC and the Food and Canning Workers Union on the kind of organization that would be set up among the neighbourhoods of Houtbay Port. The polemics grew increasingly hostile in step with broader social conflicts. Calls for general strikes, local and regional stay-aways and boycotts against white-owned businesses were directed indiscriminately at both factory workers and township residents. In areas such as Port Elizabeth and East London, where even then unemployment rates were no lower than 50 percent, it was not possible to organize such broad initiatives without joint work between the trade unions and the civics. Of course, both would call for this kind of unity. But the political stakes were such that each sought to establish hegemony over the other.

There was a range of flashpoints, including between Azapo-controlled associations and some trade unions. But the more the ANC extended its influence over the civics, the more conflicts became a standoff between the ANC (with its activists working in the name of their association and supporting the Freedom Charter) and FOSATU's main trade unions. “Who controls the movement? How is it organized? What democratic structures can be combined with the need for action?” These were the questions regularly raised during these debates.

A long text signed by Daniel Dube, an autoworker trade-union leader from the Uitenhage region, came out after such a conflict in June 1985. He speaks of the majority role of FOSATU in his region and in the auto sector. He then denounces the sectarianism and manoeuvres which he sees as the driving force behind the local general strike call of the minority trade unions with links to the UDF and the civics. He writes: The FOSATU local’s objection to the stay-away was to do with the climate of retrenchments in the area which they felt was not conducive to industrial action of this kind.

Later on he expresses his disagreement with the way joint preparatory meetings for these kind of struggles are organized. He says some participants represent no forces present on the ground and critiques the non-democratic character of the debates.

There is no shortage of examples, with physical violence in some instances. FOSATU leaders complained that, in the absence of any real centralization, groups of youths linked to the civics often attacked workers merely going about their regular jobs. In this way, bus drivers were attacked, and even killed, by youth who either did not understand or simply ignored trade-union opposition to this or that strike call. In his report, Dube writes: However in early May there was a funeral for a member of FOSATU who had been shot in the violence.... Throughout the funeral procession groups of youths stoned the procession from a distance.... When the last of the traditional ceremonies were over the FOSATU people set about wrecking their revenge on the youths who had stoned the funeral.... The [Uitenhage Youth Congress] retaliated by petrol bombing two of the members' homes.... The FOSATU members formed defensive rings around the homes of the main FOSATU leaders ....

There was a general strike on November 5-6, 1984 in the Transvaal region. The strike was jointly called by the trade-union movement, including FOSATU and the UDF-linked organizations (including the student organization COSAS). This was a turning point of sorts in relations between FOSATU and the UDF/ANC. While it did not reduce the

20 Stencilled document.
amount of conflict and misunderstanding among the rank and file, it made possible genuine unity between trade-union structures and UDF leadership bodies. A number of non-contradictory interpretations of this phenomenon are possible.

First of all, FOSATU had succeeded in establishing sufficient authority to exercise pressure on the UDF with respect to the forms and conditions of a strike of this type. But it is also likely that the Communist Party's turn in its relations to the trade-union Left, on the question of the construction of a united federation, took place around this time. From that point onwards the process picked up momentum, and organizations like the SAAWU had to give into the decisions of the majority in unification talks. The November 1984 Transvaal strike was a major success. In response, the government accurately targeted its repression by and large against trade unionists. Many trade-union leaders, including Chris Dlamini (FOSATU), Moses Mayekiso (FOSATU) and P. Camay (CUSA), were arrested. The state-owned oil company Sasol, to cite just one example, dismissed 90 percent of its 6,500 workers.

Even though relations between the trade-union Left and the ANC progressively changed from 1985 onwards, and its relations with the UDF also changed after the founding of COSATU, relations with the civics often remained quite strained. It should be noted that the report by Daniel Dube quoted above was written in June 1985: just a few months before the founding of COSATU, at a time when it can be said that a number of conflicts with the ANC current were formally in the process of being resolved.

This question of the civics was always intertwined with that of relations between trade unions and political forces. In the main, the issue was one of relations with the ANC and its creation of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

Debates on political movements and the creation of the United Democratic Front (1983–84)

FOSATU had emerged within a specific context: that of a renewed upsurge in social conflict after a period of defeats and setbacks. The specific conditions of repression in the 1960s and 1970s, and the strategic orientations of the ANC and the PAC, created a relative generational split between the new struggles of 1975–82 and those of the 1950s. It is on the basis of this split that Joe Foster, FOSATU general secretary at the time, came to speak of his goal of building a new working-class movement.

However, while until 1985 the ANC was unable to establish its hegemony in the trade-union movement, it succeeded in the civics and in the student movement. Joe Foster and FOSATU's initial project involved trade-union intervention outside of the workplace, in the townships. The project existed and was debated, but was never really implemented.

This gave the ANC extra space to rebuild itself in the country. It did so based on its modest trade-union presence (SAAWU, MACWUSA and so on), its relations with the church (Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak) and with white liberal milieux (for example, the student union NUSAS and elements of the Progressive Federal Party). The opportunity presented itself with the government announcement of a constitutional reform aimed at creating a three-chamber system (white, "mixed-race" and "Indian") and a consultative presidential council.

All the opposition forces denounced this plan and called for a boycott of the "mixed-race" and "Indian" elections. The first initiatives came from the Cape region and were

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21 We are referring to "armed struggle" policies based on an organizational apparatus for the most part in exile and dependent upon its relations with its host governments. This led to a constant transfer of membership out of the country and inhibited a full understanding of domestic socio-economic developments.
largely united in character. The Disorderly Bills Action Committee (DBAC) brought together the different political currents in its preparatory meetings, while the trade unions participated as observers. But this broad framework was soon scuttled under the pressure of manoeuvres and sectarianism setting the ANC current and various groups of the Trotskyist Left against one another. While a number of the Trotskyists founded the National Forum Committee with Azapo, the ANC for its part set up the UDF, making sure first to set aside a significant place for church representatives. Nevertheless, the big launch meeting in the Cape gave a platform to Archie Gurned, son of a former ANC president, Albertine Sisulu, wife of imprisoned ANC leader Walter Sisulu, and SAAWU president Thozamile Gwetha.

The creation of the UDF exacerbated political tensions between the ANC current and the trade-union Left. Indeed, after the debacle of the DBAC, the trade-union Left declined the invitation to participate in the UDF. Only trade unions like the SAAWU joined the CUSA federation joined both the UDF and the National Forum Committee. FOSATU and the other trade unions—at the time involved in unification talks—refused to join the UDF, making it a front of civics under the umbrella of unity between the ANC and the progressive churches.22

The arguments against joining the UDF put forward by the trade-union Left were primarily inspired by the ANC's growing rivalry with it in the broadly defined Black social movement. It is easy to see the difference between the creation of the UDF and the project advanced in the Foster report. In a social formation such as South Africa, it is not possible to unite and lead Black workers without a suitable organization genuinely rooted in the townships and carrying out specific, ongoing activity there. The emergence of the civics and then the creation of the UDF to coordinate the activity of all those influenced by the ANC (the majority), signalled the first defeat for those who had hoped to found a broad movement with no links to the old leadership teams.

On October 15 and 16, 1983, the FOSATU central committee formally decided not to join the United Democratic Front. Its resolution argued that unity had to created inside the workers’ own organizations, on the basis of their own class interests. The UDF was an organization representing a variety of class interests and with no clear structure, it said; therefore the majority of citizens could not control it and workers' interests would be at risk inside it. The resolution went on to characterize the UDF’s fight against the political oppression of the majority of South Africans as “progressive”, however, and said that FOSATU welcomed and supported the UDF’s campaign against the draft constitution.23

Cape region municipal workers leader John Erentzen explained his trade union's decision to join neither the UDF nor any other such grouping, in the interests of pursuing the specific talks aimed at trade-union unification.24 The same position was taken by the GWU and the Food and Canning Workers Union. Some leaders argued that, given the political division, trade unions should not join any front, lest they lose their ability to unite workers as a result.25 But in general positions were taken on the basis of more developed political conceptions. The most significant example is the interview with GWU general secretary David Lewis.26 His main criticism was directed at UDF functioning. He argued that this type of movement could not be run along the same lines as democratic trade unions. Without openly raising the question of the ideologically dominant current in the UDF, he under-

22 White liberals were also members of the UDF. These included the student organization NUSAS and the women’s group Black Sash. The “liberal” label stems from these groups’ links to the Progressive Federal Party and traditional white democratic sectors. Their ranks also included ANC and Communist Party members.
23 FOSATU waged its own public campaign inside and outside the workplace against the government plan and for a boycott.
25 A split soon occurred in the media workers union (MWASA), with the pro-UDF wing creating its own union.
lined the importance of preserving the independence of the workers movement, while according to him the UDF was a “multiclass” organization. The interview was a long plea for the existing trade-union and working-class democracy—the description of which, in our opinion, was simplified to some extent for the purposes of argument—against UDF structures, which escaped rank-and-file control.

The ANC’s response was extremely aggressive. It was carefully organized from within the UDF, in publications such as South African Labour Bulletin and those published in exile (the ANC organ Sechaba and the SACTU organ Workers Unity). Workers Unity published a kind of open letter to David Lewis which was widely reprinted in the country. The letter provides a clear notion of the ANC’s terms of debate.

Briefly, in the letter the ANC argues that non-UDF trade unions are pursuing an “economist” policy and refuse to join the political struggle to bring an end to oppression. It argues that these unions are led by people with their own political project, which is totally opposed to the historic, legitimate leadership of the ANC and SACTU (or even the Communist Party). The letter says that these leaders are incapable of understanding the importance of social alliances in a country like South Africa in the struggle against apartheid, and that their argument about democracy leads to a sectarian isolation of the workers.

The open letter to David Lewis says:  
An organiser of the working class must play a leading role in struggle, thus has to be concerned not only with winning the working class, but also other sections of the people.... As an academic yourself, who moved into the field of trade union organisation, you should be well aware of the importance of winning over as many allies as possible to the side of workers.

SACTU continued to be put forward as the clandestine trade-union network and the driving force of the South African union movement—which, of course, could only exasperate the independent trade-union Left. The documents speak of the ANC’s influence in unions like the SAAWU to provide an ambiguous vision of SACTU’s “clandestine” activities. But SACTU was in reality only a label given to political work oriented towards the trade unions—and the ANC representative in international trade-union circles.

SACTU declarations evolved in tandem with growing prospects for trade-union unification (into the future COSATU). SAAWU even received direction in this regard. In a 1984 SACTU document, the following credo appeared:  
We are convinced that there is no trade unionist in our country today, who is not interested in the transformation of the existing general workers unions into national industrial ones.

But SACTU also places a brand of “trade-union” pressure on the political debate FOSATU was hoping to pursue. And often without much in the way of subtlety: Trade unions are not and cannot replace a political party of the working class.... Political misconceptions relating to the history of our struggle have developed in some sections of the democratic trade union movement.... It is both vital and urgent that these inaccuracies are corrected as they can potentially divide not only the unions, but the overall liberation movement.... The concept of the political alliance which exists between SACTU and the ANC has been distorted.... This is racist propaganda. SACTU and the ANC have always functioned as autonomous organisations.... The continuing role in the development of our struggle of the Communist Party, operating underground since 1910, has been ignored.

27 Some trade-union documents—using a term that undoubtedly left their membership in the dark—denounced the UDF as a “popular front”.  
28 “SACTU is the pillar that supports legal trade unions; without it, today’s non-racial and independent trade-union movement would not exist.” Original in French: “Message aux syndicats canadiens”. Sactu Newsletter, summer 1983.  
29 Supplement to Workers Unity. SACTU, no. 39, 1984.  
30 Workers Unity, June 1983.
The Communist Party (SACP) also played a key role in these debates. Given that the different positions of the trade-union Left stemmed from the observations of the Fosater report and FOSATU’s political analyses, questions concerning the party and the working class primarily concerned the Communist Party tradition. In the ANC-SACP duo, the ANC was seen as the broad and leading framework of the national liberation struggle and the “national democratic revolution”. The Communist Party supported this working framework and helped build the ANC. Its specific role was two-fold: organizing the “communist and working-class vanguard” within the ANC-SACTU-SACP alliance and becoming—but only after the establishment of a democratic society—the party struggling for socialism.31

This rigid division of historic tasks gave the SACP the job of attacking certain specific FOSATU theses. The SACP performed its task with great relish, using the well-known methods of its political culture to vilify its opponents. It forgot nothing, especially not the references to Poland and the Brazilian Workers Party.32

This polemic continued until 1986. Until then, almost every issue of African Communist contained a polemical article and warning against the “workerist” current. The articles denounce the “simplistic economism” of those unions refusing to join the UDF33 and uncover an anti-communist plan that denies the “legitimate” and “historic” role of the SACP.34 All this clearly had an impact on relations between the UDF (where most Communist Party members inside the country were active) and the trade-union Left.

The trade-union Left underestimated the weight of the ANC and the SACP. Only later on did it become aware of the ANC’s and Nelson Mandela’s prestige, the impact on youth of symbolic Umkhonto we Sizwe armed attacks and, above all, the ability of SACP members to rebuild in the civics and then in the unions the broad base they had lacked at the beginning of the 1980s. From this standpoint the creation of the UDF was a turning point in the political race between the two forces. The UDF boosted the public and semi-public forums in which the ANC current could appear and provided the necessary breathing room for the reorganization of the SACP’s activities. Moreover, the trade-union rank and file could not see the problem with being in favour of trade-union forms of action and organization while supporting Mandela’s organization. As a result, the debate never really filtered down further than trade-union leaders and some shop stewards’ circles. The trade-union Left, including the main leadership of FOSATU, was to discover that the influence of the ANC current was increasingly being felt within its own organizations.

Doubts started to creep into the nationwide leadership bodies of its own organizations. Had the 1982 congress report been too ambitious? How could the trade-union movement play such a political role if a part of the terrain was already occupied by the ANC? How would it be possible to carry out such an audacious project in a country where history had erected so many obstacles?

31 It should be recalled that at the beginning of the 1980s, a section of the ANC leadership was made up of SACP members and that the SACTU apparatus was essentially made up of party members. It should also be recalled that the armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, was not initially conceived as a mere tentacle of the ANC but rather as a joint ANC-SACP force. See the SACP organ African Communist, second quarter 1976, and documents from the 1961-65 period in South African Communists Speak, 1915-1980, Inkululeko Publications, London, 1980.
The first debate on the Freedom Charter and "socialism" (1985–86)

These doubts among trade-union leaders still were not sufficient to reduce their opposition to the ANC and the SACP. They knew that ultimately their differences were grounded in different analyses of South African society, on the socio-economic characterization of apartheid and, lastly, on the nature of their strategic projects.

In a country where the Communist Party was outlawed and all communist and subversive propaganda (as determined by the government) was severely repressed, it was very difficult to pursue discussions on these subjects. But the trade-union Left nonetheless supported a socialist project, which it advanced—along with a certain number of academics in its ranks—through a critique of the Freedom Charter.

For the ANC, the campaign in favour of the Charter (a campaign largely taken on by the UDF) had an initial symbolic value. Adopted in 1955, the document was the best reminder of the history and legitimacy of its political struggle. But the Charter also prescribed a specific political (as well as institutional and socio-economic) project that echoed both the ANC's radical national project and the Communist Party's strategic conception. The SACP characterized South African society as one of a "colonialism of a special type" (a kind of internal colonialism), which meant that there had to be a first stage, that of a modern democratic state based on universal suffrage and the "redistribution of wealth". Questions of social relations and the nature of the state were brushed aside in the name of forging an alliance with all classes and social layers interested in bringing an end to the racist regime.

For its part, the trade-union Left did not share this "stagist" approach. It advanced a project combining democratic reforms and a break with the foundations of capitalism. Depending on the individuals and organization, this approach had two possible origins.

The first was the old Trotskyist, anti-Stalinist tradition which had long played an important role in the Cape and certain areas of the Transvaal.35 The second, which had some overlap with the first, was an analysis of apartheid as a specific form of capitalist extraction of surplus-value. The struggle against racial segregation therefore took the form of a project aimed at changing the social relations of production.

Due to repression, for a whole period trade-union leaders limited themselves in their public expression of this line. But all the shop stewards' educational material, for example, include these analyses. This is why the debate over the UDF quickly became a debate over the Freedom Charter, seen by the trade-union Left as a programmatic basis for the ANC-SACP combine's "stagist" strategy.

There was clearly another reason for this public debate. UDF leaders were waging a broad offensive to get the Freedom Charter accepted as the only legitimate document of the Black struggle. Opposition to the Charter was equated with treason and there were many cases of physical intimidation against those who, for one reason or another, expressed doubts about its usefulness.

Relations with white liberal currents certainly played a big role in the polemic. For supporters of the Charter, an alliance with white liberals was seen as a necessary stage in the destabilization of the regime and in the search for long-term social alliances; others saw it, on the contrary, as a dangerous compromise with a section of the employer class.36 The debate included public articles. The academic Duncan Innes explained that

35 The reference here is to the old debates over the nature of the revolutionary process in dominated countries, which set the majority of the Communist International under Stalin's control against the Trotsky-led opposition. See Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky, 3 vols., Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1954, 1959, 1963.
36 The Freedom Charter itself actually created some problems for the UDF in its relations with the "enlightened" sectors of the employer class, inasmuch as the Charter called for the nationalization of the country's main companies.
"a working-class vision of the future requires more than the Charter offers." 37

In a contribution to the debate, FOSATU leader Alec Erwin wrote:
The struggle for liberation from a regime such as that in South Africa requires maximum unity of purpose amongst the oppressed people.... However, can the usual two stage argument provide sufficient protection for the working class.... Unity must now be based on the politics of transformation that will secure the interest of the working class and rural population. It must address the problems of the economy and evolve practices that will establish the basis for transformation. This requires analysis and debate so as to locate the nature of any alliances. It also requires acceptance of the centrality of the working class. 18

The FOSATU's metalworkers union, MAWU, wrote the following in the July 1986 edition of its publication Umbiko we MAWU: MAWU is totally committed to the principle of worker control. This is non-negotiable. But workers must not only control their union—they must also lead the struggle for liberation in South Africa. If workers are not at the head of the liberation struggle then there is no guarantee that the Bophutseta Government will be replaced by socialism.

Interviewed by his trade union's publication, MAWU president Maxwell Xulu had the following to say:
A long time ago some people used to say that there was no need for a workers programme, because we have a Freedom Charter. Well all I want to say about this is that the Charter was drawn up over 30 years ago. And many things have changed since then. 19

For its part, the ANC did not stop at denouncing the irreverence of the "workersists". It also carried out a public theoretical campaign through pro-Charter intellectuals replying to the arguments of trade unionists and their supporters. In response to Duncan Imnes, for example, Hugh MacLean wrote: The Charter is not written in stringent socialist rhetoric but the endorsing of its working-class demands and their championing by the mass-

movement make the Freedom Charter a necessary basis for building socialism. 40

This debate covered the period from before the founding of COSATU until 1986. It took place while social conflicts were at their highest level and the mass movement at its peak. COSATU clearly was one of the central stakes. What would be the political outlook of the new united federation? What would be its relations with the ANC?

It is rather interesting to compare the two methodological approaches. The central point in the arguments of the trade-union Left and its academic allies was the "society to be built" following the overthrow of apartheid. Their answer was clear: "break with the social relations of capitalism and start on the path to socialism". On the other hand, in this heated debate, Charter defenders raised an entirely different question: "How to overthrow apartheid, isolate the regime and resolve the question of power?" It is within this frame of reference that they defended their alliances, the Charter and the practices of the UDF. 41

It is all the more worthwhile to highlight this difference, in that it reveals what we believe was one of the trade-union Left's weaknesses—and one of the causes of its future political impasse. The history of this debate shows how much difficulty trade-union leaders had in linking a credible political project to their day-to-day trade-union work and their long-term strategic orientation. There

was clearly a missing link somewhere, and supporters of the ANC and the SACP were quick to point this out.

The question of forms of struggle and an evaluation of "possibilities" (1985–87)

While the trade-union leaders came off as more "radical" than those of the UDF in relation to their different medium and long-term political projects, the tables were turned when it came to their appreciation of the short-term relationship of forces and the way in which certain struggles should be waged.

This paradox was the result of a number of factors. First, trade-union leadership bodies are primarily attached to the stability of their organizations on the workplace level. As opposed to ANC criticisms claiming that this type of trade unionism was vulnerable under such a repressive regime, FOSATU leaders and some others remained deeply attached to the patient building of a trade-union movement grounded in the day-to-day defense of the most basic demands. Their views on trade-union intervention into the big national political questions took this overriding concern as their starting point. As a result, they were very critical of forms of struggle and intensifications of struggle that could—in their eyes—hinder this slow, long-term accumulation of forces. This was one of the arguments used to express the trade-union view on the organization of a number of stay-away protests. The same argument can be found in the interview with David Lewis on the UDF, quoted above.

Second, trade-union leaders, such as those in FOSATU, were never convinced of the effectiveness of or the need for what the ANC called "armed struggle". No doubt, they saw it as a good propaganda tool for youth, but remained highly sceptical about its political benefits and its strategic usefulness.

Third, the ANC tended in its public writings to announce a victorious outcome in the short or medium term, whereas FOSATU spoke of victory as a more distant, less tangible affair.

This debate on the real relationship of forces and on "possibilities" took place in the main between 1985 and 1987 and at the COSATU national congress in 1988. This covers the period before and after unification into COSATU.

The year 1985 and the beginning of 1986 were characterized by new advances in organization at the base of the mass movement. Campaigns such as the boycott of white businesses and the school boycott gave new responsibilities to the civics. The unevenness of struggle from one place to the next, however, fed discussions on what could really be accomplished. The offensive struggles of 1985 had put forms of organization to the test (trade unions, community associations and youth organizations) which were still quite new. The degree of solidarity and internal democracy, the level of regional and national coordination, and the link between communities and trade unions all remained open questions.

It was in this context that new forms of organization emerged in the townships. In the Port Elizabeth region, in Port Alfred, and in the Alexandra township near Johannesburg, street committees sprang up. In Mamelodi, near Pretoria, "people's tribunals" emerged to settle conflicts stemming from daily life in the township. At the same time, armed groups of youth were established. But the whole process was very uneven. The civics movement in Natal was immediately faced with physical threats from Gatsha Buthela's Inkatha Freedom Party. There was a short and bloody "civil war" in the Cape region, in the Crossroads ghetto, between UDF supporters and vigilante groups; this significantly weakened the UDF in the whole region.43

42 Work in Progress, Apr. 1986.
43 Work in Progress, Aug. 1986; Weekly Mail, May 23 and July 18, 1986. The "vigilantes" were groups of youth and unemployed armed and funded by local strongmen, the police or mafia-type groups in the townships to intimidate communities and activists supporting the UDF.

The Trade-Union Left and the Birth of a New South Africa • Claude Jacquin
In this context, on July 21, 1985, the government placed part of the country under a state of emergency, which was extended to other regions on June 12, 1986. Thousands of people were arrested and imprisoned. The functioning of the base of the mass movement was destabilized as a result. The UDF faced the threat of being outlawed: a threat linked to the vote of the US Congress on sanctions against South Africa and to the UDF’s various US funding sources.

The ANC leadership opted, however, for a course of ultra-radical propaganda, describing the situation as insurrectional, with the mass movement on the verge of seizing power. On January 8, 1986, the leader of the ANC-in-exile, Oliver Tambo, explained on behalf of his movement’s executive committee that “the Botha regime has lost the strategic initiative. That initiative is now in our hands.”

In April 1986, the ANC organ Sechaba ran an article saying that apartheid was becoming unworkable and country was heading rapidly towards complete “ungovernability.” During the summer of 1986, the SACP journal ran an article by Sisa Majola explaining that the situation in the townships had created “liberated zones” that were South African version of the Paris Commune. There was even a debate in the pages of Sechaba, in which another leader of the movement, Mzala, responding to Alex Mashinini’s analysis, said that there was already a “form of dual power”: the racist government on the one hand, popularly controlled communes on the other.

It is not excluded that this one-upmanship concerning the relationship of forces was driven by debates between the ANC and the SACP over what the UDF’s goals should be. In the bureaucratic world of these organizations in exile, there may well have been internal differences based on different networks and competing activities, or even some form of internal power struggle. The following remarks from an article by Sisa Majola certainly give this impression:

"Today, our approach to the theory of state and revolution in South Africa must proceed far beyond an abstract projection of a remote “democratic” future in the coming years. Our method must establish guidelines for immediate revolutionary practice, because our revolution has already called forth organs of popular self-government.... Our demand is no longer to participate in the present apartheid. Cape Town or Durban City Council... We are not fighting just to liberate and control Soweto, Gugulethu or Lamontville. Our final intention is to form a people’s government in the whole country.... That makes us different from the liberal democrats and reformists."

Here is a debate that seems to be in total contradiction with the warnings made to trade unionists about the question of “socialism” and social alliances. The contradiction even came to be seen by some trade-union leadership teams as a threat to the working-class movement. During this entire period, the sectarianism of UDF activists was at its height against those not flying the flag of the Freedom Charter. The violence of youth groups in the townships spread to physical intimidation of currents critical of the ANC (see the Daniel Dube piece above). This some times spilled over into outright acts of uncontrolled violence.

The high school student boycott lasted for months. It began with the slogan “No Education Without Liberation” and was fed by intensified political comments about the
“ungovernability” of the system.\textsuperscript{48} It ended in confusion when the ANC decided to have UDF national structures and parental groups intervene to organize the return to school.\textsuperscript{49} The turn was made very abruptly, but the new line was not followed in some sectors for several months. ANC and UDF leaders understood that the movement was crumbling and that it was progressively emptied of any social content. The most politicized elements were often in jail while, on the margins of the movement, gangs of uncontrolled youth were starting to emerge.

Trade-union leaders still hoped to establish a presence in the townships, setting up democratic structures and a “working-class” centre of gravity. But this only actually happened in a few rare cases. The FOSATU leadership—and, after 1985, COSATU’s metalworker and autoworker union NUMSA\textsuperscript{50)——never had the means to implement this policy. They had a two-track approach, as we shall see further on, of taking a nuanced approach towards the UDF (in order not to lose contact with the community movements) and initiating attempts at trade-union hegemony in some townships.

The best known case of these latter initiatives is that of MAWU and Moses Mayekiso in the Alexandra township. In an interview, Mayekiso explained the potential problems of the civics and what the trade-union orientation should be:

\textit{In Alexandra this is problematic, because how do you sentence a person? We do not believe in corporal punishment, but we have been lucky because people listen to whatever decision is made here.... However the “necklace” [killing people by putting tires around their neck, pouring on gasoline and setting them on fire] will never be used because we believe that the courts have an educational function.... Alexandra is very different from other townships as the majority of the people living there are workers. Unlike Soweto, we don’t have rich businessmen. Workers are directly involved in the various committees and they bring with them their experience of unions’ democratic structures.}\textsuperscript{51}

The same difference between the ANC and the trade-union Left could be found over the question of economic “sanctions” against South Africa. Calls to boycott South Africa were already quite old, but the conflicts of the 1980s sparked a new debate over the question. The problem came, however, from the difficulty of judging a foreign country’s reason for leaving. Was it the pressure of international public opinion or the less noble reason of South Africa’s recession and social disorder?\textsuperscript{52} The distinction also had to be drawn between a call for an international boycott of South African exports (the example of Outspan oranges) and a call for local disinvestment.

FOSATU’s attitude on the question of sanctions and calls for disinvestment was linked to the situation of the unions of which it was composed. It is obvious that workers in the automobile and chemicals sectors were much more directly concerned by the withdrawal of foreign companies than others.

During a seminar at the University of Natal, the MAWU’s Alec Erwin provided a precise definition of FOSATU’s position:

\begin{quote}
48 Many currents, including Azapo and the member groups of the National Forum, were against this type of school strike, especially for their length and lack of credible demands. Azapo’s slogan was “Education for Liberation”.
49 In September 1986, an estimated 25 percent of state of emergency arrests involved youth. Some 3000 youth under 16 years old were imprisoned. On December 29 and 30, 1985 in Johannesburg, a conference of groups supporting the UDF was held under the auspices of the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee. Desmond Tutu was given the task of explaining that students “need education for liberation” (Weekly Mail, Jan. 19, 1986). According to the Argus newspaper of January 7, 1986, Eastern Cape UDF secretary Stone Sizani said that children have a role to play in the “liberation struggle, but in class and not in the streets”. On January 26 a similar conference was held on the Cape, and took a position against an indefinite boycott (Cape Times, Jan. 27, 1986). See also the declaration of Zwelakhe Sisulu, son of Walter Sisulu, in the Weekly Mail, Apr. 4, 1986.
50 After the founding of COSATU, the MAWU (metalworkers) and the NAAWU (autoworkers) merged in May 1987, to create the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).
\end{quote}
The disinvestment campaign has become a major aspect of international pressure on this regime to change apartheid policies. Disinvestment pressure has a number of dimensions. It can be directly on the state through cutting off foreign borrowing facilities or it can be indirect through placing pressure on multinational companies who constitute a powerful lobby. These forms of pressure are fully supported by FOSATU.

We, however, separate out the question of actual withdrawal of existing assets from South Africa. This raises a fundamentally different political issue. The legal ownership of these assets may rest with foreign companies. However they have been developed and enlarged by the hard work and labour of South African workers. In FOSATU’s view therefore these assets now constitute a part of—and in virtually all cases a necessary and useful part of—the social wealth of South Africa. We can see absolutely no sense in handing over part of the social wealth of this country in order to place pressure on this regime.53

In actual fact, the policy of “sanctions” was increasingly interpreted by the ANC leadership in exile as a way to control all relations—including with progressive, artistic and intellectual circles—with South Africa. This led to the emergence of the notion of “cultural boycott”, which meant that any foreign artist or performer wishing to go to South Africa as well as every South African invited outside of the country had to get permission from the ANC leadership. This also concerned academic exchanges. But it was the ANC decision that all international trade-union solidarity was to be centralized from London by SACTU that most affected the trade-union Left.

This measure had no real effect on relations between the metal and autoworkers’ union and the powerful international metalworkers’ federation or the German IG-Metall. But the effect was very serious when a local strike or a strike in another sector broke out and foreign unions sought to establish a direct link with the South African union directly concerned. The problem became even more serious when Moses Mayekiso was imprisoned. An international campaign developed, particularly in Britain. It seems the solidarity activities in Britain developed into a kind of competition between different political currents there. But NUMSA’s line was in support of a broad campaign abroad. This didn’t stop SACTU, however, from sending a letter to the British Trades Union Council requesting it not participate in the campaign. A letter to SACTU from the British representative of NUMSA, dated November 10, 1987, explains: The Central Committee of NUMSA has discussed the memo sent out by you to all UK unions in August calling on them not to support the ‘Friends of Mayekiso Campaign’. The CC expressed its dissatisfaction at this and the failure of SACTU to withdraw the memo as promised….54

In the same way, the trade-union Left—with NUMSA in the lead—refused to back calls for a systematic withdrawal of foreign investment. On the contrary, it seems that these trade-union leadership teams realized that these enterprise closures (or, often, their sale to South African interests) were largely determined by the socio-economic crisis alone. Indeed, they were opposed to a broadening of disinvestment campaigns abroad: All workers need to discuss these issues seriously. Up until now the disinvestment campaign overseas has been run as if the working class in South Africa had no independent demands. But workers are demanding and fighting for changes to both South Africa’s political and its economic systems.55

The trade-union Left thus led a debate in COSATU calling for any future campaign in favour of the withdrawal of companies from


54 Letter to SACTU from Mike Murphy on behalf of NUMSA, Nov. 10, 1987, Personal files.

South Africa to be based on direct consultation with the South African trade union in the sector in question. This meant giving specific powers to the trade-union movement, independent from ANC bodies outside the country; an implied challenge to the hegemony claimed by the ANC. By the end of the 1980s, however, the trade-union Left would gradually accept the ANC’s hegemony in the framework of an ANC/SACP/COSATU alliance. We now turn to examine the process through which the trade-union Left abandoned its claims to political independence.
THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA  • CLAUDE JACQUIN
Chapter 3
Changing context, changing assumptions

South Africa went into recession in 1982, in spite of profits from the gold rush of preceding years. The crisis was to last for the whole decade. The cause was, to be sure, the global economic crisis; South Africa is a raw material exporting country, and the world economy saw a drop in demand. But this recession was also the result of the internal contradictions of the socio-economic system of apartheid: this is what de-linked the South African crisis from global cyclical fluctuations. The economic crisis would in its turn pose major challenges for the trade-union Left, just as other currents of the South African Left were beginning a process of rethinking. Before the crisis was over, different elements of the trade-union Left would begin to move away from its unifying assumptions and head off in various directions.

The context of the recession

We have already discussed the structural limits of apartheid. These were weakness of internal demand, a lack of qualified workers, low labour productivity and, as a result, low levels of manufactured exports. But this did not prevent the system from reproducing itself without much difficulty through the 1960s into the early 1970s. At that time, while certain liberals—like the Oppenheimer/Anglo-American group—were already protesting against the system’s rigidity, the country was still attracting massive foreign investment and experiencing a significant industrial boom. Before the crisis, there was nothing “anachronistic” about apartheid as far as getting a return on one’s investment was concerned.

But once a certain level of accumulation had been attained—with the globalization of the economy continuing apace—the “spurious” political and social costs stemming from apartheid started to become real economic problems weakening the system. The growth of manufacturing and service industries slowly created new needs and required new markets; the “separate development of the races” and its organizational structures could neither provide these markets nor meet the new needs.

It is difficult to say when this change took place, and a number of answers have been offered. It is certain, however, that the beginning of the recession in 1981-82 was characterized by the exhaustion of the whole system, including on the institutional level.

Between 1980 and 1985, bankruptcies rose 500 percent. The discount rate went from 9.5 percent to 17 percent in 1981; it reached 18 percent in 1982 and 25 percent in August 1985. In 1982, the country still enjoyed a 662 million rand net capital influx; in 1983, however, there was a 33 million rand deficit. The rand was worth $1.09 US in 1982; by the end of 1985, it was worth less than $0.37. Total investments dropped from 2.35 billion rand in 1981 to 1.41 billion in 1984. In 1984, the foreign debt totalled 24.8 billion dollars, 13 billion of which were short-term debts. Manufacturing and export volumes...
dropped, while wage costs and unemployment rose.¹

The recession continued in spite of the global recovery in the mid-1980s. The crisis even worsened as a result of trade-union mobilizations, the loss of confidence among foreign investors and the crisis of the gold mining industry.

It should also be recalled that the South African economy is highly centralized. It is estimated that in the 1980s Anglo-American controlled between 33 and 45 percent of shares on the Johannesburg stock exchange. The six biggest consortiums, with Anglo-American on top, controlled about 80 percent of shares. This extreme concentration of capital had political implications. The power of the big firms—long controlled by Anglophones—had a very specific relationship with a state under Afrikaner hegemony until the 1980s.

Indeed, the public debate on the reform of the system was strongly influenced by the weight of Anglo-American and by the fact that the main opposition party in the whites-only parliament in the 1980s was the Progressive Federal Party (PFP).² That said, it would be a dangerous simplification to say that all the big private industrial and mining interests were controlled by Anglophone liberals. The structure of South African capital had gone through a major evolution since the 1960s, even though the state as such controlled a substantial part of the domestic economy.³ It would be more accurate to speak of the shifting boundary between reform-minded liberals and conservatives. This boundary changed depending on the period and on the question under examination. The government was no more a monolithic bloc than were the Afrikaner and Anglophone employing classes.

The key point is that the structural crisis of apartheid, which took the shape of a long depressive cycle, pre-dated the social explosions of the 1980s.⁴ This crisis precipitated debate and conflict in the country’s political and economic ruling circles. This systemic crisis was then amplified by growing social conflict. This combination of economic and social crises forced the regime to undertake a number of reforms. The 1980s were thus not only characterized by intense political and social confrontations, but also by ongoing reforms.

But these reforms were limited by the preservation of the pillars of the system: the Group Areas Act, the existence of bantustans and the lack of citizenship rights for “Africans”. The labour market and labour mobility questions cannot be examined apart from the political debate on citizenship. This is why the Botha regime always lagged behind in its reforms in relation to the demands posed by the socio-economic crisis.⁵

The position of Botha’s liberal-democratic opponents in the PFP was not without contradictions itself. Advocates of a “deregulation of apartheid”, they were also aware that too much change could lead to something altogether different from a mere reform.

1 In 1990, 14 percent of South African exports were manufactured goods and 70.5 percent were mineral products. In the area of imports, 36 percent were manufactured products and 27 percent were machines and equipment. The price of gold was stagnating; it had lost some of its “refuge value.” and 70 percent of South African production went to the jewelry sector. With prices hovering in the 360 to 400 dollar range, the South African government estimated that the whole gold mining industry would collapse for lack of profits if the price were to drop to 320 dollars. Profits in this sector were much lower than in Australia, and South African mines had to dig deeper and deeper only to find a decreasing proportion of the mineral. In 1991, mining company officials estimated that 40 percent of gold was being mined at a loss.

2 There were very strong ties between the Oppenheimer group and the PFP. Harry Oppenheimer was one of the party’s founders and Zac de Beer was head of the company before taking on leadership responsibilities in the PFP.


While the PPF firmly criticized repression and the state of emergency, this was not the position usually taken by big company heads, who wanted to bring an end to the strikes.6

The idea of negotiating openly with ANC leaders in exile quickly made headway in liberal opposition circles.7 On this basis, meetings were held in Lusaka, Zambia to discuss with the outlawed organization.8

"Deregulating apartheid"

September 1985 saw the first major public initiative to establish contact between white liberals and the ANC leadership. A delegation including Anglo-American head Gavin Reilly went to Lusaka. Reilly later said, “It was one of the most pleasant days I ever spent.”9 A section of the Anglophone establishment went on the offensive. The governing party had already experienced a split to the “right” with the formation of the Conservative Party (CP). There was now a challenge from the “left”. Those who became known as the “new Nats” (because of their membership in the National Party) called for more decisive reforms. South Africa’s ambassador in London, Denis Worall, and the parliamentary deputy Wynand Malan resigned. Along with a well-known party figure in the Cape region, Esther Lategan, they issued a manifesto calling for freeing Black political life so that it could be properly organized.

While some only had democratization and institutional reform in mind, many began to address themselves to the socio-economic impasse associated with the “separate development of the races”. In 1986 Anton Rupert, head of the Rembrandt group (one of the main South African trusts) and Broederbond10 member, declared: I am only sad that it took so long to convince people that apartheid or separate development regardless of the good intentions with which it may have originally been imposed can never be a practical solution in Southern Africa.11

A Broederbond document went much further a few months later, saying that neither a Black head of state nor a government with a majority of Blacks represented in and of themselves a threat to the survival of the Afrikaners—on condition that the government be structured in such a way that no single racial group could dominate another.12

Stock market head Tony Norton said that reforms would open up the path to development and expansion, since a post-apartheid society would be much wealthier and more productive than society at the time.13

On September 27, 1985, ninety of the biggest names in the world of business and high finance—primarily from the Anglophone community—signed a document calling for the end of apartheid. Among other things, the document said: We believe that the reform process should be accelerated by: — Abolishing statutory race discrimination wherever it exists. — Negotiating with acknowledged Black leaders about power sharing. — Granting full South African citizenship to all people.... We believe that there is a better way for South Africa, and we support equal opportunity, respect for the individual, freedom of enterprise and freedom of movement.

6 The mineworkers unions would point to the very “liberal” attitude of Anglo-American mining company heads who called for police intervention.
7 Around the same time, a framework for negotiation and joint work called Indaba was established. This was an attempt at political and economic, and even institutional, cooperation between white and Indian industrialists, various professional institutions, and officials from KwaZulu (led by Buthelezi), Durban and Natal. See Transformation, Durban, no. 2.
8 These contacts were illegal and the government could restrict the issuance of passports to stop such trips. It could also, however, prove rather counter-productive to prevent a white with strong ties to Anglo-American from travelling abroad! We now know that Nelson Mandela began talks with the government from 1987 onwards.
10 The Broederbond is a kind of club—often described as a kind of Afrikaner masonry—whose members are the cream of the Afrikaner bourgeoisie and has provided a number of political leaders and future prime ministers to the National Party.
Spokesperson Raymond Ackerman said they were seeking to demonstrate, both inside and outside the country, that the private sector was in favour of change. He added that the group was as opposed to misery and unemployment as to the boycott of South Africa and disinvestment. "We are not asking for one man one vote—we are urging the government to negotiate shared power."4

Bishop Desmond Tutu and Inkatha leader Buthelezi supported this effort. Among the signatories were heads of Nedbank, Toyota, Barclays Bank, Anglo-American (including H.F. Oppenheimer), IBM, Rank Xerox, Caltex, Kodak, BMW, Control Data, Coca-Cola, the Argus press group, Colgate, Volkswagen and General Motors. It can be assumed that the subsidiaries of multinationals among this group of South African employers did not sign the document without approval from headquarters.

While each company desired peace in its operations and may have supported the state of emergency towards this end, the employers' class as a group was involved in a debate on the overall structure of South African society.5 The economic crisis was seen as something beyond a simple depressive cycle, and had come to be understood as the sign of the new needs of the accumulation process.

In the heat of events, government violence and the measured use of it by employers clearly could obscure what was actually going on. The key thing, nonetheless, was that the country was going through a systemic crisis that led to a progressive overhaul of employer strategy, and later in the strategy of the government as well. This change was bound to have significant consequences for the trade-union movement, which progressively faced new employer policies and government attempts to combine repression of the movement with a plan for political negotiations.6 But in 1985-86 the trade unions were still in the middle of a unification debate about the UDF and had to respond to the ANC's analyses of "apartheid's ungovernability" and "dual power."7

The founding of COSATU

The founding congress of the Congress of South African Trade Unions was held from November 29 to December 1, 1985, in Durban. According to its own figures, it had 449,679 dues-paying members. The founding was a major event and the core of the existing FOSATU leadership felt it had made a further step forwards in its project.

Two trade-union groupings did not attend the founding congress. CUSA and AZACTU refused to join COSATU. Their main criticism was that the new confederation did not have a "Black leadership". CUSA wrote that it didn't want whites to enter into such organizations from the top.8 CUSA rejected COSATU's claim to being a "super-federation" at a time when only 15 percent of the country's workers were unionized. A joint AZACTU-CUSA statement called for a real federation uniting the majority of organized Black workers, without making concessions to the aspirations of a minority leadership. These arguments, however, did not blind anyone to the real reasons for their opposition to COSATU; CUSA and AZACTU did not participate in the merger for specific political reasons. Dominated by the Black Consciousness current and the PAC, their leaders were not prepared to melt into a joint framework with the trade-union Left, on the one hand, and the "Freedom Charter" current on the other. They later created their own federation, the National Council for Trade Unions (NACTU).

16 In 1986, F.W. De Klerk was already expressing similar views and raising the question of power-sharing with the Black community, while not mentioning the ANC. See an interview with him in Leadership, vol. 5, no. 4, Johannesburg, 1986.
17 See, for example, the different approaches taken by COSATU leaders in The Crisis—Speeches by COSATU Office Bearers, COSATU Education, Dalbridge, 1986.
of Trade Unions (NACTU), which was much weaker than COSATU.

The COSATU founding congress ratified the key proposals of the trade-union Left. These called for a federation founded on industrial unions, with strong horizontal coordination across the regions aimed at centralizing the independent activity of the trade-union movement. 19

But the balance sheet of the unification congress was in fact much more contradictory for the FOSATU leadership. We have already mentioned that even within FOSATU there had been growing influence from the ANC and UDF—which may still have been hard to detect inasmuch as it did not affect the "pillars" of FOSATU, that is, the metalworkers, textile workers and chemical workers unions. But FOSATU leaders were aware of these developments nonetheless, and had to keep them in mind.

The other problem faced by the leadership of the trade-union Left was its own underestimation of the political weight of the UDF-ANC combine. True, judging by the number and size of the unions they controlled, their forces were weak in the newly founded COSATU. General unions like the SAAWU had to divide into sectors and merge sector-by-sector with industrial unions, of which many had been in FOSATU. However, the network of individuals constituting the heart of the trade-union Left was now faced with a Freedom Charter group highly organized and centralized through the offices of the Communist Party. The result was that the former, on the one hand, had a rather general political project and saw themselves as no more than a trade-union leadership of a big and decentralized movement. On the other hand was a highly politically homogeneous current identifying with a party structured along lines dictated by its years in clandestinity.

The real internal relationship of forces would be determined by the mineworkers union, the NUM. It had been created in 1982 and joined CUSA. It then broke with CUSA and joined with those who went on to found COSATU. The majority of its leadership came out of the Black Consciousness tradition; very soon, however, its main leader, Cyril Ramaphosa, emerged as the strongest supporter of the Freedom Charter current in the leadership of the new federation's biggest union. This rapid transformation—three years—may be related to the thus far little-known history of the relations of the ANC and SACP with the Black Consciousness current. 20

Negotiations over the creation of COSATU were sped up thanks to the consensus reached between FOSATU and the NUM. But this soon became an agreement/conflict between two different political orientations. The two trade-union leadership teams would soon take very different positions on such major questions as relations with the UDF and the internal functioning of the new federation.

Internal relations were very strained until 1987. Former FOSATU leaders came to harbour serious doubts about the viability of the unified federation. Attacks from ANC supporters were unyielding. Further, the small general unions delayed the release of their true membership figures in order to impede the fusion process with industrial unions. The metalworkers and autoworkers unions continued to face hostility from the UDF youth, up to and including physical intimidation. The establishment of regional structures was drawn out, with serious political conflicts erupting in regions like the Eastern Cape and Witwatersrand.

Some leading members of the Left elected to the central committee stopped attending

19 The motion for the first of these two points was put forward by the chemical workers union (CWLU) and textile workers union (NUTW); while the second was put forward by the autoworkers union (NAAWU). All three unions had been part of FOSATU.
20 Zwelakhe Sisulu, son of the two ANC leaders Walter and Albertina Sisulu, spoke in 1986 of his former membership in the Black Consciousness current. "Although I myself still held dearly to the principle of non-racialism, I went with BC because I believed that it was tactically correct at that time." Interview in Leadership vol. 5, no. 4, Johannesburg, 1986.
meetings. They hoped the weight of the metalworkers, autoworkers, chemical workers and textile workers unions would make up for their political weakness in the federation’s central committee, by creating hegemony on a regional level. But the fight turned out to be much fiercer than expected; and the other current knew full well how to prevent such an outcome.

The 1987 congress reflected these obstacles and difficulties. Indeed, the congress message from the executive committee noted: “We have to make sure all our structures—at the local, regional and national level—are consolidated and working properly. To do this effectively we need one union, one industry. We promised at our launch that we would merge and form big industrial unions within 6 months. It is now 14 months and still we do not have one union in each industry. This cannot be allowed to continue.”

Mike Morris from the University of Natal provides a good glimpse of the opinion of the trade-union Left on this situation. In a text written for the MAWU delegation at the meeting of the International Metalworkers Federation in New Delhi in November 1986, he writes:

On the issue of how to intervene politically, COSATU is currently the site of a major struggle between different political tendencies. Although the terms of description remain the same as in previous years, i.e. "populists" versus "workers", the real content of this struggle is taking place between nationalist and militant socialist tendencies.... The debates that are raging within the union movement are centred around the form that alliances with other township-based classes should take; the status of organisational alliances with other groupings (whether they be corporate, community/resident or directly political) which are not union-based; the political line around which tactical and strategic alliances should be cemented (commitment to "socialism" or "national democratic"); the necessity to maintain strict union independence or whether, instead, to subordinate the union movement within the broader "national liberation movement".

Another trade-union Left project was to broaden its influence thanks to its gains and savoir-faire in the area of internal education of trade-union cadres. MAWU education head Alec Erwin headed the whole federation’s education department for some time. But difficulties and mistrust apparently blocked this path for the trade-union Left.

The ANC’s shifting strategy

None of these internal conflicts stopped COSATU from growing and expanding its spheres of influence. Internal tensions were brought under control by the different forces. This came about for two reasons. The first relates to changes in the policies of the ANC and SACP. The second corresponds to parallel changes in the analyses of the former FOSATU leadership.

The ANC took its own initiatives, taking advantage of the new relationship of forces offered by the creation of COSATU. Since liberal figures were now meeting ANC leaders without fear of retribution, why not organize similar meetings with COSATU? The first contact was made in a meeting in Harare with COSATU general secretary Jay Naidoo at the end of 1985; later, another meeting was held in Lusaka between delegations from COSATU, the ANC and SACTU. The Lusaka meeting’s final communiqué was very detailed and of great interest. In it, COSATU was recognized as the "representative of workers in struggle", as an "independent organization" and as "an essential component of the country’s democratic forces". The question of an alliance with "other forces" (no doubt, this refers to the ANC) appeared.

22 Mike Morris, “Prospects and problems for COSATU after the declaration of the state of emergency”, International Metalworkers Federation, Executive Committee Meeting, New Delhi, Nov. 12-13, 1986, stencil. See also the motion of the 1987 congress on the formation of industrial unions (COSATU pamphlet). See also the speech by S. Mafumadi (supportive of the UDF and ANC), COSATU joint general secretary, Mar. 2, 1986, to the founding congress of the Natal regional federation, COSATU Education, Dalbridge, 1986. See also the Weekly Mail, Oct. 24, 1986.
UDF) is highlighted and one section refers to the national liberation movement “led by the ANC”. The fact that SACTU was a key player in the meeting is clearly highly symbolic of the goals of the ANC and part of the COSATU leadership: assert the continuity and legitimacy of the leadership in exile.

Paradigm shift in the trade-union Left

But this meeting was not solely the result of ANC pressures and manoeuvring. The leadership of the trade-union Left had also changed its position.24

The main leaders of this current observed that the Freedom Charter current had been rebuilt inside the country, primarily as a result of the role taken on by the UDF and by the talent of many ANC and SACP activists. They felt that the ideological struggle would last longer than expected and result in fewer gains for their views. They were faced with a current much better organized than they were. They argued that their project of working-class independence and hegemony would have to take a detour: priority on joint action with the political current with a majority at the rank-and-file level and among township youth. A section of the trade-union Left leadership was hoping to be able to win this political current to its conception of trade-union independence in relation to UDF functioning. This implied establishing a degree of peaceful co-existence with the Freedom Charter wing in the federation. Above all else, it was necessary to avoid a split, which would be catastrophic to its position relative to the regime. This was the general approach of former FOSATU leaders.

Is it now possible to say how far this represented a break with their previous approach? The main problem seemed to be that of political independence in relation to the ANC. Indeed, the trade-union Left was not satisfied by a mere adjustment in its relations with the ANC; it became locked in a one-to-one relationship with it. It definitively abandoned all constructive relations with other political and trade-union currents. For a whole period, it ignored the important question of NACTU (aside from the chemical workers’ leadership, which had a strong NACTU partner in its sector). The internal affairs of COSATU were henceforth seen in a unilateral fashion, solely through the prism of closed-door relations with the ANC. Ideological convictions seemed to remain intact, but the related political project took an entirely different turn. This decision to pursue a political line linked solely to the ANC/SACP current led to a loss of substance of the trade-union Left’s call for trade-union independence. Indeed, the plurality of political relations was one key factor for furthering such independence.

This new “alliance” primarily took the concrete form of privileged relations between COSATU and the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO). SAYCO was one of the pillars of the UDF and contained some of its most active elements. Relations with SAYCO could not present the same problems of “principle” as would relations with UDF leadership bodies. It was not possible to characterize the youth organization as a movement led by “other classes”. In fact, it was totally under the control of the ANC and the SACP. Simultaneously, UDF figures such as Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak began to be marginalized by the ever more strident appearance of ANC members. The COSATU-SAYCO axis was put forward as a “factory-township” alliance, and as a way to bridge the gap between trade unionists and young activists in the civics.

As late as 1988 the trade-union Left was still very critical of the Freedom Charter current, even though by this time it was part of a “disciplined alliance” with it.25 A summary of discussions held at a NUMSA central committee meeting on March 20, 1988, provides a glimpse of what was going on. The min-

24 The analysis that follows is based on interviews carried out in South Africa between 1985 and 1987 with leaders of this current.
25 This term frequently appears in COSATU documents from the time of the debate on the Freedom Charter in 1986-87.
utes of the gathering, for example, relate the following:

The structures of the front [UDF] have been weak.... This promotes uniformity of views that is not based on debate.... Within COSATU there have also been restrictions on freedom of expression.... There has been a vacuum of political leadership and because no one has filled this, people just revert to old ways of thinking.... The use of indefinite stay-aways and forcing people to boycott is a problem. There has been a failure to discuss things analytically with exile groups. Etc....

But simultaneously the main leaders realized they had to find a way out. How could gains be consolidated? How to retreat to a defensive stronghold?

The trade-union Left was at the crossroads. Better than the rest of COSATU, it was able to understand the new stakes; it had never been taken in by the rhetoric of “dual power”. It could also remain loyal to its former project while finding a path of retreat that would allow it to rebuild trade-union independence and prepare for future political debates. Instead, however, it entered another phase in its development. It opted for a course representing an unstable transition from the old approach to the quest for a new one.

Until this time, its political thinking was expressed through trade-union activity that progressively brought forth a “new working-class movement” and the long-term perspective of “democratic socialism”. It had only seen the end of apartheid and segregation as the fruit of a struggle for “socialism”. It disagreed with the SACP theory of “internal colonialism”, which it saw as an arbitrary way of delimiting the history of the working class.

By 1987-88 the trade-union Left no longer held the monopoly on references to “socialism”. The trade-union current linked to the SACP was now also hoisting the socialist flag. But the difference in day-to-day policies remained—as we have just seen—as it did on matters of internal democracy and the place accorded to independent working-class positions.

At the end of the 1980s many of these remaining political differences seemed to melt away. Many factors contributed to this swing, first towards neo-reformist positions and then eventually towards a blend of social democracy and neoliberalism. A major role was certainly played by “realism”: having failed to build an overall social alternative to the ANC, the trade-union Left could only acknowledge and adapt to the ANC’s hegemony. Lacking the ability or the strategy to translate its social impact in the early 1980s into a broader political project, it gradually lost its autonomy once it was closed off in the bureaucratic consensus of COSATU’s leadership circles. Some of the white activists who made up these leaderships were literally guilt-tripped about the fact that they were racial outsiders among the mass of activists and workers. They were, finally, rather fascinated by the ANC leadership, which was capable of putting out many different kinds of messages at once in different milieux while increasing its legitimacy among the poorest South Africans. What could explain this paradox: a reformist leadership that steadily widened its mass base in a population that seemed to be growing more and more radical? Why was there a sort of insurmountable barrier for a working-class, socialist project?

Through trying to find purely objective answers to these questions, Left leaders ultimately came up with halfway solutions, makeshifts that little by little grew into adaptations. They became a classical example of what happens to an anti-capitalist project conceived only as something short- or middle-range. Impatience at the first setbacks led them very quickly to a “realistic” retreat towards neo-reformist solutions. Then came

26 NUMSA Briefing, stencilled preparatory document for the COSATU congress, NUMSA Education, Apr. 28, 1988. This is a collection of views expressed at the central committee meeting. It is therefore not a union resolution as such. The debate at this meeting certainly reflected more points of view than this and was not so one-sided. But the document itself provides an indication of the tone of participants’ remarks.

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the great Gorbachevist turn, which allowed them to imagine for a while that they could work out a common project for national liberation with the Communist Party, adding a strong social dimension to a project of democratic renewal of orthodox Communism.

A key moment of change in the orientation of the trade-union Left—even a paradigm shift—came with initiatives such as the foundation in 1988 of the Labour and Economic Research Centre (LERC), in which Alec Erwin had substantial influence. LERC’s publications quickly moved away from the trade-union Left’s earlier positions, which had seen workplace-level struggle (between workers and employers) as the pivotal factor of the struggle against apartheid. The position developed from 1988 onwards—to get out of the strategic impasse—seemed to represent a break with this previous approach insofar as it argued for joint responsibility (with the employers) in the definition of “post-apartheid” society. 27 The break with the 1982 Foster report was complete; the “working-class movement” would not be able to achieve political hegemony based merely on the self-assertion of the trade-union movement.

The SAPC changes course

We have already pointed out that one of the key factors of this period is the change in the Communist Party’s orientation around a series of questions. In our opinion, from 1984-85 onwards this organization undertook an adjustment of its analysis and work; this led to progressive changes in the parameters within which the complex relations between political and trade-union currents had been defined up until that point.

The SAPC first recognized its shortcomings in the heart of the trade-union movement (among metalworkers, autoworkers, and so forth), compared to a current it denounced either as “workerist”, “Trotskyist” or “economic”. It decided thereafter to make up lost ground, with the help of the ANC. It did so by breaking with the idea of general trade unions and opting to get fully involved in the march towards the founding of COSATU. 28 But the Communist Party also went on to change its orientation toward the mass movement as a whole, after observing the generalized radicalization under way. It realized that since it was totally immersed in the structures of the ANC (including in the ranks of its executive) it could one day lose out in an agreement between the traditional wing of the ANC and liberal sectors. In an SAPC internal discussion document probably published in 1987, we can read the following remarks:

_We continue to face the old problem of party work always being pushed into second place because of the necessary involvement of virtually all talented personnel in other structures of the liberation alliance. This continues to limit our capacity for the independent spread of working class perspectives in the struggles and hinders the strengthening of the Party organizationally. If no effective steps are taken to deal with this weakness, the Party will not be able to carry out its historic mission._ 29

The text is not signed but there can be no doubt—judging by articles appearing at the time in the public journal _The African Communist_—that it represents the views of at least a section of the leadership. Interestingly, the document argues at length against the danger of a “negotiated agreement”, as did signed articles appearing in the party press at the time.

In 1990, Jeremy Cronin, one of the main leaders of the party, drew a very interesting balance sheet of the period before these changes were made:

27 A critical account of the approach of the South African “regulationists” can be found in Patrick Bond, op. cit.

28 In a speech reflecting the rhetoric and concerns of the SAPC, on Dec. 2, 1986 COSATU leader Sydney Mafumadi told the liberal student unions (NUSAS) that the experience of general trade unions was over. He said history had shown they were “outmoded historically”. At the same time, however, NUMSA was being founded (through the fusion of the MAWU, NAAWU, and MIFUWU) and the metalworkers section of the SAAWU was still not in a position to join because of a lack of clarity and will.

29 SAPC, stencilled directive/discussion document.
I attributed that less to Stalinism than to the psychological realities of exile. They didn’t want things to have changed too much; it was terribly unsettling to feel that vast changes had occurred.... These kinds of experiences tend to produce a certain dogmatism, an abstractness from the realities of the situation. You mentioned one example, the party’s fumbling with regard to the emerging trade union movement. The other glaring fumble, I would say, was the emergence of a very vibrant historical materialism, the academic Marxism which arose much at the same time as, and often interrelated with, the developments on the union front.

Cronin also confirmed that the SACP made a series of decisions in 1985-86 calling for a more independent profile for the party and the publication of a clandestine journal (Umsebenzi) inside the country.

The party also changed its views on the question of “socialism”. Up until that point, the ANC-SACP-SACTU bloc had a single line: they agreed that to advance a socialist perspective meant ruling out possible alliances for national liberation, and was the divisive approach of “armchair revolutionaries”.

But a section of the social movement inside the country saw things differently. Not only was there the ideological impact of the trade-union Left (with its positions on workers control and socialism), but there was also the objective fact that on a day-to-day level some of the mass movement’s opponents were liberal employers. Trade unionists were not ready to see anti-apartheid bosses as friends. Among the most active layers, including in the UDF, there emerged a tendency to consider apartheid as a product of capitalist social relations. The SACP was able to detect this tendency and adapted its approach to present itself as the party of socialism—while repeating that first the stage of “democratic revolution” had to be achieved.

In 1986-87 seemingly contradictory views coexisted in the party. The UDF was still described in theory as the place for unifying all social layers mobilized against apartheid. According to the ANC and SACP, it remained the meeting point of choice to forge the alliances necessary for carrying out the “democratic revolution”. But activist youth in the UDF were growing increasingly sympathetic to the more radical slogans coming from COSATU or from the Communist Party itself.

At the same time, the ANC and SACP were analysing the political situation as one characterized by “dual power” and the “ungovernability of apartheid”. There was also talk of “people’s communes” and a “people’s war”.

In the run-up to the 1987 general elections (for the whites-only parliament), the ANC and the leadership of the UDF called on the New Nats to attempt to defeat the government. This was a call to white voters to cast their ballot in favour of the reformers. Up until that point, however—as the February 20, 1987, Weekly Mail rightly noted—the line had been to denounce all forms of “racial” elections and call for a boycott. This change came about at a time of major crisis for the regime. But it may also seem somewhat out of synch with the “insurrectionary” line found in their other declarations.

The magazine Work in Progress reported this situation in its comments on the SACTU message to the July 1987 COSATU congress:

In a not altogether clear message the SACTU startled most congress delegates by saying that while they should discuss socialism, they should not “elevate it to a policy”. Some delegates did pursue a rather crude version of this argument.

Within COSATU, the quest for some middle ground between these different positions

31 This term appeared in articles in Sechaba and The African Communist.

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met with success thanks to the specific relationship established between the new unified autoworkers and metalworkers union (NUMSA, with 130,796 dues-paying members) and the NUM (with 261,901 dues-paying members). The two COSATU mainstays were able to find de facto common ground for their respective concerns. This re-opened the debate on the Freedom Charter, but also placed the question of “socialism” in COSATU’s official propaganda. Here as well, it is probable that SACP initiatives in COSATU and in the NUM played a decisive role.

Conflicts and compromise over the Freedom Charter

The Freedom Charter current had gradually come to present the COSATU-UDF and COSATU-SAYCO alliance as being based on the Freedom Charter. The preparatory period for COSATU’s 1987 congress was an opportunity for it to push the Charter further still and call on every trade union to formally adopt the Charter as its own programme. Given the context at the time, to refuse would create serious problems for many union leadership teams. It would run the risk of provoking splits, a new test of strength within the federation, and the alienation of a section of the rank and file that would not understand the “nuances” of the position of leaders opposed to adopting the Charter. There was a variety of responses from the different unions; with a few exceptions, they could be divided into four categories. The first was total support for adoption of the Charter without commentary. The second and third saw the Charter as a minimum democratic programme to which the trade-union movement should refer, but differed on the way the document fit into the struggle for “socialism”. The fourth refused to adopt the Charter.

The second and third positions were, respectively, those of the NUM and NUMSA. For the NUM, the Charter was “a guiding document of the struggle against national oppression”, but its leadership added:

> It is only in a democratic socialist South Africa that the working class and the oppressed people will control the wealth they produce.”

As for NUMSA, it adopted a more nuanced and, by all appearances, more tactical position. It adopted the Charter “as containing the minimum political demands that reflect the view of the majority of the metalworkers’ vision of a free and democratic non-discriminatory South Africa”. It saw it as “a good foundation stone with which to start building our working class programme”. NUMSA sought to maintain the initiative and proposed that COSATU hold a debate on a specific “Workers’ Charter”. NUMSA hoped to bring together the immediate and specific demands of the working class because, “It should be a priority of the new union and other organisations of the working class to build a clear political programme.”

Was the goal for the trade-union Left thereafter to get around the Freedom Charter by asserting a new political programme from its base in the trade-union movement? Whether it was or not, the NUM took a position against such an approach. There was no ambiguity in Cyril Ramaphosa’s remarks at the time:

> A ‘Workers’ Charter’ which demands the recognition of unions and democratically elected shop stewards committees should be seen as complementing the demand on freedom of association enshrined in the Freedom Charter.

The NUM’s idea was that any workers charter should only concern itself with legal problems, such as the right to strike and other trade-union rights. But NUMSA had an entirely different approach. Its founding

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36 In 1986, a MAWU motion had already requested a debate on socialism.
congress said, "The lack of initiative and the confusion that exists within the community itself on political issues arises from the lack of a working class programme." 38

The trade-union Left proposal for a Workers' Charter went well beyond a mere complement to the ANC programme on questions of labour rights. Beyond the formal agreement on the Freedom Charter and the federation's special ties to the ANC, the major conflict between "workerists" and "populists" was thus still very much alive in the congress year of 1987. Indeed, the UDF—through the comments of ANC and SACP activists—denounced those trade-union leaders who too openly display their infatuation with socialism.... For the UDF, the problem with the workerists is not their correct call for worker leadership but rather what they understand by this.

They rejected the idea that "the leading role of the working class means the leading role of the progressive trade unions". 39

Not surprisingly, the SACP showed its support for the NUM position: The adoption by the recent NUM conference of the Freedom Charter correctly reflects the mass popular mood and understanding. It is a pointer to the trade union movement of a more realistic linkage between the economic and political struggle in the present phase.40

Finally, COSATU general secretary Jay Naidoo sought to conciliate the two positions, while giving the impression that the Workers' Charter project could be reduced to a simple trade-union charter. "In adopting the Charter, we see it as a guideline, not as a blueprint", he said. "There will not be a suspension of the struggle for a non-exploitative society." 41 A COSATU information bulletin from October 1987 explained that while not opposed to a Workers' Charter, "COSATU should not do this now. Rather we should be developing our working class understanding of the Freedom Charter." There could be no doubt that the NUMSA and the whole trade-union Left had already lost the fight over the "Workers' Charter".

But the debate on the Freedom Charter did not follow this pattern in all quarters. The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) held its congress in June 1987; on its agenda was the question of political orientation and fusion with two smaller unions from the Freedom Charter current. Regarding the matter of political orientation, the positions of the Johannesburg branch (the biggest one) won out. Their position was that the Charter should not be adopted since it was the programme of a specific political organization and because the union should on principle be open to all forces: in particular, to those who identified with AZAPO and the National Forum. This led to a split.42

This episode is helpful for understanding the thinking of the trade-union Left within COSATU. The affair is very well-documented, so we have quite a good picture of what transpired.

The Transvaal branch of the CCAWUSA was led primarily by activists with a socialist orientation who were not linked to the ex-FOSATU leadership team. Some were political activists who published the bulletin Arise-Vukani!43 Their position was in clear opposition to the Freedom Charter current in COSATU, but also to some elements of NUMSA's policy. Under their leadership, for example, the CCAWUSA criticized the "sectarianism" of the COSATU-UDF alliance with respect to other components of the democratic movement.44
The 1987 congress took place in a very different climate, in which the two camps had the clear intention of making no compromise with the other. But the split occurred only after a normal voting procedure that produced a victory of the majority over the minority.

COSATU named a commission to arbitrate between the two sides; but no agreement could be reached. The COSATU executive committee did, however, recognize the Freedom Charter current's congress that had in the meantime merged the union with two smaller ones.

The COSATU leadership's decision was rejected by NUMSA's shop steward committee from the Witwatersrand region. There then followed a number of incidents; for example, CCAWUSA majority members were kicked out of different COSATU offices. Finally, the second national COSATU congress changed the executive committee's position and accorded equal status to both parties.

In this rather serious affair—the CCAWUSA was one of the biggest unions in COSATU—the national leadership of NUMSA took no risks. It fully realized that the approach of the CCAWUSA majority current was different from its own. The NUMSA leadership's silence was not only a function of trade-union opinions; it made a negative political judgement of the "Johannesburg group" and refused to get involved too directly in a conflict that could squander progress it had made in its relations with the Freedom Charter current. This was a coherent position, and confirmed that the NUMSA leadership at that time remained very united and could act as a group unto itself.

All the debates of the period have to be placed within the context of the time, one characterized by high levels of strike activity. May 1, 1986 saw the biggest strike ever organized in the country's history. According to the National Manpower Commission, 1985 was characterized by a drop in the number of labour conflicts (389 as compared to 469 in 1984) but an increase in the number of participants. The following year, on the other hand, saw a large number of walk-outs (793) involving fewer workers. The average number of strike days per worker, however, was 2.8 in 1984, 2.09 in 1985 and 3.08 in 1986. At the beginning of 1987, there was a wave of intense strike activity. Railworkers and postal workers went on strike; and retail workers, led by the CCAWUSA, struck OK Bazaars. Debates in COSATU were heavily influenced by this situation, which led to a strengthening of the union and its role in social conflicts.

For a section of the trade-union movement (above all the Freedom Charter movement), the question of power was being posed. The question of political programme was therefore seen as a short-term or medium-term affair. What would be the nature of the "ANC government"? What should the relationship be between the ANC in government and the trade unions?

Once the Freedom Charter question was settled (adoption by the majority of COSATU unions)—granting a political monopoly to the ANC—the question of socialism and the radicalism of demands no longer seemed to be a problem for the trade-union group most closely linked to the SACP. The 1987 NUM congress was organized under the theme "Socialism Means Freedom" and the preamble to the resolutions adopted read, "Apartheid and capitalism are two inseparable evils that must be smashed". At the time, COSATU launched a campaign for a minimum wage. COSATU's press ran an editorial in March 1987 on this subject, explaining that the campaign for a decent wage was a basic challenge to South African capitalism. The apparent contradiction between these remarks and the terms of the debate set by the Freedom Charter can only be understood through an appreciation of the SACP's turn and the way it was seeking to combine its policy inside the ANC with increased autonomy. This approach was seen as much as a pressure tactic for internal ANC debates.

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1987 CONGRESS TOOK PLACE IN A VERY DIFFERENT CLIMATE, IN WHICH THE TWO CAMPS HAD THE CLEAR INTENTION OF MAKING NO COMPROMISE WITH THE OTHER. BUT THE SPLIT OCCURRED ONLY AFTER A NORMAL VOTING PROCEDURE THAT PRODUCED A VICTORY OF THE MAJORITY OVER THE MINORITY.

COSATU NAMED A COMMISSION TO ARBITRATE BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES; BUT NO AGREEMENT COULD BE REACHED. THE COSATU EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE DID, HOWEVER, RECOGNIZE THE FREEDOM CHARTER CURRENT'S CONGRESS THAT HAD IN THE MEANWHILE MERGED THE UNION WITH TWO SMALLER ONES.

THE COSATU LEADERSHIP'S DECISION WAS REJECTED BY NUMSA'S SHOP STEWARD COMMITTEE FROM THE WITWATERSRAND REGION. THERE THEN FOLLOWED A NUMBER OF INCIDENTS; FOR EXAMPLE, CCAWUSA MAJORITY MEMBERS WERE KICKED OUT OF DIFFERENT COSATU OFFICES. FINALLY, THE SECOND NATIONAL COSATU CONGRESS CHANGED THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S POSITION AND ACCORDED EQUAL STATUS TO BOTH PARTIES.

IN THIS RATHER SERIOUS AFFAIR—THE CCAWUSA WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST UNIONS IN COSATU—THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF NUMSA TOOK NO RISKS. IT FULLY REALIZED THAT THE APPROACH OF THE CCAWUSA MAJORITY CURRENT WAS DIFFERENT FROM ITS OWN. THE NUMSA LEADERSHIP'S SILENCE WAS NOT ONLY A FUNCTION OF TRADE-UNION OPINIONS; IT MADE A NEGATIVE POLITICAL JUDGEMENT OF THE "JOHANNESBURG GROUP" AND REFUSED TO GET INVOLVED TOO DIRECTLY IN A CONFLICT THAT COULD SQUANDER PROGRESS IT HAD MADE IN ITS RELATIONS WITH THE FREEDOM CHARTER CURRENT. THIS WAS A COHERENT POSITION, AND CONFIRMED THAT THE NUMSA LEADERSHIP AT THAT TIME REMAINED VERY UNITED AND COULD ACT AS A GROUP UNTO ITSELF.


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59 THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA • CLAUDE JACQUIN

"THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA • CLAUDE JACQUIN"
as a response to the trade-union Left on the questions of a working-class programme and of socialism. All the SACP writings from the time—along with many interventions from trade-union party members or sympathizers—pushed the same ideas. They said there was indeed a need for a party to struggle for socialism; this party was the SACP and the trade unions could not replace it.46

The idea was essentially the following: the party accepts political pluralism but there can only be one “party of the working class”. The working class could not be divided, and in any event only one programme for emancipation was possible. Ipso facto, other parties could only be representatives of other classes.47

This represented a combined tactic. On the one hand, there was the rapid introduction of the Freedom Charter into the trade unions’ programmes, implying allegiance to the ANC. On the other hand, there was propaganda for socialism, implying recognition of the SACP. This all began to destabilize the trade-union Left.

The trade-union Left always underlined the importance of basic democratic demands and supported socialism. From this point on, though, it had to separate the question of democratic demands from the notions of “legitimacy” and “leadership of the liberation movement” applied to the ANC. On the other hand, there was propaganda for socialism, implying recognition of the SACP. This all began to destabilize the trade-union Left.

The government and employers retake the initiative

The strike movement showed no signs of waning. On May 5-6, a nationwide strike of unprecedented magnitude took place. The merger that same month of trade unions within COSATU to form NUMSA contributed to this dynamic of struggle.

The collapse of the reformist, white bureaucracy-controlled Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) led to the freeing up of some huge unions in the textile and clothing sector. These unions fused in November 1987 with COSATU’s National Union of Textile Workers to form a large COSATU textile union, ACTWUSA.48 But 1987 was also the year of the first negative shift in the relationship of forces, in three areas: repression of the trade-union movement, the social effects of the recession, and new employer policies in some sectors.

The repression of the trade-union movement

The state of emergency went into effect in June 1986. At the beginning of 1987, the Detainees Parents Support Committee calculated there were 25,000 prisoners arrest-
ed under the special powers. According to the committee, 40 percent of detainees were under 18 and 75 percent belonged to the UDF. For any serious observer, it was clear that the UDF's base structures had been seriously affected by this repression, especially their youth activists. Relatively speaking, this weakening of the UDF's activist base strengthened the trade unions.

On April 29, 1987, COSATU's national office in Johannesburg was surrounded by police and then brutally taken over. Henceforth—while recognized de facto by a section of the employer class in negotiations and the settlement of local conflicts—the federation's leadership was under direct threat. The legal space that the trade-union movement had managed to open up—by taking advantage, among other things, of the different approach of the government and the heads of some companies—was now in danger of being slammed shut.

On August 31, the NUM accepted employer offers that it had rejected a few days before. These were three years of salary for families of workers that died in accidents and an increase of holiday pay from 55 percent of the wage to 65 percent. Nothing else was obtained. An impressive number of NUM members were fired and the union came out of the strike much weaker. Cyril Ramaphosa could only say that neither the Mining Chamber nor the NUM had emerged victorious. He said the strike was a tactical maneuver. In fact, it was a heavy blow for the NUM and for COSATU as a whole. Trade unions could still make substantial gains in sectors like auto and the retail trade; it was an altogether different affair to get something out of the mining companies.

### The social effects of the recession

The government tried to compensate for losses to liberal forces incurred with each meeting between employers, the PFP and the ANC, with a series of reforms to legislation concerning labour and trade-union rights. The regime itself undertook the famous "deregulation" of apartheid, promising privatizations and abolishing the "pass". In September 1987, it proposed new labour regulations whose obvious goal was hindering trade-union activity.

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49 At the time, NUMSA general secretary Moses Mayekiso was in prison on charges of "high treason" for his activities in the Alexandra township.

50 The 1987 strike saw 5.25 million strike days, during a conflict that lasted 21 days.

51 As in the case of SASOL, a few years before, these firings did not necessarily mean definitive exclusion from the work force. But being hired again was often conditioned on the employee signing a letter committing him to "good conduct".


53 The previous elections, in May 1987, had revealed a slight shift of the Anglophone electorate from the PFP to the National Party.
The process of amending the new legislation was completed in September 1988. Generally speaking, the government project was well-received by the main employers' associations, Assocom and the SAIFSA. The new regulations said, for example, that a strike carried out for an "identical or similar motive" to a work stoppage within the previous year was an "unfair labour practice". Trade unions could also be pursued in the courts for damages caused during a wildcat strike. "General" work stoppages and solidarity strikes were illegal and, once again, the trade unions could end up in the courts for calling such actions. Employers would be allowed to negotiate unilaterally with minority trade unions (usually made up of white workers); the existence of the closed shop was challenged. It would be easier to lay off workers, and the employer would no longer have to respect the "last hired, first fired" rule. The government could appoint whomever it liked to head a conciliation committee; until then, only labour law experts had qualified for such posts.

Aside from the restrictions on trade-union activity, the planned changes to the Labour Relations Act could have provoked two changes to the work of the trade unions. First, the changes could make conflicts more difficult to handle within a legal framework, leaving conflict management to non-company officials alone. Second, they could lead to the signing of direct agreements on the company level between the union local and the employer, to the detriment of sectoral trade unionism and nationwide negotiations. This tendency already existed; in 1988, NUMSA drew a critical balance sheet of its strike in Witwatersrand, pointing to the growing tendency towards agreements reached on a company-by-company basis.

COSATU launched a broad campaign against these changes to the Labour Relations Act. It called for workplace actions and asked employers to oppose the government proposal. The result was not a good one, although the campaign did create unity with NACTU. Karl Van Holdt from the South African Labour Bulletin wrote:

Although many of the unions are campaigning against the Bill, there is as yet little co-ordination between unions.... NUMSA also believe the campaign has to be broader than COSATU, that alliances should be built with other trade unions, as well as with other working class organisations.... [The] desire for action was expressed in the Sharpville stayaway on Monday, 21 March. There had been a national call by UDF affiliates for a day of protest. COSATU had neither endorsed nor rejected the call, preferring to concentrate on preparing for the Congress. Some unionists supported the call, others opposed it....

The balance sheet was not a positive one for the federation. In October 1987, a COSATU information bulletin was already saying the following about the campaign for a decent minimum wage:

The structures are generally non-existent and there has been little or no national co-ordination. The result has been that COSATU did not give direction in terms of solidarity action.... We failed to draw community-based progressive organisations into the campaign.

COSATU was coming up against a number of obstacles. From 1982-83 the country had seen an uninterrupted rise in strikes and violent confrontations. But the impasse of the school boycott and consumer boycotts, the weakening of the cívics, the failure of the miners strike and the changes to the Labour Relations Act revealed the limits of the radicalization and the main obstacle it faced: the fact that the regime held the initiative, and

55 The LRA was amended six times between 1979 and 1987.
57 Three million workers still managed to participate in a three-day strike from June 6-8, 1988.
58 On the collapse and impasse of the boycotts of white shop owners, see Mark Bennett and Deborah Quinn, "Kamikaze politics," Indicator, an Overview of Political Conflicts in South Africa (1984-1988), Durban, p. 21. The authors highlight "the unrealistic demands made by the boycott committees—particularly in their expectations of the influence of the white business community in dermining state policy".
that the overthrow of the government was not in fact on the agenda.

The economic crisis, bigger and bigger layoffs and the effects of foreign disinvestment were all serious blows to the foundations of the trade-union movement. The introduction of new technologies into the mines led to significant cuts in the size of the work force.

There were the beginnings in Natal of what was to eventually become a civil war situation. Buthelezi’s Inkatha party created a "trade union" to compete with COSATU, the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA). While the operation never went very far in the whole region, it joined in Inkatha’s attacks against independent trade unionism and against all progressive forces. The gradual rise of confrontations in the Natal townships between Buthelezi and ANC supporters led to a rapid weakening of COSATU, especially in the Pietermaritzburg area.

**The employers take a new approach in certain sectors**

In tandem with these different initiatives undertaken with intimidation in mind, the trade-union movement was also faced with an employer offensive of an altogether different type: that of an offer of worker-held company shares.

To be sure, in 1987-88 the proposal remained very modest with fewer than 30 companies practicing this employee share-ownership scheme. But more significant was the July 1987 Anglo-American plan to propose an Employee Share Ownership Plan (ESOP) to its workers. In November, the company specified that it would give five shares to every employee that had been with the company for at least two years. Nothing that Anglo-American did could be seen outside of its national, political and social implications. The trade-union movement had to respond to the offer. Jay Naidoo, still COSATU general secretary at the time, wrote:

> We are essentially opposed to the idea of ESOPs. Fundamental issues must be redressed first. We’re struggling for a living wage, let alone considering buying shares which we see as perpetuating inequality.

But the matter was not laid to rest. The employers were carrying out a full-blown offensive which was to combine with a number of developments within the trade-union movement.

In April 1988, the workers at Samcor (Ford) began a strike against an agreement signed between NUMSA and company management. The agreement put 24 percent of Samcor shares into a union-controlled fund to improve life in the “communities”, within the framework of a partial retreat of South African capital from the US-owned company. The NUMSA leadership saw this as a victory, arguing that the workers had been duly consulted and had preferred the fund over an individual distribution of the dividends. In fact, confusion reigned supreme. At the Pretoria factory, 3,000 workers went on strike for seven days to prevent the signing of the agreement.

Individual motivations for the action were very diverse, and the union pointed to a lack of union structures at the Pretoria factory. But the problem remained. What was to be done? Accept that dividends should accrue to individuals or create a collective fund—by thereby running the risk of turning the trade union into a service association?

The employers’ policy was creating serious problems for trade-union strategy. Different positions were taken from one company to the next; it was very difficult for a union to provide a simple, centralized response. As we

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59 US investment went from $2.8 billion in 1983 to $1.3 billion in 1986.
shall see later on, this matter of employee share-ownership—which may have seemed secondary—re-emerged in later debates on trade-union strategy. This question came up in a variety of sectors, including mining.

**Trade-union gains in steel and the evolution of NUMSA**

There were also specific discussions on the question of co-operatives. Over a long period, the NUMSA leadership considered this attempt to establish co-operatives as a clear step in the direction of "self-management". Very soon, however, there emerged the matter of managing funds, capital investment and the growing autonomy which could potentially give to the union leadership because of its activities and projects outside the scope of traditional trade unionism, as in the case of ESOPs. Indeed, NUMSA had some serious internal problems in Port Elizabeth stemming from a badly managed co-operative.

This raised the question of the current evolution of the South African economy. We are not dealing solely with trade-union gains won through struggle and confrontation. There had also been a parallel evolution among a section of employers and their attempts to integrate trade-union know-how into their operations. It was the most radical sector of the trade-union movement that had to respond to these difficult challenges.

In the same way, the enormous inequality in the progression of wage levels from one sector to the next was also difficult to attribute solely to struggle. The difference may also have derived from the different margins for consensus employers had in different sectors.

Until the end of the 1980s many wage agreements outpaced inflation. This led to a drop in the average difference in salary between Black and white workers. At the same time, however, there was a heightening of disparities between Black workers in different sectors and companies.

In the second half of 1988, 12 of the 20 best negotiated wage agreements were handled by NUMSA. The 178 wage agreements made that year provided for an average weekly salary of 120.66 rand. Not counting very low wages in the mining sector, the average rose to 134.13 rand. The average wage obtained by NUMSA in its sector, however, was 165.46 rand. The average in the food sector (handled by the FAWU) was 140.81 rand; the average was 98.76 rand in the transport sector and 88.06 rand in the mines. NUMSA secured average weekly salaries of 210.15 rand at Toyota and 208.95 rand at Mercedes-Benz.64 One year later the average weekly wage obtained through negotiation was 203.44 rand in the auto sector and 185.62 rand in the steel sector. The average rose to 121.46 rand in transport and 96.69 rand in the mines. Once again, six of the 10 best salary agreements were negotiated by NUMSA.65

NUMSA and the chemical workers union had to face the problem of handling ongoing contractual relations with certain employer groups. This is not surprising in and of itself, when a trade-union movement is stable and becomes institutionalized on the company level. But it was surprising to see this in the context of apartheid and periods of intense repression. It also destabilized the apparent coherence of a current whose political project was based essentially on trade-union practices.

**How to respond?**

The COSATU leadership—including the leaders of the trade-union Left in NUMSA, the CWIU and other unions—understood long before the most active groups in the townships that the situation was changing rapidly. The government rendered the UDF inoperative and weakened the unions through repression and the new Labour Relations Act. There was growing talk of negotiations.

The British government made the first gesture by officially receiving a delegation from the ANC; US government representative George Schultz met with Oliver Tambo. The internal pass was eliminated and replaced with repressive regulations against those with no fixed address. A debate on the Group Areas Act began in 1988, with prospects of opening certain zones "to all the races". Different official statements raised the "necessary conditions" for the release of Nelson Mandela.

The NUMSA leadership—especially Erwin and the union's supporters in academe—sought a way out of the impasse through answers to the new challenges and a critique of the limitations of previous strategy. They essentially felt that they had to provide the trade-union movement with a better understanding of the objective changes underway, based on the idea that no lasting resistance could emerge without a trade-union understanding of both the period and changes to the system. They felt that for the trade union to survive the new tests it faced, it had to draw up its own programme for economic change as part of an alternative project for society.

This approach led to the founding of the Labour and Economic Research Centre (LERC). In its ranks could be found Erwin, but also Mike Morris from the University of Natal and Vishnu Padayachee and Stephen Gelb from the University of Durban-Westville, among others. All had worked with the trade-union movement and with NUMSA for a long period of time.

But what was this social project going to be? And how was economic research as such going to influence the political project? Introducing the LERC project to COSATU in November 1988, Erwin wrote:

**Trade unions in South Africa have had a relatively limited impact on economic policy.... The issue at stake is what conditions is a socialist transformation of an economy likely and possible.... What has been argued is that there are immediate pressing reasons why the unions should be party to developing a more coherent analysis of the South African political economy. In doing this the question of alternate economic systems must inevitably arise.... It is argued that the removal of the apartheid regime could be in the economic interest of various components of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois classes. The basis of this would be a mixed economy situation giving space for capitalist enterprises but curbing or removing the power of the monopolies.**

This was the initial overall approach to the project taken by Erwin. But the group of academics working on the project had already opened up new avenues of study and research on South African society. Stephen Gelb was undoubtedly the one who went the furthest in reformulating the socio-economic history of the country. He did so by delving directly into the thinking of the French Regulation School. He sought to define the type of "regulation" put in place after the Second World War, and came up with the term "racial Fordism".

His work should have provoked more debate than it did. He debunked the notion that apartheid had been a mere "reactionary detour" in a country still dominated by "backward Boers". His writings followed those of some others and underscored the link between the racist institutions and the specific needs of capitalist accumulation. He also made it possible to understand why the system had entered into a period of change from 1972 onwards, and especially after 1982. Gelb and his associates brought up to date the old debate on the nature of apartheid and the way it functioned. Their work pointed to the importance for the state and employers of charting a new path in response to the exhaustion of the old system.

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66 Presentation to COSATU, Nov. 4-5, 1988, LERC, stencil.
68 This made it possible to have a more intricate understanding of the developments of February 2, 1990, when Frederick de Klerk legalized the ANC and opened the door to negotiations. For almost two years, the ANC explained that this was the fruit of the victories of the national liberation movement and the regime's closing act before the "transfer of power".
But wasn't Gelb himself searching a bit too hard to describe what a new "virtuous" model of regulation would look like in a post-apartheid society? At any rate, this was a valid question when he tried to determine what the new growth model "should" look like:

In the alternative strategy, a central role is accorded to the state, whose capacities are seen to provide an essential counterweight to the inevitable reluctance of extremely powerful private economic agents, especially the conglomerates, to bring about a fundamental shift in economic development. The critical question facing this growth model would be relations between business firms and government planning institutions. Cooperation, rather than conflict, requires that firms be involved in the sectoral planning process (as indeed should labour).

Gelb did not specifically define the character of the new state in charge of such a policy and did not take into account the objective nature of the social relations of production—indeed independent of government policies of "co-operation" and 'planning'. Keep in mind that there was a clear correlation between LERC's work and the reformulation of trade-union orientations, NUMSA's to begin with.

A report to a 1990 NUMSA national conference recalled the socialist objective at length, but also explained that:

We can't build socialism in one factory. So factory tribalism or sectionalism will definitely hold back our struggle. By bargaining at industry level, we can start to restructure the economy. That is why NUMSA's demands ... for more job security and for job creation programmes are so important.... These are demands which start to give workers a say in restructuring the metal industry.

The goal was negotiations that would lead to some employee "control" of a thoroughgoing "restructuring" of the sector, based on the needs of the national economy. In our opinion, the plan reflected Gelb's proposals in part.

Much of LERC's work provoked considerable debate. Based on information available to us, it is impossible to know whether only the authors were responsible for certain signed publications or if this reflected the thinking of trade-union leaders. With hindsight, however, we can say that certain studies published by LERC marked a decisive break with earlier positions of the trade-union Left, and provided the intellectual basis for what quickly became new, established trade-union positions.

This is the case, for example, with a work on Employees Share Ownership Plans (ESOPs) written by Judy Maller and published by LERC in 1988. The author raised the question of workers' share ownership within the framework of possible changes in social relations in the workplace. She wrote that the trade unions should demand "more participation, demand the right to sit on company boards, demand real control of company decisions".

In a reply to one of her critics, Maller wrote:

We need to take advantage of capital's contradictory needs in the workplace so as to benefit workers. Participation may open up a space for organised struggles to change the way work is done. It may also provide a vision of how work could be organised differently in a transformed society. Attempts to assert some control of the process of 'joint creation' may also change the very structure of participation and widen their impact at the workplace.

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69. Gelb, op.cit., p. 31.
70 According to its authors, this plan required a "de-monopolization" of the South African economy. After 1991, positions seemed to have changed rather quickly on this score; the ANC seems to have rejected such an approach.
71 "Speech to first NUMSA national bargaining conference", stencil, 1990. The "regionalism" and "tribalism" raised here refer to strong corporatist relations on the level of each work place.
only could workers benefit materially from this approach ... it could also facilitate the establishment of new structures of worker participation, which when coupled with fundamental social change beyond the workplace could transform the social relations of production.74

There was no single position on this question in NUMSA's ranks.75 Later on, however, certain NUMSA leaders came back repeatedly to the question of joint responsibility in the workplace as a way to change social relations in the broader society.76 This approach had been totally foreign to the ideological framework of FOSATU, and even of the whole independent trade-union movement until 1987.

Another polemic arose following the publication of the LERC paper, "Inflation, Wage Freezes and the Labour Movement."77 This paper suggested that trade unions and companies jointly try "the more promising anti-inflation strategy of trying to develop consensus and agreement over income distribution within the society" and set up a wider forum, with more of a national character, where broad guidelines for wages and prices can be discussed, and the redistribution of resources planned.78 Such a system could be developed even without there being a democratic constitution for South Africa which is acceptable to the majority.79

We will see that later on that these were not just the working hypotheses of an academic research centre. But it is important to note here that these key bits of thinking took place from 1988 onwards, that is in the run-up to constitutional negotiations.

In our opinion, the most significant part of these changes was the search for a new strategy, combining the centrality of the trade-union movement with the idea of "post-apartheid national reconstruction". This was a quest for a new mode of "regulation" in which the main social forces (employers and employees) would objectively participate in one and the same transformation of the country based on the following circular scheme: greater equity in the distribution of revenues, an increase in manufacturing productivity, economic restructuring, improvement of the competitiveness of the South African economy in the world market, increased overall revenues, growth in the revenue of Black communities.

A few years before such reasoning would have provoked an immediate response from the SACP, denouncing the "economism" of such a project. But the 1988-89 change in course did not only involve the political thinking of a few leaders of the trade-union Left. It was in fact a period of intense redefinition of positions, as much in COSATU as in the SACP and the ANC. Two other questions therefore have to be examined: developments within the SACP and the change in NUMSA's orientation towards it.

The Communist Party, from rectification to rectification (1988-91)

Speaking before parliament on February 2, 1990, Frederick De Klerk announced that he had decided to legalize the ANC, the Communist Party and all outlawed organizations, as part of a plan for all-party talks.79 Among the arguments put forward at the

75 See Adrienne Bird, "ESOPs—part of a strategy to smash democracy," South African Labour Bulletin, Sept. 1988. At the time, Bird was responsible for education in the Witwatersrand local NUMSA branch.
76 The LERC bulletin devoted to "employee share ownership" takes a more cautious and less favourable position than the one taken in Maller's pamphlet. The conclusion lists possible gains for both workers and employers, and says, "No rigid guidelines can be given as to how workers should respond to ESOPs... As a form of participative management ESOPs have definite limits..." LERC, bulletin no. 1, Johannesburg, Sept. 1987.
78 This position can also be found in LERC bulletin no. 3.
79 When the possibility of such talks had been raised, all opposition forces had stressed the conditions the regime would first have to meet: COSATU General Secretary Jay Naidoo, for example, said, "The condition we stress is freedom of association and freedom of speech. In order for us to have negotiations, organisations will have to put their programmes to the people, to canvass the people and get mandates." Southscan, May 24, 1989.
time by De Klerk to justify his new policy, we find the following:
The dynamic developments in international politics have created new opportunities for South Africa as well. Important advances have been made, among other things, in our contacts abroad, especially where these were precluded previously by ideological considerations. The collapse, particularly of the economic system in Eastern Europe, also serves as a warning. Those who seek to force this failure of a system on South Africa should engage in a total revision of their point of view. It should be clear to all that it is not the answer here either.

We will not go into this specific side of things. It is commonly known that, from the mid-1980s onward the Soviet government sought to negotiate with the United States over ending so-called regional conflicts. South Africa and southern Africa fell under this heading. What is important for this study is the parallel evolution of the SACP and the impact of these changes on the trade-union Left.

Publicly, Moscow had sent out many signals. During a series of conferences on Africa held in 1987, members of the Africa Institute in Moscow had raised the need for a negotiated settlement in South Africa. At the time, the ANC had publicly called on the Soviet government to make its position known. At the Arusha Conference (an international conference organized under the auspices of the ANC) held at the end of 1987, the Soviet delegates pointed to the possibility and need for a political agreement on condition that the Pretoria government make the concessions required for creating the appropriate political climate.

Henceforth the SACP faced Soviet pressure in different forms. First, there was the question of negotiations. But pressure also came on the subject of the balance sheet of the Soviet regime. Indeed, the Gorbachev regime itself regularly reinterpreted the history of the USSR. The SACP leadership, which had always displayed a slavish loyalty to the positions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, fell victim to the twists and turns of this debate.

Its seventh congress at the beginning of 1989 adopted a rather traditional programme, noteworthy for its lack of self-criticism on the question of "actually existing socialism". The main congress document reflected a compromise between various positions, but maintained the notion of a working class "unified" around the Communist Party.

At the beginning, it was mainly the party's central leader Joe Slovo who signed the successive "rectification" documents. Later, as the party's positions began to change and it was possible for the party to appeal publicly, more leaders expressed their opinions. Joe Slovo's first major document was called "The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution". To a large degree, it restated the party's views on "internal colonialism" and on its relations with the ANC. It attacked one of the Soviet academics (Vicor Goncharov) who had first spoken of the need for negotiated compromises. The document continued to proclaim the "central" role of the Communist Party in the leadership of the working class. The influence of the conflict with the trade-union Left could still be clearly seen in this 1990 document, which contained the following paragraph:

"We do not claim that the necessary democratic practices have always been implemented within the mass democratic movement, or that Communist Parties have never abused democracy on the excuse of centralism. But such illegitimate departures from the norms... should not become the excuse for insisting on syndicalist practices which, in the case of the political leadership of the struggle, would lead to organisational constipation."

80 Steven Friedman and Monty Narsoo, A New Mood in Moscow: The Soviet Attitude to South Africa, Johannesburg, South African Institute on Race Relations, 1989.
The document tried to reconcile all existing approaches to perspectives for "socialism", including that of the trade-union Left. There was a slight shift compared to the official party programme approved in 1989. The new text, for example, explained that the "internal colonialism" theory did not mean that there was a "Chinese Wall" between the stage of the democratic revolution and that of the struggle for socialism.\(^{83}\) It added, however, "We have never made a secret of our belief that the shortest route to socialism is via a democratic state." So there was really no change in the party's position after all; for decades the debate on the South African Left concerned the social nature of the future state (including, therefore, the social relations that would help establish and reproduce) and not merely the political and institutional categorization of that state.

Nevertheless, Slovo tried in the document to attract the interest of the trade-union Left, by proposing a rectification of the party's stance on the questions of democracy and socialism. He wrote, for example: "It also requires a continuing exchange of ideas not only within the ranks of the Party but also between us and all non-Party serious revolutionary activists."\(^{84}\)

Events moved quickly, in step with openings in the Soviet Union to critical debate and with the South African regime's ongoing upper hand in the negotiations process. The next SACP document, also bearing Joe Slovo's signature, was entitled "Has Socialism Failed?" The text appeared publicly in the February 1990 issue of *South African Labour Bulletin*. This time there was a clear change in course and a large measure of self-criticism. The Communist Party leader subjected the history of his political current to a thorough-going critique, saying, "We should rather ask why so many communists allowed themselves to become so blinded for so long." True, "Has Socialism Failed?" continued to see Stalinism as a mere "distortion" of socialism and offered no historical interpretation of these "distortions". Our goal here, however, is to measure the impact of changes in the SACP on the specific situation of the trade-union Left.

During the 1988-91 period, a number of political events changed the political landscape for all the different forces involved. In June 1989, the "brotherhood" of the Afrikaner elite, the Breederbond, released its plan for the reform of the system. In July of the same year, a seminar on "post-apartheid society" was held in Lausanne, Switzerland. The seminar brought together South African government officials, ANC members, Soviet and East German experts and Afrikaner economists.

The UDF became the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), before being eliminated altogether and absorbed by the now-legal ANC. The ANC and SACP decided to "suspend the armed struggle" after being legalized in 1990. The Freedom Charter was gradually forgotten and replaced by a series of ANC constitutional and economic proposals that drifted further and further from the organization's original positions. Plans to nationalize the big companies were abandoned as was the plan to "demonopolize" the South African economy.

When the negotiations began, the ANC and SACP leaderships initially presented them as the final act before victory and the "transfer of power".\(^{85}\) The rank and file of the

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\(^{83}\) This concession to the "workerist" approach had existed from 1987 onwards. See for example the intervention of SAYCO leader Peter Mokab to the July 1987 COSATU congress: "In South Africa the route to socialism has already begun in the national democratic stage of the revolution. It has not been postponed because both the national democratic stage and the socialist stage are dialectically interlaced in the crucible of the whole revolutionary movement." Second National Congress, COSATU pamphlet.

\(^{84}\) The following quotation appears in the article signed "Toussaint" in The African Communist no. 144, 1988: "That task demands the unity of the socialist vanguard... It is time for debate between 'workerists' and 'popularists'."

\(^{85}\) In Sept. 1990, the SACP reprinted the programme adopted at the beginning of 1989, "The Path to Power". It contains the following analyses: "The prospects of a revolutionary advance are greater today than ever before in our history... The situation has within it potential for a relatively rapid emergence of conditions which make possible seizure of power... There is no conflict between this insurrectionary
movements (including COSATU) continued to discuss the "sovereign Constituent Assembly" and the "ANC government". But the negotiations process itself revealed something quite different: the deterioration of the relationship of forces. Murderous attacks against Blacks by a well-organized "third force" were never investigated; along with violence between Inkatha and ANC supporters in the Transvaal townships, these attacks quickly wore down the network of activists and community associations. The violence and chaos in the townships weakened the population and let the De Klerk regime keep the initiative. The ANC leadership remained at the mercy of every new government proposal and every new government advance.

It was in this context that the trade-union Left—its main leaders, at any rate—joined the Communist Party and the ANC.

Problems in union functioning

This political shift by the trade-union Left was facilitated by the slackening of rank-and-file activity and self-assertion in several core COSATU unions. A rigorous trade-union democracy based on networks of shop stewards depends in part on the degree of mobilization of the rank and file. At every moment, it depends on the factors acting on the collective consciousness of the working class. Among other things, these include the relationship of forces and dangers of the moment.

Whatever the individual behaviour of leaders and their will to escape from rank-and-file control, relying on workers to get interested in their union's debates and its internal life is often problematic in general. But even if we set South Africa apart as an exceptional case, we do not believe it was possible to sustain over 15 years the same level of control and commitment from the trade-union rank and file. In fact, during visits to South Africa we observed a progressive weakening of the functioning of the networks of shop stewards. At the same time there was a drop in the number of members in NUMSA and other unions in the private manufacturing sector. From 1991 to 1993, the NUMSA membership fell from 281,000 to 238,000.

Problems of bureaucratization soon emerged in COSATU, to such a degree that from 1986 onwards NUMSA leaders stopped regularly attending national meetings (as we have already mentioned). Financial questions were among the problems of accountability and independence COSATU encountered. The proportion of funding coming from the dues of affiliated unions became much less than that coming from foreign aid and donations.

These problems of internal functioning have a direct impact on a political project such as the one conceived by the trade-union Left. But the trade-union Left never produced an analytical work on examples of bureaucratization in COSATU. It remained silent on such problems in the South African working-class movement.

Another question worth examining is that of the way in which the leadership team of the trade-union Left functioned. Its ambiguous mode of functioning led to a growing gap between the theory and practice of trade-union and political democracy. It also limited the leadership group's potential for discussion, formulation and experimentation. Did it perhaps finally lead to its break-up?

perspective and the possibility of a negotiated transfer of power... Whatever prospects may arise in the future for a negotiated transition, they must not be allowed to infect the purpose and content of our present strategic approaches. We are not engaged in a struggle whose objective is merely to generate sufficient pressure to bring the other side to the negotiating table."

86 For a recent appreciation of the negotiations process and the regime's ability to seize the initiative, see Pierre Beaudelet and Hein Marais, Le Monde Diplomatique, Paris, Sept. 1993.
87 COSATU says there was renewed growth after 1993.
88 It would be interesting, for example, to understand the slow evolution of John Copelyn and textile worker unionists...

THE TRADE-UNION LEFT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICA • CLAUDE JACQUIN
The third phase in the transformation of the trade-union Left (1989–91)

From mid-1989 onwards, two parallel and seemingly contradictory processes were under way. The first was the quest to adapt trade-union policy to the new situation. As shown by the LERC project, this led to the unsettled existence side-by-side of a "socialist" project (for the medium or long term) and the development of a framework for economic restructuring" gradually taken over by notions of co-management.

The second saw an opening from the SACP to the NUMSA leadership and the whole trade-union Left. This involved a criticism of Stalinism (based on Gorbachev's approach), a formal change in the party's position on socialism and, above all, the beginnings of a debate on the need for a "mass"—and hypothetically "pluralist"—Communist Party.

These two processes were only contradictory in appearance. In actual fact, they came to complement one another.

The trade-union Left was aware of its own limitations, indeed of the impasse of its political project. It was tempted by the idea of a new kind of trade-union practice and by a rapprochement with the SACP in the complex and undoubtedly difficult debates taking place within the ANC-SACP-COSATU bloc. In 1990 we were told of many NUMSA meetings where there was considerable concern about the way the negotiations were beginning de facto, even before the freeing of Nelson Mandela. A part of the SACP's analyses of the new period—"favourable to the mass movement"—were even adopted by the NUMSA leadership. The idea was that there had to be a strengthening within the bloc of those struggling for the most radical and most "working-class" outcome to the negotiations. Joe Slovo's writings were seriously examined and many discussions between the two forces took place.

The SACP itself was going through a contradictory evolution. With hindsight, it is now possible to grasp the consequences of the internal and external pressures the party had to face. Some observers have made an analogy with the "Eurocommunist" course pursued by Communist parties in Western Europe during the latter part of the 1970s. Indeed, aside from the formal debate on socialism, the overriding tendency was that of a de-radicalization of the party's idea of "national democratic revolution". In other words, the party itself abandoned the most radical elements of the Freedom Charter.69

At the start, the NUMSA leadership noted Slovo's self-criticism over Stalinism and his support for a "democratic socialism". Some NUMSA leaders insisted that SACP was in the process of coming over to their union's positions. With perfect timing, the SACP began to circulate a draft for a Workers' Charter, which was well-received by the NUMSA leadership.

The other problem—to which we shall return at the end—was the acceptance by the most central leaders of the trade-union Left of the need to belong to a party (in this case, the SACP); previously, they had generally been hostile to such an idea.

69 From 1986 onwards Joe Slovo spoke of a "mixed economy". While borrowed from economists of the Gorbachev period, the concept was a new one on the South African scene. See the interviews with Slovo in Marxism Today, London, Dec. 1986, and in Die Zeit, Apr. 10, 1987. But in the 1989 SACP programme "The Path to Power", the party was still writing: "The foundation of the national democratic state will be popular representative institutions of government based on one-person, one-vote.... These bodies will have to be accountable to the people and subject to popular control.... In order to satisfy the needs of the people and ensure balanced and rapid development of the economy, it will be necessary to ensure popular control over vital sectors of the economy.... The state must ensure that workers in particular and the people in general play an important role in the running of enterprises...."
Our hypothesis is that, aside from probable personal agreements and others based on group interests, there was also a coming together in 1989-91 of the respective redefinitions of the two groups' essential doctrine. A section of the Communist Party leadership and a whole group of party members in COSATU turned their attention to the approach suggested by LERC and Alec Erwin for a way out of the crisis through "reconstruction" and "restructuring". This contributed to a large degree to the entry of the majority of NUMSA leaders into the SACP, and into the ANC in a parallel fashion.\(^9\)

Indeed, in the numerous seminars organized to discuss "post-apartheid society" Erwin's approach appeared more concrete, more immediate, more related to the day-to-day activities of the different forces involved. It led to the formulation of an immediate socio-economic project and provided some solid backing for discussions with the employers' associations.

The positions advanced bit by bit by Erwin, on the one hand, and SACP members, on the other, went through a parallel development. In 1989-90, Erwin provided the framework for the discussion:

*We must prepare to govern and rebuild our country.... These policies are anchored in the belief in a socialist society [with] a democratically planned socialist economy.*

*Command planning based on administrative measures is inappropriate.... Our policy is that of a mixed economy.*\(^9\)

*The challenge to a planning process in South Africa is therefore to restructure the parameters within which market forces will operate.... This would require ... establishing a greater equality of power between capital and labour.... Workers control is, therefore, a complex issue that requires us to address the nature of the State.... The area a number of reasons why our thinking has to go beyond State ownership (nationalisation) into concepts of collective ownership.... Our priority is ... to strengthen our political organisations—the ANC and the SACP—and ... the unions [and] civics....*\(^9\)

At the same time, Erwin also seemed to want to convince NUMSA that:

*The mixed economy position is being adopted not as some expedient to hoodwink capital.... This is not often fully recognized by the left nor are its wider implications.*

At the time, there was still tremendous influence from the “Gorbachev Soviet model”, at least of the perception of it as a “mixed economy”.\(^9\) This meant support for the Soviet path at the time: “market socialism”, with the introduction of market mechanisms alongside state planning and property. Erwin thus initially raised the notion of market correctives while pointing to the importance of “planning”.\(^9\)

But events were moving at a fast clip indeed, in both the USSR and South Africa. In 1990 (in part thanks to the positions of Erwin and others) the ANC decided to back a programme of economic growth, and an end to apartheid, through “redistribution”. Erwin wrote, “So what’s envisaged is a growth path which concentrates mainly on developing the domestic economy, but in a way which keeps us competitive in international markets.”\(^9\)

\(^9\) Erwin spoke of the need for a South African “perestroika”, as a way to raise both the need for a structural reform of the economy and his conception of a “mixed economy”. In the Weekly Mail of Mar. 30, 1990, he said, “Finally, economic restructuring will have to go hand-in-hand with building a new democratic state in South Africa.... Our democratic future depends on our own perestroika.”

\(^9\) In this and other texts, Erwin systematically uses the term “command planning” as part of his balance sheet of the USSR. But he never says whether this is a criticism of an economic “mechanism” or if, behind the term “command”, there is a social and historic characterization of the Soviet regime. Did this regime represent a “distortion” of socialism, a “deformed socialism”, or no socialism at all?


\(^9\) A parallel has been drawn by some writers between the high degree of centralization in Soviet planning and the high degree of concentration of South African capital, with both being seen to contain similar forms of rigidity.


\(^9\) New Era, Athlone (Cape Town), vol. 5, no. 2, winter 1990.

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*The Trade-Union Left and the Birth of a New South Africa*  \*Claude Jaquin*
Positions were still evolving; at the time, however, there was still talk of a government soon to be controlled by the “liberation movement”. The NUMSA leadership was in the midst of a debate on the SACP. But it continued to evolve until its positions were far removed from what they once had been. NUMSA (and with it a large number of leaders of the trade-union Left) broke with the idea of the incompatibility of interests between the working class and the employers. The idea of a South African manufacturing sector more competitive on the world market was presented as one of the primary goals for getting out of the crisis and breaking with apartheid. Labour productivity and production costs were taking as “objective” criteria and were examined in a vacuum, disconnected from the idea of a social project as such.

But to put it bluntly, is it possible in today’s South Africa to emulate the model of growth seen in the major industrialized countries in the 1950s: simultaneous growth in productivity, profits, wages and consumption? This was the framework for debates at the time. The leadership teams of the ANC, the SACP and COSATU were all involved in specific negotiations on these questions, in the National Economic Negotiating Forum (NENF) and the National Manpower Commission (NMC). The question was therefore also posed—including to NUMSA—of turning these forums into long-term, permanent bodies for joint responsibility.97

Tito Mboweni, from the ANC’s Department of Economic Planning, provided the following analysis:

The challenge facing semi-industrialised countries such as South Africa is to fashion new institutional arrangements between labour, capital, the democratic state and other organs of civil society.... Strong labour movements can propel transition to democracy, but this requires both institutional innovation and economic strategies with a high degree of sophistication.98

New experiences emerged on the company level with the partial integration of trade-union representatives into the so-called “joint decision-making structures”. This was the case at P.G. Bison Limited, a company with 4000 employees, of which 3000 belonged to three different COSATU unions. The agreement touched on training but also on “Total Productivity and Quality” (TPQ). Elijah Masinga, a leader of one of the unions (PPWAWU) declared:

What we have done here is not small. It is very big. We are makers of history of the new South Africa. This is not easy. There are no set rules, no precedents to follow. We are pioneers of the new industrial order in South Africa. None of us should feel we are not making a contribution. We should look forward to the day when other companies feel at liberty to copy what we are trying to do here.99

A managerial consultant even said:

The new meaning of workers control is infinitely better than the meaning of ‘worker’s rights’

96 Another union from the trade-union Left tradition, the chemical workers union (CWU), had a similar debate. “The union discovered that ‘employers were far beyond us in thinking about restructuring the chemical industry’.” But: “Our members believe that a social contract route would be a disaster for the unions. It would tie us to what kind of economic system we get.”

97 Geoff Schreiner (national head of research at NUMSA), “Restructuring the National Manpower Commission”, South African Labour Bulletin, July-Aug. 1991; Adrienne Bird (national head of education at NUMSA) and Geoff Schreiner, “COSATU at the crossroads”, South African Labour Bulletin, July-Aug. 1992. At the Mining Summit (negotiations between the NUM and the Mining Chamber) in 1992, the NUM put forward a programme of “co-determination” as a solution to the crisis in the sector. See also Dot Keet, “Negotiation and actions towards the general strike”, South African Labour Bulletin, July 1992. In July 1992, COSATU and the employers union SACCOLA co-signed a Charter. The two signatories proposed “an open and inclusive approach at both national and industry level to economic restructuring and to agreeing on an economic strategy which will deliver high and sustainable levels of growth and development. To this end, we seek to avoid unilateral economic restructuring and to seek consensus between government, labour and business in this regard.” South African Labour Bulletin, Sept. 1992.


control' ten years ago.... It's ironic that management will have to give up some of its control in order to keep it.\textsuperscript{100}

The crisis of the project and the fragmentation of the trade-union Left (1991–93)

To sum up the different stages:

First, at the beginning of 1990 the debate over the Workers' Charter in COSATU definitively concluded with a plan to draw up a series of basic rights (labour and trade-union rights) to be appended to the ANC's constitutional proposals.\textsuperscript{101} There was no longer any question of a "political programme" of any sort, which signalled the rejection of the original NUMSA proposal.

Then during 1990 national NUMSA leaders joined the Communist Party. An exemplary case is that of Moses Mayekiso, elected on July 29, 1990 as one of the 22 members of the provisional leadership of the newly legalized SACP. John Gomomo joined the "internal leadership committees" of both the ANC and the SACP in the Eastern Cape.

At the end of 1990, a NUMSA working seminar was held on the policy of "reconstruction", as a solution to the problems created by the economic crisis and as a way to put the country beyond apartheid. An agreement seems to have been made at the time between the ANC and NUMSA on what was labelled a strategy for "growth through redistribution".\textsuperscript{103}

In July 1991, the fourth COSATU congress confirmed the alliance between the mineworkers union (NUM) and the auto and steelworkers union (NUMSA). The two unions had between them 1,000 of the 2,500 delegates present. "The only debate which found them on opposing sides was that on advancing women's leadership."\textsuperscript{103} A significant development was the election of NUMSA leader John Gomomo as federal president, with the support of the NUM, against the candidacy of Chris Diamini, supported by the unions traditionally associated with the Freedom Charter current. Both were SACP members, but Gomomo had only joined recently.

One of the documents approved by the congress said, "We commit ourselves to educate and encourage our members to join the ANC and SACP." This position was clearly far removed from the original principles of the trade-union Left on trade-union independence in relation to political movements.\textsuperscript{104} At the eighth congress of the SACP, two of the main NUMSA leaders joined the party's central committee: John Gomomo and Moses Mayekiso. Part of the remaining trade-union Left also joined the party; but only NUMSA has representatives in the leadership.

The SACP congress was billed as a congress of transition. A majority of delegates opposed Joe Slovo's call for the idea of "democratic socialism" to be included in the resolutions, using the argument that socialism is "democratic in essence" and that the new formula would appear too "defensive". The SACP was divided and heterogeneous.\textsuperscript{105} Its specific project—alongside and

101 See the COSATU questionnaire linked to this debate in South African Labour Bulletin, Mar. 1990.
102 Company heads (primarily from Anglo-American and Toyota) were present at the seminar. The South African Labour Bulletin reporting the event notes that the debates "indicate the beginning of a shift from the politics of resistance to the politics of reconstruction" (South African Labour Bulletin, Mar. 1991).
104 NUMSA did not shy, however, from making a strong critique of manipulative internal COSATU practices. A letter from Daniel Dube on behalf of the union to COSATU's national secretariat in August 1989 shows that this remained a sore point even at this late date. Dube complains about confusion over the Mass Democratic Movement and the nature of its relations with the trade unions. He complains about certain internal procedures and the way in which certain federation positions were not debated. Letter from Daniel Dube to Jay Naidoo, Aug. 8, 1989.
105 One of the leading figures in the SACP's intransigent wing was Harry Gwala. An old SACP cadre, proponent of a return to the party's radical past, and one of the last defenders of the Soviet Communist Party, Gwala had been elected as an honorary NUMSA president at the union's founding congress—in honour of his working-class roots, but no doubt...
inside the ANC—was far from clear. The different currents agreed on a number of compromises. Paradoxically, while seemingly very orthodox in the ideological sphere, the congress proved to be very innovative in the realm of strategy. The congress declaration called for a policy of economic growth, an increase in productivity and an improvement in the competitiveness of the country’s exports!

The academic Left was also under pressure. Intellectuals who had been long-time supporters of the trade-union Left also joined the SACP or became close sympathizers. Journals like *South African Labour Bulletin* followed step, losing some of their former independence in the process.

The whole process stood out on an international level. Everywhere else Communist Parties were in crisis, wondering about their future. The South African party, on the other hand, seemed to be winning over a whole generation of trade unionists and intellectuals who had previously been fiercely hostile to it. This distinction of the SACP is linked to factors specific to the country and the political and social movements that emerged during the 1980s.

In fact, the SACP was also in crisis, and a part of the leadership was in fact wondering about its future. In 1990 Jeremy Cronin recognized the existence of this crisis. It developed gradually, as the leadership’s role grew in the process of compromises and negotiations and the base was marginalized as the new line was worked out. When the SACP finally joined the government after the electoral victory of the ANC-led bloc, these strains grew worse. Many cadres continued—some in all honesty, others out of opportunism—to reaffirm the party’s socialist objective while defending the policies, first reformist, then neoliberal, carried out by the government. Wasn’t it all question of “tactics”, of a preliminary democratic reconstruction to lay the foundations for a new working-class advance? Many of the party’s activists were lost in the end to personal career opportunities or to demoralization.

**Emergence of new dividing lines**

Two major controversies in the early 1990s revealed new political dividing lines in COSATU in the changing political and economic context, with elements of the old trade-union Left lining up on opposite sides of the new divides. The first controversy concerned the accumulation of offices in COSATU and in the SACP and/or the ANC. The second concerned the negotiations process and the economic positions of the trade-union movement.

In the first controversy, there was significant debate in every union. The matter of leaders “wearing many hats” was raised in the conventions and in a series of articles over the course of 1992. Many trade unionists came to see the ANC-SACP-COSATU bloc as an unequal coalition in which the federation played a minor role. Most decisions were taken without discussion in the trade-union movement and applied through administrative channels by those holding positions in all three organizations.

As for the second controversy, the trade-union stance on economic positions, it took on greater and greater significance as prospects for an ANC-National Party coalition government grew clearer and clearer. Positions were diverse, even within each individual COSATU union, on how much responsibility should be shared with the employers, on the need for “social contracts”, and so on.

These two debates concerned COSATU’s independence in relation to the ANC. The document also at that time in order to send reassuring signals to the SACP.


107 Of the three alliance partners, COSATU was the only one not to be represented in the constitutional negotiations (CODESA). There was a formal framework for meetings and joint decision-making between the three partners. But there is good reason to believe (based among other things on eyewitness accounts and complaints) that this did not actually work and that only a small group of people determined the orientation of the “alliance” in the negotiations.
question was raised as to what the trade-union movement should do in the face of a government in which the ANC would play a more or less central role. The answers were, once again, varied, but also very radical. They also served to confirm the political fragmentation of what had been the trade-union Left.

For instance the textile workers’ union (SACTWU)—in whose ranks could be found a part of the old FOSATU—argued for one of the most open-ended positions in relation to sharing responsibility with the employers, and one of the hardest lines in favour of breaking the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance, so that that the trade-union movement could recover its independence. SACTWU called for a “social market economy” and proposed a system of economic self-regulation linked to the negotiating abilities of the employers and the trade unions. Its 1993 congress positions corresponded to those taken from 1991 onwards by its general secretary, John Copelyn, a former leader of the trade-union Left.

At the other extreme were the positions taken by NUMSA. At its July 1993 congress, the call for “nationalization without compensation” was adopted by 455 votes to 312. The union also called for breaking its disciplined solidarity with the ANC as soon as the ANC joined the government. The congress proposed a discussion, in particular with the SACP, about new forms of organisation that unify the working class organisations and parties, that will take forward a programme to implement socialism. This could take the form of a Working Class Party. Possibilities include a front of left forces or one organisation. The delegates, who were mainly supporters of the SACP, felt that the SACP should play a leading role in this process together with left sections of the ANC as well as other forces like WOSA and many independent socialists and social democrats.

Unlike the past, there was a marked lack of uniformity within each union. More than in the past, controversies tended to divide conference delegates and local leaders from one another. NUMSA’s 1993 positions also revealed a high degree of internal disarray. Its leadership was divided and a number of serious debates have arisen since then.

But the main observation at this stage is that the trade-union Left—such as we defined it throughout this study—had ceased to exist. Fragmentation had become its dominant feature. This, however, does not exclude new developments in the South African trade-union movement. Nor does it rule out the influence the trade-union Left’s heritage may have on these developments.

We will now try to draw a balance sheet and suggest a number of possible interpretations.

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111 The South African Labour Bulletin account of these debates reports the discussions in a way that seems to be aiming at consensus. The terminology used in the resolution reflects a compromise between those wanting to found a new broad, pluralist party (perhaps still on the model of the Brazilian PT) and those who feel the SACP should itself carry out this transformation.
112 In August 1992, following a general strike, the NUMSA leadership proposed a compromise with the employers and a withdrawal of its demand for a freeze on layoffs. An August 11 letter from the East Witwatersrand branch of the union denounced both the proposal and the methods of the national leadership. Letter from Bethuel Maserumule to the NUMSA national secretariat.
Conclusion
From one paradigm to another

We can now give at least some elements of an overall view that considers the whole social and historical background of the appearance and evolution of the South African trade-union Left—without a doubt the largest working-class Left formation in all of Africa. The important thing is to determine the rationale behind the actions and positions of the different forces involved. This can also help us to understand better the trajectory that these forces are following now and will follow in the future, a trajectory with major consequences for South Africa’s labour movement in particular and the country in general.

We have shown that the trade-union Left’s vision of the workers’ movement and of socialism was influenced from the beginning by the specific working-class sectors it was rooted in.

The questions remain: could the trade-union Left have built a united, independent workers’ movement committed to realizing its vision, and gathered the other sectors of working and dispossessed people around it, in the context of South Africa in the 1980s? And now that the trade-union Left is no longer united around this project, could some version of it be taken up and carried out in the future, by some other set of forces? Responding to these questions means highlighting some of the weaknesses that characterized the trade-union Left even at its height. It requires seeing that a political project based purely on the trade unions was never enough. There were always gaps in the Left’s project where its own concepts of “working-class party” and “national liberation movement” belonged; and this lack forced the Left in a period of rapid and difficult change to fall back on the SACP as the “actually existing” working-class party and the ANC as the “actually existing” liberation movement.

The SACP’s impact on the trade-union Left’s evolution
Why did NUMSA leaders, other leaders of the trade-union Left and their academic supporters join the Communist Party? In our opinion, a partial explanation—but only a partial one—was provided by Mike Morris in a 1991 interview. First, he says, “The ANC option faced many problems but the major one was that very strong forces were pushing the ANC towards the centre-right.”

Morris wonders about the content of the ANC-SACP alliance, even seeing it as the origin of a number of manipulative practices. But he says there was the need to save a socialist “pole” within the ANC-dominated alliance. Once that approach had been adopted, he says, and once joining all the small, “insignificant” groups was ruled out, that left the SACP option. But it, too, was surrounded by troubling questions. Could an organized left within the party ensure that it took its new slogan of democratic socialism seriously? How genuine was the attempt by

some forces (grouped mainly around Slovo) to break with its Stalinist past?

Morris then concludes:
The anti-Stalinist unionists who have joined the SACP face a critical dilemma. Can the key political principles of their style of unionism (democracy and political independence) survive in their new political home?

This seems like an overly one-sided view. Morris explains the adopted approach as due largely to "pragmatism". The trade-union Left, the argument goes, needed a political framework and the SACP seemed to be the only real solution.²

We do not ignore this side of the question. But Morris does not make any reference to the specific, autonomous evolution of the economic thinking of the trade-union Left: an evolution of which he was a part. The way Morris puts it, it is as if NUMSA simply took an "empirical gamble".

The Morris article in New Era does, however, contain two sentences which could have been the springboard for further explanation. First, he mentions the specific attention paid to the current led by Joe Slovo in the Communist Party. He then raises the need to take a critical look at the "colonialism of a special type" theory.

Regrettably, Morris only briefly mentions these two issues. Joe Slovo did indeed push his party in the direction of criticizing its past and its alignment with the Soviet Union. But he also opened up a debate on the post-apartheid transition. He raised the question of nationalizations and was among the first to question the most radical economic precepts of the Freedom Charter. When they joined the party, NUMSA leaders could not have been unaware of this. No more unaware, at any rate, than they were of the core of SACP doctrine: the theory of "internal colonialism". This is why we feel, while including Morris's explanations, it is also necessary to provide others.

The trade-union Left's original stance was that racial segregation could only be totally eliminated as a result of a break with the social relations of capitalism. It was therefore opposed to separating political tasks and charting out two different stages of historical transition (the national-democratic stage and then that of socialism). This two-stage approach flowed from the theory of a "colonialism of a special type". The leaders of the trade-union Left put forward a long-term strategy: that of a cumulative process in which a growing working-class movement would achieve hegemony in the Black liberation struggle.

From the start, however, the approach oversimplified a number of considerations. Black workers were collectively seen as "proletarians" within social relations that combined racial oppression with labour exploitation. This led to a clear tendency to underestimate the fragmentation and stratification that deeply affect social status and consciousness. Class identity—as it was seen by the trade-union Left and by the far Left in the Cape region—always had an all-encompassing, inflexible character about it. In many declarations and analyses, proletarianization was presented as the only objective social relationship.

The long-term approach implicit in the 1982 Foster report clearly reflected an understanding of the time required to overcome "divisions" and heterogeneity: between workers in big and small companies, between salaried workers and the township unemployed, between urban and rural communities, and so on. In the final analysis, though, it was the relationship of exploitation between capital and labour that carried the day, expected to lead in a linear fashion to a unified working class and the uniformity of its social consciousness.

² In support of Morris's remarks, there are a number of interviews with Moses Mayekiso in which he stresses the fact that, according to him, the majority of workers follow the SACP's lead and that this had to be kept in mind (in Socialist Workers Review, London, Apr. 1991, and in the collection of interviews assembled by Alex Callinicos, Between Apartheid and Capitalism, London, Bookmarks, 1991).
In our opinion, there was a simplification of the relationship between the trade-union Left, to a certain degree, responded to the "colonialism of a special type" theory with a certain symmetry, which is not without error. For the Freedom Charter of 1945, the struggle for the liberation of the continent, the social relations of modern capitalism. The relations of racial oppression were often linked to the institutional sphere (laws, state, and so on). The end of apartheid was presented as the necessary end of an "epoch", without any real links drawn with the social relations of production. But this opposition was presented in the light of the exploitation of labour and proletarianization.

The trade-union Left soon discovered the problems with this approach. It was unable to build its own organizations in the political life of the townships. It was surprised by the ANC's ability to rebuild itself inside the country and attract the political attention of the workers. It gradually realized that it could not be able to sustain its project if it were to remain a trade-union force and nothing more. It fully understood that problems such as the crisis in Natal and the weight of South Africa were based on complex social relations going beyond the conflict between capital and labour.

The heritage of apartheid produced different effects on the consciousness and the religious and racial prejudices of mixed-race, African, Indian and other communities. One of the best examples of this change in thinking of the leaders of the trade-union Left was provided by Moses Mayekiso in 1989. In response to a question, he indirectly repeated his current's former position.

"Getting rid of apartheid, that's another gain towards socialism... You can't get socialism if apartheid is still there. Getting rid of apartheid is part and parcel of stages. I believe there are stages."

The same concern can be found in an interview with him the following year, when he underlines the difficulty of the situation and the political tasks of the day. "We are the last part of the continent to achieve national liberation."

The trade-union Left thus tried to overcome the limits of its initial orientation. And it tried to do so, as we have already mentioned, under the impact of the change in the relationship of forces between the state, the employers and the mass movement.

The search for a solution was not carried out in the same way as in a party. The trade-union Left had no specific apparatus for reproducing itself. It did not even have absolute control over the unions it led. Its course was largely influenced by the growing weight of the ANC. It therefore felt it had to act by exerting pressure within the current dominated by the ANC and the SACP. From 1985 onwards, its own theoretical contribution was very weak; it borrowed more than it created.

So it was not solely a pragmatic judgement that led these trade-union Left leaders to join the SACP. The NUMSA forces that joined the SACP were not only seduced by Joe Slovo's attempt to "de-Stalinize" the party. There was also a convergence of the two forces' political trajectories based on the work of LERC and its "reconstruction/restructuring" programme. This programme required a major overhaul of the trade-union Left's original thinking about the conflict between capital and labour and of the perception of the "nation" to be built (or re-built as the case may be).

In our opinion, there was indeed a political integration into the SACP and the explanation goes beyond that provided by Mike Morris.

Indeed, it is necessary to clarify what appeared to be a sudden shift on the question of "the party". The SACP never stopped using the notion of "political vanguard" in

4 Interview with Alex Callinicos, op.cit., p. 108.
its most sectarian and restrictive form, which the trade-union Left had always sharply rejected. However, when the trade-union Left entered the SACP, to our knowledge there were no documents to justify the change in its approach to the question of political representation.

The political project, the national question and the concept of the "national liberation movement"

There was a relationship between the trade-union Left’s evolving conception of social struggles and the notion of "national liberation movement". The ANC always sought to promote this notion of a broad political movement that would on its own represent the future “nation in construction”. This approach has links not only to African nationalist movements, but even beyond.

But the greater the complexity of the social formation and its economic structures, the more difficult it becomes to claim to be both a political movement and the effective representative of the “nation in construction”. The trade-union Left ran up against this problem on several occasions. As late as the 1988 COSATU congress, NUMSA and the CWIU (chemical workers) put forward a motion calling for a front of all the organizations of the working class and the oppressed. There then followed the process of integration into the ANC, the SACP and the “alliance”. But, as we have seen, the question re-emerged at the NUMSA congress in 1993 on the question of a unitary Left force.

It is clear that this debate on the “national liberation movement” was related to an analysis of the social formation, to notions of class in general, and notions of the working class in particular. If the trade-union Left wanted to rebut proponents of a simplified “national liberation movement” it had to demonstrate the relevance of its conception of “working class”. At the beginning, there was an equation with two parameters. On the one hand, there was an independent and radical political project; on the other, there was a trade-union practice aimed at forging collective consciousness and confidence. The two parameters were seen as being complementary. But the problem changed when trade-union practice logically led to the possibility of negotiating contracts and institutionalizing dialogue. This development had an impact on the specifically political level; this new relationship of confrontation and negotiation with the employers changed the federation’s conception of society, social conflict and socio-economic mechanisms.6

The problem could not be reduced to the process of production alone. It had to be shown that in all confrontations with the apartheid regime, the category of “class” (whatever its heterogeneity and stratification) was indeed operational. To demonstrate such a thing, it was necessary to have a political project that went beyond the trade unions.

Instead, leaders of the trade-union Left increasingly toyed with the opposite conception: that of the overriding notions of “oppressed nation” and “disciplined unity”. The dominant tendency was towards the formulation of a macro-economic vision: a new “coherence” for all of society, transcending social interests. And, above all, towards convincing the employers of the validity of such proposals.

While in 1989-91 there was still talk of “planning” and socio-economic measures that went against market mechanisms, today the goal is organizing these market mechanisms with a high dose of state intervention. But no proposals are forthcoming about how this intervention should relate to matters of property, democracy and the institutions. The question of social relations evaporated as the negotiations progressed.

5 South African Labour Bulletin, June-July 1988. A more restrictive counter-motion called for unity between COSATU and all “mass” forces with a political programme not compatible with the federation’s.
The delicate transition

Today, while the government and the ANC have on the surface managed an orderly political transition, society itself remains a huge boiling cauldron. The long-term effects of apartheid, its violence and prejudices, have not yet been fully felt. A new phase of the political process has begun. South Africa has entered a relatively long economic, social and political transition.

Hein Marais has sketched insightfully the constellation of forces with which this transition began:

The 1980s had been characterized by an increasingly aberrant mix of repression and reforms, the latter geared primarily at restructuring the social and economic basis for capital accumulation. Partly because these reforms only marginally and ineffectively addressed the demands of the opposition, they failed to halt the surge of resistance and, instead, fueled successive waves of popular action which climax in the uprisings of 1985. Subsequent state repression dismantled the movement’s capacity to capitalize on the insurrectionary climate it claimed prevailed at the time. Animated by visions of change that were on the overthrow of the apartheid state, the democratic movement found its path at last temporarily blocked by the end of the decade, while an ensemble of other local and international factors combined to consolidate the stand-off. Upon this precarious impasse an ambitious and far-reaching attempt to structure the political sphere began.

One of the key propellants of the negotiations process was the realization among sections of the ruling bloc that the capitalist system in South Africa had to be “modernized”—in both economic and political terms. In short, South Africa had to become a “normal” capitalist society. Despite its haphazard reform efforts of the 1980s, the National Party (NP) administration had proved manifestly unequal to the task.

The abandonment of the exclusionary political framework of apartheid and its replacement with a democratic system meant at the NP would no longer function as the political axis of the ruling bloc. That role would befall the ANC, albeit on terms, business hoped, that inhibited its ability to advance the interests of the disadvantaged majority at the expense of the key prerogatives of capital.

There was initially a long period in which the government negotiated while carrying out various operations aimed at weakening the ANC. Its goal was to cut down the ANC’s ambitions, weaken its activist base and force it to adopt a new political approach. Among the methods used was the terror of the death squads—the famous “third force”—and political and terrorist pressure from Inkatha and neo-Nazi groups.

The two years before the 1994 elections were rich in debates, even though the enormous consensus-producing machine gradually imposed its intended result. In this watershed period, a truly independent trade-union force that would rigorously defend working-class demands was cruelly missed. But the little socialist political forces proved equally incapable of lastingly capturing the attention and sympathy of the sectors that were most critical of the process under way.

In this context of failure, a vote for the ANC, 6 in 1982, the South African trade-union movement organized 23.87 percent of the non-agricultural work force. By 1986, this figure was 33.51 percent; by 1991, it was 52.92 percent. In 1991, NUMSA and the other unions in the manufacturing sector organized 48 percent of the work force, or 676,570 workers. By comparison, the SACCAWU (retail sector) organized only 12 percent of employees in its sector. Such an evolution had an influence on trade-union activities and relations with the employers. See Ian Macun, South African Labour Bulletin, July-Aug. 1993.

Judging by the textua evidence, leaders in the steel sector were influenced by the “German model”, even the specific model of Volkswagen in Germany. The relationship between NUMSA and the German union IG-Metall, through the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), go back to the days of FOSATU. There were regular contacts and the German union organized genuine solidarity, doubtless with an eye towards finding a trade-union partner independent of SAC- TU and therefore of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). (Similar interest in FOSATU was shown by the French CFDT over a certain period.) This could be an explanation for the proposal that trade-union representatives enter the administration and the idea of joint responsibility for industrial policy.


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During the 1960s and 1970s, a new working-class generation took shape in South Africa. The new wave of industrialization contributed by the 1980s to the greatest political and social mobilization in South African history, of which the trade-union movement was one of the central driving forces. This period saw the emergence of a particularly interesting working-class current: the "the independent trade-union Left" that was behind the foundation of the trade-union federations FOSATU and later COSATU.

In "The Trade-Union Left and the Birth of a New South Africa", Claude Jacquin follows the political, social and economic changes that ultimately brought an end to the apartheid system. The main issue raised for the Left was how to combine "democratic" emancipation and social liberation, he says. But all the forces, trade-union or political, that made the attempt ultimately failed. The current ANC government's choice for neo-liberal management of South African society is very remote from either of the options defended in the debates of the 1980s: not only from the socialism once advocated by the trade-union Left, but also from the "national democratic revolution" advocated by its adversaries in the South African Communist Party.

Jacquin's account of how these two currents converged with each other as they abandoned their original perspectives should contribute to lively debates both in South Africa and internationally.

Claude Jacquin covered South African events for the fortnightly "International Viewpoint" and carried out research and studies during ten visits to South Africa between 1982 and 1992. His other works includes studies of the Angolan revolution and the independence movement in New Caledonia.