## 1. The State and the Institutionalisation of Trade Unions during the Twenties

At the turn of the 20th century, both black and white workers' militancy intensified, expressing itself in various forms such as urban unrest, strikes and the development of political forms of organisation such as trade unions and political parties. These new conditions of struggle posed a challenge to capital and the state by slowing down the process of capital accumulation and by effecting a loss of economic and political control over the whole of the working class. The necessity for a radical restructuring of the social relations of production led the state to intervene not only through its repressive apparatus (with the bloody crushing of the Rand Revolt) but also through the passing of labour legislation (such as the 1924 IC Act and the 1925 Wage Act) designed to contain and control further working class action.

The provisions of the IC Act represented an attempt to extend the mining pattern of labour organisation to the manufacturing sector. By granting protection and statutory bargaining rights to the organised (and therefore mainly skilled) section of the white, coloured and Asian labour movement, it tended to perpetuate the gap which existed between skilled and unskilled workers. Under the terms of the Act, the upper stratum of unionised workers were able to negotiate settlements and win concessions from the employers, if necessary at the expense of African and other low paid workers. The bulk of the non-white unskilled labour force was left without protection and at the mercy of the employers and was **de facto** barred from competing on the labour market and from gaining access to skilled status and training facilities. Thus, the IC Act became an instrument of racial domination in that it reproduced and reinforced the racial hierarchy in the wage structure and in job allocation (even though it did not explicitly contain a colour bar). With this Act, the state hoped to defuse workers' militancy and create further divisions in the South African workforce so as to weaken it. The Act also aimed at undermining the independence and effectiveness of those workers' organisations falling under state control through the setting up of state-regulated bargaining procedures centralised in the Industrial Council system thereby moving the focus of bargaining away from the shop floor and into the hands of union bureaucrats. Over the years, the bureaucracy has managed slowly to entrench its control over an increasingly apathetic membership (with some exceptions) which it appeased with short-term economic gains won in the Industrial Councils.

The successful implementation of these mechanisms of labour control and trade union institutionalisation depended on the reaction of the labour

movement and on its willingness to fight for its independence and self-control. On the whole, the white, coloured and Asian unions welcomed the 1924 IC Act as a tool in the defence and advancement of their members' interests. However, there were certain differences of perspective among the unions.

**Artisan Unions**

The artisan unions showed themselves willing to secure all possible benefits under the IC Act, even if this meant abandoning other workers to the mercy of the employers. Not only had some craft unions suffered a heavy defeat during the Rand Revolt, but they had also been increasingly threatened on the factory floor when some of their members began to be subjected to pressures of deskilling and displacement (especially in the light consumer goods sector). Over the years, the artisan unions had secured a strong monopoly control over the job supply and the labour process at the point of production and had become a hindrance to the employers in their attempt to effectively subordinate the workers to their rule and increase the rate of surplus extraction. During the 1920s the expansion of secondary industries, and especially the expansion of the consumer goods sector (such as leather, clothing, furniture ), provided the employers with an opportunity to reorganise the labour process and introduce more mechanised methods of production which could contribute both to the expansion of the industry and to undermining the artisans' bargaining power. Artisans became threatened by a double process of craft dilution and job deskilling: the one involved the introduction of mechanised forms of production which made some of the artisans' skills redundant and the other involved the introduction of less skilled workers who could perform part of the artisans jobs, thereby undermining their skilled status. This threat to the artisans' bargaining power forced some of the craft unions to reconstitute themselves so as to organise the lower section of the skilled labour hierarchy. Some unions in the furniture and garment industries, for example, transformed themselves into industrial unions in the 1920s, while new industrial unions emerged to organise all workers irrespective of their skills.

A similar process of mechanisation and craft dilution occurred later on (during the war years) in the capital goods sector, such as in metal and engineering industry, when similar practices were again adopted by the then craft unions. After having resisted vigorously for over a decade the process of job fragmentation and craft dilution, the craft unions in the metal and engineering industrylost their control over the labour process and job supply during the war and started to reconstitute themselves as craft-diluted unions. Lewis[1] shows that in the case of the Iron Moulders Society, real obstacles

emerged when the union attempted to forge a tactical alliance between craft workers and some production workers in resisting further job dilution and deskilling; it was only by using strict lines of demarcation in the job definition and wage structure of craft moulders and production moulders that this alliance within the IMS was lasting and effective.

On the issue of racial discrimination, the craft unions had adopted a functional and shortsighted approach in that they only fought those aspects of racial discrimination which came to infringe upon their activities and threatened their members' immediate interests. It could be argued that the craft unions' position on the racial issue was shaped by the objective position that their members held within the labour process. For instance, the mixed artisan unions in the Cape and Natal opposed racially discriminatory practices on the grounds that it would break or undermine the unity of the **artisans** within the labour movement.[2] However, this restrictive approach resulted in coloured and Asian artisans quickly being drawn onto the side of the white labour aristocracy and abandoning the struggle against the colour bar and for a genuinely non-racial labour movement. On the other hand, in the Transvaal where there were few non-white artisans and skilled workers, the craft unions saw their function as being to limit the job supply on a racial basis so as to resist the process of craft dilution. Similar trends are apparent in craft union practices in the metal and engineering industry.

However, the development of racial forms of protection in industry cannot merely be explained in terms of the changing labour process, but should be accompanied by an explanation of the existence of a racially discriminatory hierarchy in the division of labour. It is important not to take for granted the racial differentiation within the labour process, but to situate the division of labour within the context of the racially segregated society in South Africa. Historically, the different patterns of proletarianisation of the various racial groups, together with other social processes, have formally expressed themselves in the racially discriminatory constitution of the South African state which granted political and industrial rights to whites and which exercised a rigid form of authoritarian control over blacks. Subsequently, in an attempt to weaken and divide any movement or group which resisted its hegemonic rule, the state and capital consolidated and extended the racial dimension of South African society and, in the case of the labour movement, tried to impose and reinforce racial divisions. The state, for instance, contributed to shaping racial forms of protection in trade unions by institutionalising the job colour bar in the mining industry and extending it to the manufacturing sector (with the 1956 IC Act). Under pressure from job fragmentation and wage undercutting by the employers, many industrial

and craft unions turned to the state for support, adopting racial forms of protection, thereby isolating themselves from workers of other racial groups. At another level, the very weapons which the unions on the defensive decided to use, took on a racially discriminatory character: standard protective union practices such as the closed shop, which many unions negotiated with employers on a voluntary basis, became instruments of racial domination because they contained a clause reserving certain skilled jobs to union members only (thereby excluding African workers). Similarly, because of the racially discriminatory educational system, the Apprenticeship Act of 1944 also became **de facto** a racially discriminatory piece of legislation preventing non-white workers from gaining access to skilled status and training facilities.

However, it is important to understand that the racial forms of union practices which emerged in South Africa are not **inherent** and/or **inevitable** to the South African union movement.[3] Rather, we have to understand that they arise, firstly, out of various political influences such as those involving the state, the union leadership and manipulation by petty bourgeois Afrikaner Nationalists; and, secondly, that they are then assimilated by certain sections of the labour movement which makes their implementation possible. By approaching the question in this way, one can appreciate the necessity for actively taking up these concrete issues with workers themselves on the factory floor.

**White Industrial Unions**

One cannot seriously discuss the question of the possible unification of the South African working class without taking account of the racial differentiation which arises out of the specific form of political incorporation of the white working class through its access to the state. South African labour history is rich in examples of white workers fighting on a racist and national chauvinistic basis. For instance, in the early 1920s, the heavy political repression against white and black workers was a major factor in leading white workers to fall back onto their political privileges to secure any possible economic gains. In fact, over the years the white workers have used their stake in the political power structure, together with their strong union organisations, to win for themselves many concessions from the employers and the state in return for which they have rejected solidarity with other sections of the workforce.

These limited concessions and gains combined with the impact of an Afrikaner petty bourgeois leadership, did contribute to the assimilation of a white chauvinistic and racist ideology among sections of the white labour move-

ment. Thus in the early 1930s, after the economic and political backlash of the depression, which generated serious insecurity among workers (including white workers), a new extreme right wing group, the Hertzogites, decided to infiltrate the labour movement and manipulate the white workers' insecurity as part of a broader strategy to rally all Afrikaners under the banner of their common cultural identity, Afrikanerdom. They tried to stir up racist feelings among white workers, in the hope of drawing them away from communist and even liberal influence, to support the segregationist ideology and policies of Afrikaner Nationalism; they used black workers as a scapegoat to justify the difficult times which lay ahead for white workers and pressurised the latter to unite against black workers and abandon their racially mixed unions. New white-only industrial unions started emerging in the mid-1930s and organised white workers irrespective of their skill, while attempts were made to take over existing unions with a large and predominantly Afrikaner membership. This tactic only succeeded with certain unions in some regions (cfr for the Mine Workers Union) and failed with others which were usually characterised by a more class-oriented democratic leadership (cfr Sachs' Garment Workers Union). These new white unions also agitated within the main trade union co-ordinating body (the S.A. Trades and Labour Council) to woo members away from the racially mixed federation: eventually, in 1947, a group of mainly industrial white-only unions broke away from the S.A. Trades and Labour Council and formed the Koordineerende Raad van Suid-Afrikaanse Vakvereeniging which, in its constitution, excluded any union that allowed black workers voting power.

**Mixed Industrial Unions**

The open industrial unions emerged largely as a result of the rapid changes which occurred in the labour process of certain industries from the late 1920s onwards. This process of secondary industrialisation laid the basis for a 'rapprochement' among the different groups of workers involved in these industries and created the possibility for solidarity among workers of different races within the same factory or industry. In his paper, Lewis[4] notes certain instances of interracial labour solidarity in the late 1920s among workers in the consumer goods sector (such as clothing, leather, textile). However, his treatment of this evidence is inadequate as he tends not to differentiate between workers' struggles which appear to take a non-racial form and those which are fought on a consciously united working class basis. The former generally occurs out of a coincidence of short term interests between workers of different races and at best might constitute a kind of working arrangement or at worst a form of opportunism by one group of workers wanting to use other workers in order to strengthen their own sectional

position. The latter on the other hand represent a concerted effort by the union leadership and rank and file to develop links among workers across race and skill boundaries in order to build a united labour movement. In fact, in the late 1920s, it was the Communist Party which played a decisive role in promoting this kind of non-racial trade unionism, while also having to assist in the formation of parallel African unions (in order to comply with state legislation) which co-operated **on a more equal basis** with the registered unions. At that time, the conditions for solidarity were favourable not only because of the renewed militancy among workers, but also because of the corresponding emergence of African workers' organisation. However, counteracting these tendencies, which drew industrial workers more closely together, were the various political influences which contributed to reinforce racial and other sectional divisions among the labour movement such as state legislation, the ascendancy of Afrikaner Nationalism and exclusory and racial craft unions practices.

This class-oriented strategy of building workers' unity was fought within the S.A. Trade Union Congress (SATUC), which was formed in 1925 and which, although without an explicit colour bar, was mainly composed of white unions. The election of a Communist Party member, Andrews, as general secretary of SATUC, scared off some of the white-dominated craft and industrial unions. Some of these decided not to affiliate, others withdrew their membership, while others remained affiliated without subscribing to the radical views of the SATUC leadership (this latter group emphasised the need for a united trade union front, especially after the heavy defeat suffered after the Rand Revolt). Other racially mixed unions, affiliated to the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, deliberately stayed away from SATUC under the pretext that it was a **de facto** 'colour bar organisation'. In fact, this mixed federation had to appear committed to the principle of abolition of racial discrimination in the labour sphere since their strategy was to win over the support of the mainly coloured workers of the Cape region, especially those in the light industries. However, this did not mean that the Federation was committed to building a genuinely non-racial labour movement, especially under the banner of the communist-oriented SATUC. The Cape Federation, under the leadership of Stuart, in fact tried to woo its members from the communist influence of SATUC, which it feared threatened its control over the bureaucratic company unions it was trying to foster through the Federation.[5]

However, by the early 1930s, the strength of the non-racial industrial unions which formed the left wing of the registered union movement had been seriously undermined by the economic and political backlash of the De-

pression; a climate of fear and insecurity was generated within the labour movement especially as the campaign of White Terror of the late 1920s was directed against the radical non-racial unions and their leadership. Furthermore, the communist union leadership was thrown into confusion by the new slogan which the Communist Party adopted after 1928/9 of building a Black Republic (this change in policy meant communist activities moved away from non-racial unions towards building the conditions for a Black Government of workers and peasants). The few CP members who continued to promote interracial workers solidarity in the union movement (such as Andrews, Glass and Sachs) were eventually expelled from the party in 1930. Although the Cape Federation and SATUC assisted in the formation of the South African Trades and Labour Council, whose constitution accepted all bona fide unions irrespective of their race, the independent radical non-racial unions had by this time been considerably weakened and were unable to resist the on-going employers' assault on the workers.

## 2. The Post World War II Period: State Intervention & African Labour Representation

The substantial reorganisation of the methods of production in the capital goods sector during the war years occurred under conditions of full employment and skilled labour shortage and led to a restructuring of the skill hierarchy and the division of labour. This involved the occupational advancement of African workers into more skilled and therefore more strategic positions in the labour process. This increase of African workers' bargaining power at the point of production was accompanied by an intensification of workers' militancy during the war years - the severe deterioration of African workers' living standards had produced widespread unrest and strikes both on the mines and in the urban areas which culminated in the 1946 African miners' strike. These developments posed a challenge to the state and the employers in their political and economic control over the black labour force at a time when the war effort put them on the defensive. Alongside brutal state repression, legislative proposals were put forward to bring the African section of the labour movement under firmer state control.

In response to these political and economic changes, the newly elected Nationalist Party Government of 1948 appointed a Commission of Enquiry (the Botha Commission) to investigate the industrial relations system and suggest new mechanisms for the control and exploitation of the black labour force. The Commission reported in 1951 and recommended the registration of African unions under separate industrial conciliation machinery. By then though, the modes of African resistance had changed from trade unions'

struggle to a more nationalistic struggle for the overthrow of the apartheid state under the banner of the various African Nationalist movements. It was mainly the fear that African unions could be used as a political platform which led to the government's refusal to grant Africans legal trade union rights. It passed the 1953 Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act which imposed an alternative forum on African workers in the form of consultative inplant works committees. Later on, the 1956 IC Amendment Act was passed which compelled existing mixed unions to split along racial lines, prohibited the formation of new mixed unions and provided for job reservation agreements reserving certain job categories for specific racial groups. These pieces of legislation laid the basis for a dual system of industrial relations and expressed the state's intention to further promote and institutionalise racism among the South African working class. In other words, through these various measures the state tried to reassert its control over African workers so as to keep them powerless, unorganised and their labour cheap, while attempts were made to further divide and weaken the labour movement as a whole.

## 3. The Registered Trade Union Response: unity versus fragmentation

By the time of WWII, the bulk of the registered trade union movement had become institutionalised and it clearly felt itself threatened by the growing strength and increasing militancy of African unions. At this stage, most of those affiliated to the Confederation of Non European Trade Unions (CNETU) worked closely with the African National Congress in their struggle against the apartheid state. In an attempt both to reassert their domination over African workers within the system of industrial relations and to defuse the African workers' militancy, the leadership of the main co-ordinating body, the SAT & LC, urged the government in 1945 to grant trade union recognition to African unions.

The new labour legislation of the mid-1950s accentuated the differences existing within the registered union movement and contributed to a regrouping of unions and to the re-emergence of new federations. Although the bulk of the registered unions condemned the state's intervention in their activities and areas of operations, they were less unanimous about the form and extent their opposition should take. Also the issues of African occupational advancement and African unionisation had always been a cornerstone of the unions' policies and practices, and were to become one of the more important causes of dissension and conflict within the existing registered union movement. We can again broadly distinguish three different groups: the craft-diluted unions, the white and mixed industrial unions.

**Craft-diluted Unions**

On the issue of African labour, the position of craft-diluted unions were shaped mainly by the objective position of their membership within the labour process and by the ensuing policies and practices adopted by their unions. As we noted earlier, the craft unions' tradition was associated with exclusory practices aimed at consolidating their sectional position as a labour aristocracy, which in South Africa rapidly took a racial character in certain regions through the use of implicit racial forms of protection. In fact, the principle of craft unionism tends to be based on the denial of a community of interests among workers, irrespective of their skill and race, and on the denial of the possibility of forging an alliance and building solidarity among all workers. In their struggle to maintain and improve their members' living standards, the craft unions tended to adopt an elitist and sectional approach. This resulted in their growing political isolation from the bulk of the workforce and the other unions, as well as in their diminishing bargaining power on the factory floor since they ended up organising a smaller proportion of the workforce as the process of mechanisation and job fragmentation intensified.

In return for the consolidation of their craft privileges, the union leadership guaranteed the employers a stable, co-operative and disciplined craft workforce, loyal to the industrial consiliation procedures laid down by the state-controlled industrial relations system. Historically, the South African system of industrial relations was designed to co-opt the union leadership and invest it with substantial disciplinary powers over the rank and file so as to strengthen the leadership's role of mediator and regulator in industrial conflict. Operating from the basis of a harmony of interests between employers and workers at the level of production, the union leadership located industrial conflict at the level of distribution and became committed to resolving it by peaceful and 'reasonable' means; for instance, they tended to be against the use of the strike weapon (except in order to pressurise management in negotiations) and opted instead for full industrial co-operation and responsible negotiations with employers within the boundaries of the Industrial Council system. After the experience of the 1922 Rand Revolt, most craft unions deliberately avoided mobilising their rank and file and adopted a more militant and combative position vis-a-vis the employers and the state and agreed to negotiate limited wage gains in return for substantial craft dilution.

The issue of African advancement and union representation was not central to the bulk of the craft-diluted unions; during the 1950s the government's apartheid policy was not yet directly prejudicial to the interests of their mem-

bers, nor were African workers immediately threatening their privileged position. On the contrary, the exploitative conditions to which African workers were subjected guaranteed the employers a cheap, unorganised and unskilled labour force. This made it easier for the more powerfully organised craft workers to win their demands and be granted limited concessions. At another level, although the craft unions, which comprised the SA Federation of Trade Unions, explicitly condemned the IC provision compelling the existing unions to split along racial lines, they seemed quite opposed to the organisation of African workers. In 1951, a group of craft unions representing white mineworkers, boilermakers, furniture workers, typographical unions and printers, broke away from the SAT & LC in a disagreement with the latter's policy of promoting the organisation of African workers in parallel unions and formed this new S.A. Federation which debarred African workers from joining.

This stance on African unionisation in the 1950s and 1960s, reflected the opportunism and shortsightedness of craft unions in that they chose to shield behind the government as long as their interests were not damaged thereby. In fact, by the Fifties it appeared as if apartheid policy was indirectly (at any rate) beneficial to the craft unions' members. By 1969, the largest craft-diluted unions, such as the Amalgamated Engineering Union of South Africa, the SA Electrical Workers Association and the SA Typographical Union had disaffiliated from TUCSA which had opened its ranks to African unions (see infra). Thus, by the late 1960s, the craft-diluted unions seemed to have distanced themselves from the bulk of the registered industrial union movement.

**White Industrial Unions**

The white industrial unions which organised on the basis of race became strong supporters of the ideology and strategies of Afrikaner Nationalism. They argued that the white workers living standards could only be maintained through racial segregation not only in the factory, but throughout the whole of society. Thus white trade unions became a central form of organisation to defend white workers at the workplace, while political parties were used as a platform from which to defend their access to political power.

On the factory floor, they refused to build links with black workers and became increasingly isolated from the bulk of the workforce. Paradoxically, they regarded the maintenance of their privileged position as highly paid semi-skilled workers and civil servants as being both dependent on and threatened by the existence of a cheap and unorganised African labour force

with no political and industrial rights. Their determination to fight for the maintenance of their privileges was directed not only against the employers, but also against their fellow black workers whom they considered as potential enemies capable of undercutting their position in the labour market. Thus the white unions led by Afrikaner Nationalist supporters adopted various racially discriminatory practices and chose to rely on the state by supporting its labour strategy through actively reproducing and reinforcing the system of racial discrimination on the shop floor. Greenberg points out the nature of the relationship of these unions to apartheid:[6]

> 'apartheid is not some distant philosophy that operates on the peripheries of industrial practice, it represents the social support that makes that brand of trade unionism possible'.

However, some white unions have shown themselves more combative than the craft unions vis-a-vis the employers mainly because of the more vulnerable position of their membership in the labour process and because of the nature of the industry/sector in which they organise. The militant white unions operate mainly in the mining industry and organise production workers, who, through their relatively high wages, have applied strong pressure to the level of profitability in a rather labour-intensive industry. The unions understood rapidly that it was only through a sustained and protracted struggle that they would win their demands from the well-organised mine-owners. Thus, unlike the craft unions, they became committed to the use of all weapons available, whether peaceful or disruptive, to resolve industrial conflicts and win concessions from the employers. Strike action was considered an essential and necessary weapon in the collective bargaining process and, were any strike action to occur, the white unions sought to mobilise their rank and file to sustain their disruptive action (see the Mine Workers Union in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s). This reliance on the latent power of the rank and file, however, did not rule out a parallel strategy of reliance on the state to intervene in case a deadlock was reached in a dispute. Thus, the white unions chose to isolate themselves from other workers and unions and turned instead towards their own rank and file and the state to win racist and sectional demands from the employers.

### Mixed Industrial Unions

Some industrial unions organised workers irrespective of their race and skill. Their policies were based on the rate-for-the-job, and abolition of racial discrimination in the labour market and within the union movement. However, they tended to use these multiracial slogans to gain some credi-

bility among the black labour force and win their support,often only to preserve and improve the position of the dominant skilled section of the union membership. These unions declared their commitment to fight for the abolition of racial discrimination in the labour sphere in response to a realistic assessment of the changes in the employment situation. But this was far from fighting to organise workers of all races and skill **on an equal basis** and eradicate broader racial discrimination in society.

In 1954, the SAT & LC , the craft-dominated SA Federation of Trade Unions and the Western Province Federation of Labour Unions, called a Unity Committee Conference to co-ordinate and consolidate opposition to the IC Bill. It was decided 'in the name of unity' to form a new co-ordinating body, the SA Trade Union Council (later called TUCSA) which would exclude African unions while maintaining a close working relationship with them so as to: [7]

> '...achieve the maximum possible degree of unanimity in existing circumstances in the country, that membership of the new body (will) be confined to registered unions'.

TUCSA was thus not prepared overtly to challenge the state,and limited itself to a rhetorical opposition to the IC Act. This **de facto** compliance with the state's definition of the racial composition of union membership on the one hand made TUCSA an instrument of racial domination in that it contributed towards the implementation of the government policy of apartheid in the labour movement. On the other hand, it reflected TUCSA's opportunism and lack of determination to fight for all sections of the labour movement. *In other words, the unions affiliated to* TUCSA *decided to use the* state legislation to their own benefit at the expense of African workers whom they left **de facto** at the mercy of the employers.

Some industrial unions decided to organise African workers in parallel unions (cfr clothing, textile, catering, food and canning) in order to resist the employers tactic of undercutting and force the latter to employ African workers on the basis of equal pay for equal work. However, very often the organisation of African workers in parallel unions was not undertaken on an equal basis, but rather as an effect of the need to **control and subordinate** African workers in the collective bargaining process. A key factor in this strategy was to break the independent African unions which seemed to have developed their federation, CNETU, as a political platform from which to challenge the system of white supremacy. In 1955, the TUCSA president explained the tasks of the registered unions towards African workers and

their unions as follows:[8]

> 'Trade unionism should be willing to guide the natives along the path of responsible trade unionism without endangering their own standard of leadership. Suppression will instil in workers the desire for political power to alleviate their lot. That is the possibility which we cannot contemplate without grave misgivings if the Europeans wish to remain in Africa.. If we continue to withhold trade union organisations to improve themselves, they will have to turn to political action to overcome their frustrations'.

and later in 1956:[9]

> 'An offer was therefore made to the Minister of Labour to allow us... to co-operate with the Minister in devising ways and means of preventing the ever increasing Native Labour force from continuing to menace the European standard of living?

In other words, some industrial unions sought to organise African workers in parallel unions in order to prevent their exploitation as cheap labour and their organisation on the basis of the demand for genuine racial equality.

One is entitled to question the credibility and motivation of these unions struggling for African unionisation and the abolition of racial discrimination limited to the workplace and the composition of union membership. The slogans of 'multiracialism' which were developed by these unions were used to win over and neutralise the black section of the labour movement, but were not intended for a genuinely non-racial labour movement and society.

TUCSA's collaborationist approach to the state and its new labour strategy resulted in a number of registered unions,together with some CNETU African unions,forming the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU); a non-racial federation which sought to break the racial differentiation created in the new labour legislation and to organise all workers on an **equal basis** irrespective of their race and eligibility under the IC Act. These SACTU unions argued that racial inequality at work was inextricably bound up with the political system of white supremacy and that the struggle for a non-racial labour movement had to deal with both the economic and political forms of apartheid. Thus the struggle for the abolition of racial discrimination in the labour sphere was seen as part and parcel of a broader struggle against the apartheid state. Allied with the African National Congress, SACTU entered into the Con-

gress Alliance in 1955 and participated in the nationalist campaigns of the period. However, SACTU's political orientation developed at the expense of the independence of the labour movement, often leading it to ignore shop floor organisation around specific workers' demands.

Early in the 1960s, the industrial unions put pressure on TUCSA to reverse its exclusivist policy towards African workers. By then the changes in the pattern of African labour utilisation (involving them in more skilled and strategic positions) had become clear. The necessity to control African unions had intensified with the renewed strength and militancy of the SACTU-affiliated unions. Finally, in 1962, TUCSA decided to open its ranks to African unions despite the opposition of both the government and its affiliated craft-diluted unions. At the same time, TUCSA's industrial unions began to implement their paternalistic and opportunistic policy towards African workers and assisted in the organisation of Africans into parallel unions. This move was designed to curb the forward movement of African workers under the leadership of the ANC and SACTU by providing alternative trade unions, under the parent registered unions' control and patronage. TUCSA hoped to create and co-opt a compliant African union leadership which could neutralise African workers by winning certain limited economic advantages through the industrial council system with the assistance of the parent union. Thus, by trying to break the politically oriented African unions which threatened the existing system of white supremacy and by offering an alternative means of control over African workers, TUCSA came to fulfil (wittingly or unwittingly) an important political role on behalf of the state.

However, a more crucial factor in contributing to the collapse of the politically oriented African unions in the mid-1960s was the heavy state repression against the African nationalist movement and more specifically against the radical union leadership. Therefore, by this time, the attempt to build workers' solidarity through a united non-racial labour movement had suffered a serious setback and was to take another decade to re-emerge. A few compliant African unions concerned exclusively with bread and butter issues survived this period (such as the National Union of Clothing Workers - NUCW ), but at the price of complete subordination to and dependency on the parent registered union which assisted them.

## 4. The Seventies: The State, The Wiehahn Commission and African Labour Representation

The period of the 1970s witnessed the deepening of one of the worst eco-

dustrial and political action among the growing African urban working class (particularly in the 1973 Durban strikes and the 1976 stay-at-homes) posed a challenge to the control of the state and the employers over the black population, and constituted a clear warning that the mechanisms of labour co-option and control needed to be re-organised if economic and political stability was to be restored. In response to the increasing political significance of African resistance, the state and employers agreed broadly (with some opposition from the staunch defenders of Afrikaner Nationalism) to embark on a new strategy. This consisted of trying to broaden their social base by finding new allies among the black population who could be won over to the side of the ruling white minority, so as to act as a buffer against the oppressed majority of the black population. In other words, they sought to create a co-opted black leadership and a black 'labour aristocracy' through the granting of some concessions and privileges. However, such a strategy was bound to generate some hostility among the white petty bourgeoisie and white workers.

At the level of labour relations, this new strategy meant substantial re-organisation in the relations between the state, the employers and the labour movement as a whole; not only did black workers need to be coerced into more effective institutions of labour control, but also an attack had to be launched against certain white sections of the labour movement if black workers' militancy was to be defused through acceding to some of their demands. The state's re-organisation of labour relations which began with the investigations of the Wiehahn Commission generated some important policy changes and realignments among the registered trade unions. The following section attempts to analyse the state of the labour spectrum as it stood by the end of the 1970s.

**The Craft-Diluted Unions**

By 1978, those unions which organised workers in specific trades in heavy industries such as mining, motor, building, metal and engineering represented about one third of the total registered trade union membership (about 678 000 workers). Earlier craft union policies had resulted in a serious watering down of their members' skills and a loss of bargaining power and control at the point of production. The Typographical Union raised some of the problems which the unions' conciliatory approach has and some of the resultant costs for the membership.[10]

> 'Our system... ensured industrial peace but I have just got the terrible suspicion it is more in favour of the employers than the employees. We

> have had to make very big concessions to get improvements, instead of striking and getting our increases without making concessions and diluting the skilled man's job...in order to get an increase, we have to give something away and eventually you are going to reach a stage where there is nothing more to give away'.

Another important problem arising out of the craft unions' strategies and tactics was their refusal to ally themselves with the non-craft section of the labour movement **(on an equal basis)** against the employers' divisive and undercutting tactics so as to try and break their isolation and compensate for their diminishing bargaining power. Instead, the craft-diluted unions continue their struggle on a sectional basis.

However, as it will become clear, the craft unions had lost so much of their bargaining strength, that it was extremely difficult for them to fight beyond the defence of the **immediate** interests of their membership, particularly as the employers were on the attack to restore higher levels of profitability during the recession. One craft-diluted union, the Iron Moulders Society, questioned the nature of the recession and the employers' argument for the existence of a skilled labour shortage in these terms:[11]

> 'We don't see any recession. In the foundry industry, the employers granted 100 certificates of apprenticeship in the last 10 years. Such a small increase in the intake of apprenticeship is difficult to understand at a time of expansion of the foundry industry. We believe that the argument of an economic recession and shortage of skilled labour is a kind of psychological warfare waged by the employers against all workers to frighten them and make them work harder if they want to keep their jobs. The result of this is that the productivity of the workers' increases and so does the profit of the employers'.

It is important to situate the recession in the context of the struggle between the employers and the workers and not to fetishise it as something external to the social relations of production. Employers seeking to cut their labour costs and increase labour productivity have once again launched an attack on the whole of their workforce, one form of which was to try to replace artisans with cheaper African workers. Limited by their union tradition of nearly 50 years of collaboration with management and reliance on the state, the craft-diluted unions could do little to resist frontally these attempts at further craft dilution and chose to collaborate with the employers by warning their members of the need to 'tighten their belts' in this period of economic recession and wait 'for better times to come'.

On the issue of African unionisation, by the mid-1970s, many craft-diluted unions had realised the necessity of adapting to the new employment situation as African workers were moving into skilled positions. If they wanted to maintain control over job categories by representing everybody in these jobs, they had to consider ways of organising African workers. The Boilermakers Society explains the necessity to adapt to the new economic realities: [12]

> 'Black job advancement is inevitable - we simply haven't got enough whites and coloureds to do all the skilled jobs. The only way we can guarantee the survival of our members, is to organise these African workers who are moving into the higher skilled jobs. It is in our interests to organise skilled African workers. The recognition of black trade union rights would stop the super-exploitation of black workers and put an end to the process of undercutting of white and coloured workers by cheaper and unorganised black workers'.

This argument which resembles TUCSA's position on African unions in the 1950s (except that it was confined to **skilled** African workers) can hardly be described as a genuine attempt to build solidarity on an equal basis among workers across racial lines.

Thus, after continuously shielding behind the government's apartheid labour policy, the craft unions have come out broadly in support of the government's new labour strategy which has incorporated most of the proposals contained in their evidence to the Commission. They have agreed to the abolition of job reservation and to the granting of legal trade union rights to African workers. Some craft unions in the metal and engineering industry went even further in anticipation of the Wiehahn Report and in June 1978 agreed voluntarily to abolish the job colour bar implicitly contained in their industrial conciliation agreement. The bulk of the craft unions welcomed the incorporation of African unions under more effective state control since they were afraid that African unions might be used as a political platform or as a means to undercut their own position in the collective bargaining system. However, they favoured the setting up of African unions on parallel, as opposed to independent, lines so that unions of skilled African workers could be under their own effective control and be used by them to strengthen their position **vis-a-vis** employers. In the recent past, both the SA Electrical Workers Association and the SA Boilermakers Society have sought to co-operate with existing independent African unions operating in their industries, but these approaches have been rejected on the grounds that the craft unions were elitist and opportunist in their attitude to African wor-

kers. Another view, expressed by the Iron Moulders Society, argued for the incorporation of African skilled workers into their own union so as to avoid rivalry and ensure complete control over the skilled labour force while negotiating. It has been precisely through the manipulation of the fears of displacement among skilled white workers and by exposing the collaboration of the craft union leadership with the employers, that the white Mine Workers Union has,since June 1978,tried to woo white workers away from their mixed unions and encourage them to rally under its banner as the only union which can adequately champion the cause of white workers (see infra).

Thus, on the whole, the response of craft unions to the government's new labour strategy has been confined, as usual, to bargaining and negotiating around the table to win the best settlement possible, having **de facto** accepted the principles contained in the Wiehahn Report.

**White Industrial Unions**

The white industrial unions operate in government services and in the metal, engineering and mining industries and are broadly grouped under the banner of the SA Confederation of Labour whose membership reached a peak of 206 500 in 1975. Since then, however, membership has declined, partly because white workers were moving into traditionally non-unionised administrative and clerical jobs, but mainly because the Confederation was weakened by the re-organisation of labour relations. Concomitantly, the differences of policies and strategies sharpened among its affiliated particularly in regard to African unionisation and African advancement.

The pressures on the white labour movement and especially on its non-craft section, were both economic and political. Since the mid-1970s, white workers (as well as non-white workers) have been subjected to falling living standards, job de-skilling and the gradual abolition of formal racial discrimination in the labour market. The Handelsinstituut calculated that the real earnings of white households declined by 0,5% in 1975, 1,9% in 1976 and 2% in 1977. The Consumer Price Index has increased by an average of 11% since 1975 (reaching 15% in 1979), while wage increases have consistently lagged behind. This is most apparent in the mining industry, where the minimum wage for white workers increased by 6% in 1977 and 1978 and by 10% in 1979; in metal and engineering the minimum wage increases for skilled workers were 4% in 1977, 15% in 1978 and 10% in 1979. Job colour bars have been formally abolished in the metal, engineering and furniture industries and are under severe attack in the mining industry. Also, the process of de-skilling and job fragmentation intensified during the years

of the recession, especially in metal and engineering (where a system of modulated training is now in the process of being introduced to enable employers to train African workers for certain parts of the artisans' jobs).

This economic insecurity to which white workers (and especially white production workers) were subjected was coupled with a political insecurity which arose out of the state's new strategy of seeking to widen its social base among the black population. This shift towards sections of the black labour force, which showed that the government was forced to accede to some of the demands of the black workers, was likely to threaten white production workers whose privileged position depended so much on the continued subordination and powerlessness of black workers.

On the whole, the SACL's response to the Wiehahn Report, although antagonistic, remained confined to a rhetorical opposition with Nieuwoudt, the president of the Confederation, condemning the government for its departure from its policy of total racial segregation of which the Confederation had become such a staunch defender. This rather sedate response must be seen in the context of a weakened confederation and the loss of bargaining power of white-only unions. The Confederation's coherence increasingly came under threat with some unions, such as Engine Drivers' Association, the National Association of Furniture Workers and other railways-based unions, wanting to distance themselves, at least informally, from the Confederation and its hard racial stance and to adapt to changing political and economic realities. At the other extreme, there was the Mine Workers' Union, which tried to swing some SACL affiliates into a more combative HNP-oriented position so as to categorically refuse any 'liberalisation' in labour legislation. The end result was the adoption by the Confederation of a middle-of-the-road position accepting the IC Act as an inevitable change, while emphasising the need to negotiate adequate safeguards to defend the future of white workers. Thus, the Confederation's response was confined to debating the pace of the implementation of the Wiehahn Report as opposed to questioning the principle of its implementation. Some unions such as Yster en Staal Unie, went as far as to threaten disruptive action if the 'liberalisation' was carried out too rapidly without proper negotiations with the white unions.

Last, but not least, the MWU, which eventually disaffiliated from the Confederation after its mild response to Wiehahn, has been trying to drive a wedge into the white labour movement and poach some of the membership of the Confederation's unions. Thus it has hoped to extend its power base

and constitute a solid platform from which to challenge the government. However, the MWU's hard racist stance backfired with the failure of its all-out strike in March 1979, which was intended as a show of strength and a warning to the government in anticipation of the Wiehahn recommendations. The strike which was sparked off by the relaxation of the job colour bar on a particular mine, collapsed after a few days mainly because of the leadership's misjudgement both of their capacity to swing the white miners into a hard uncompromising position and of the power of the Chamber of Mines which had secured the backing of the government. The collapse of the strike signified a warning to other white workers and unions that their power was diminishing both politically and at the point of production. Effectively the strike left the MWU weakened and largely isolated.

This new realignment of forces within the white labour movement, together with the possibility of a rank and file backlash, poses more urgently the question of white workers' future political significance and economic power. After many years of reliance on collaboration with the state, the position of these white bureaucratic unions can only be altered by a movement at rank and file level, which would increase the members' participation in the unions' affairs and pressurise the bureaucracy to more adequately defend and improve their material welfare. Already today, as white workers are confronted by racial changes at the factory level, some sections of the white production workforce are moving onto the defensive in response to increasing black workers militancy (as in the case of the Ford strike). However, the white workers' reaction and the pressure put on the union leadership today remains phrased in racist and sectional terms and in no way indicates the possibility for a rapprochement with black sections of the labour movement.

**The Open Industrial Unions**

Today the bulk of the industrial unions are affiliated to TUCSA, whose membership has increased rapidly in the past decade to reach a peak of 278 000 in 1978. As we mentioned earlier, the history of industrial unionism is rich in examples of militant struggles and open confrontations with the employers. After persistent attacks on the militant section of the industrial unions, those of which survived into the early 1970s were relatively tame and institutionalised with a leadership loyal to the industrial conciliation system. Limited by the apathy of its rank and file, the union leadership decided to collaborate with the employers and tried to soften the harsh effects of the recession for its membership. Workers were encouraged in the name of the

national interest to work harder and more effectively without expecting corresponding wage increases.[13]

As part of their continuous campaign for the abolition of racial discrimination in the labour market and in the unions, the TUCSA unions welcomed the Wiehahn proposals for the abolition of job reservation and supported the idea of the Codes of Conduct (which TUCSA offered to monitor). TUCSA argued that economic growth and the influx of foreign capital would have a liberalising influence and undermine the government's apartheid labour policy. For their part, the foreign investors use TUCSA's support to promote their investments in the profitable apartheid economy. Mvubelo from the National Union of Clothing Workers explains the importance of this 'unholy' alliance:[14]

> 'necessity here has created strange bedfellows between employers and workers but can it be surprising in a situation in which the very narrow and restrictive ideological concepts of apartheid still rule'.

If one sees the system of white supremacy in South Africa as being an integral part of the capitalist economy, then TUCSA appears to strengthen and not weaken the apartheid regime. On the issue of African unionisation, TUCSA supported the granting of unions' rights to Africans while condemning the stipulation for racially separated unions. However, in the face of these restrictions, TUCSA stepped up its strategy of parallel unionism.

By the mid-1970s, some allegations were being made by African workers claiming that the TUCSA parallel unions were either paper unions or completely controlled by and subordinated to the parent registered union. Scheepers of the Garment Workers' Union answered as follows: [15]

> 'I only intervene in the affairs of the NUCW when asked to address their meeting or report back on negotiations..but the African union's negotiating ability is still not up to standard'.

It should be remembered that such a remark was made after more than 40 years of GWU patronage over the NUCW. Nevertheless, the creation of parallel African unions was stepped up considerably particularly with the resurgance of strong independent African unions. In 1978, in anticipation of the Wiehahn Report, the Motor Combined Workers' Union assisted in the formation of the African Motor Industry Workers' Union and in 1979, the Engineering Industrial Workers' Union of South Africa set up the National Union of Engineering Industry and Allied Workers Union, the Furniture

Workers' Union set up an African parallel union and Mvubelo from the NUCW assisted in setting up new African unions in sectors other than clothing.

The motives in TUCSA's assisting in the organisation of African workers are still questionable, particularly since they seem to receive the backing of both the state and the employers who would like to see them supplant the more independent African unions. By the end of 1979, an organising war had developed on the factory floor,with some independent unions (mainly FOSATU's affiliates) accusing the parallel unions and TUCSA of trying to squeeze them out of the factory (sometimes at the request of the employers in the hope that they would neutralise the more militant African unions operating in their factory). Grobbelaar from TUCSA replied:[16]

> 'I don't know if our unions have formed an alliance with management - but if they have, good luck to them. Co-operation with management is the crux of industrial relations. I hope the TUCSA unions are co-operating with management. This falls within the ambit of partnership in industry'.

Thus, the employers have come to favour parallel unions given their relation to parent unions which they have learnt to trust over the years. For its part, the state seems to expect less opposition from these unions to its terms of registration. This support for parallel unions is seen by some of the independent unions as a serious threat over the short term since the parallels could win over some of the potential or actual membership of the independent unions with some limited economic concessions. However, the real test will be at rank and file level as a union can only be effective if it enjoys the real and active support of its membership over the longer term. Already there are cases of African workers rebelling against their bureaucratic and co-opted leadership and allying themselves with more democratic, shop floor oriented trade unions (see splits in the Engineering and Allied Workers' Union and in Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union).

At another level there have been a few important cases of registered unions challenging the bureaucracy and compliance of TUCSA unions and turning towards an alliance with more democratic and independent unions. In the case of the Western Province Motor Assembly and the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers, the main issue was over bureaucratic controls in the internal organisation of their unions. It was only after a long and protracted internal struggle against a co-opted leadership which was reducing these unions to company unions, that they emerged as more

democratic organisations with rank and file participation in the unions' activities. The leadership developed a more conscious role as representative of the workers' interests against the employers (as opposed to a role of mediator between the employers and the workers). In an attempt to ally themselves on a more equal basis with the independent unions they formed, together with 10 African unions (open to all racial groups), the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) which was committed to promoting a democratic and open form of trade unionism under workers' control. A few other registered unions (such as Food and Canning Workers' Union) are also actively mobilising their membership to fight for an independent non-racial labour movement under workers' control. But on the whole, the bulk of the mixed industrial unions are led by a co-opted leadership, a section of which argues that the existing system of white supremacy guarantees the coloured and Indian workers a better deal than a regime under black majority rule. The question which remains to be resolved is whether this leadership will be able to survive any future challenge from its rank and file under increasing social pressures.

## Conclusion

In this period of economic and political instability, with changes taking place in the form of apartheid in the labour field, there seems to be a basis for some regrouping within the registered trade union movement, with a new polarisation developing between the more realistic craft and industrial unions and the right-wing MWU allies. But more important for the organised labour movement is the question of the future political significance and role of the registered unions within the overall context of instability. The problems facing the trade unions today are the fruits of their own long tradition which involved union bureaucracy and institutionalisation, collaboration with the state and the employers, sectionalism and a loss of power both politically and at the point of production. Today, the bulk of these trade unions are reduced to playing the role of passive agents adapting to new economic and political realities, in contrast to their earlier role as active agents fighting toether with other sections of the labour movement against the employers and the state.

Therefore, the question of union democracy, workers control and rank and file mobilisation must today be on the agenda if the labour movement hopes to resist effectively renewed attacks. It is only when the internal problems of the union's structure are tackled that one can think about the building of a strong and united non-racial labour movement. A tactical alliance or realignment of union bureaucrats into new federations will have

no weight whatsoever in struggling for their members. It is only by giving expression to the full weight of the rank and file that the unions' latent power can realise itself and the unity of the workers be achieved. Although there are examples of renewed rank and file participation (whether in the right wing or independent unions), these developments have neither been consolidated nor secured and attempts will undoubtedly be made by the existing bureaucratic leadership with the help of the employers and the state to put an end to this movement.

Similar questions are posed for African unions, particularly today as the government is granting union rights to African workers. This attempt to assert state control over African unions both directly and indirectly generated mixed responses from these unions, 17 of which have formed an united anti-registration front to secure changes in the terms of state registration. They have emphasised their commitment to building a democratic non-racial union movement. In order to resist the political economic pressures aimed at undermining its independence and unity, the non-racial unions will need the active participation of its rank and file as a concrete basis on which to unite with other unions of the same kind. It will only be through strong shop floor organisation, a democratic union structure and genuine solidarity with other unions that the workers' interests can begin to be adequately pursued against the employers and the system of apartheid.

**Footnotes**

1. J. Lewis 'South African Craft Unions and Dilution during World War II,' paper presented at a conference at York University, March 1978.
2. For more details on the craft unions of the Cape, see D. Lewis 'Registered Unions and Western Cape Workers' in E. Webster: **Essays in Southern African Labour History**, Ravan Johannesburg 1978.
3. See an example of that tendency in S. Greenberg's Ph.D. Thesis on Race and Trade Unionism Part II: the Trade Unions , Yale University 1978.
4. J. Lewis 'The New Unionism: Industrialisation and Industrial Unions in South Africa,' 1925-1930, in E. Webster, **op cit.**
5. For more details of this period, see H.J. & R.E. Simons 'Class and Colour in South Africa' 1850-1950, Penguin African Lit rary 1965.
6. In S. Greenberg 'Open and Closed Unionism in South Africa', in **South African Labour Bulletin** 1 (10), 1975 pp 18-30.
7. In M. Horrell **South Africa's Workers**, S.A. Institute of Race Relations p 19, 1969.
8. Quoted in L. Ensor 'TUCSA's Relationship with African Unions: an attempt at control' in E. Webster, **op cit**, p 216.

9. Quoted in the editorial of the South African Labour Bulletin, 5(3), October 1979.
10. Quoted in S. Greenberg 'Open and Closed Unionism in South Africa', **South African Labour Bulletin,** 1 (8), January/February 1975, pp 6-23.
11. From an interview carried out with Bloomkort, Harris in April 1979.
12. From an interview carried out with I. van der Watt in April 1979.
13. See 1979 issues of the **Government Worker,** organ of the Garment Workers' Union and especially A. Scheepers' speeches.
14. Article on Mvubelo, in the **Garment Worker,** 21 July 1978.
15. Quoted in an article of the **Financial Mail,** 9 November 1976.
16. Quoted in an article of the **Financial Mail,** 16 November 1979.