

# A STUDY OF STRIKES IN THE 1970s

MA du Toit tells us in a recent work (South African Trade Unions, McGraw Hill, Johannesburg, 1976) that in South Africa industrial conflict was/is accommodated quite well by sound industrial legislation. Yes indeed, he has a point there, for strikes by African workers have mostly been illegal and for whites mostly channelled and 'bureaucratized' (cf R Davies: "The 1922 Strike", History Workshop paper, Wits 1978). Yet one thing is also clear: that is, the history of capital in SA - as the history of any other capitalist social formations - has been haunted in all its steps in space and time by the 'malaise' it always tried to stamp out, African workers going on strike. It somehow suggests that 'profitable investment' and the 'capitalist enterprise' seek to carry within them this 'malaise', for we would not like to attribute this phenomenon's repetitive manifestation to the work of external 'agitators' - as most of the spokesmen through the years have done. It has in fact been with us wherever hard cash flowed and multiplied. From the 31st May, 1856, in Port Elizabeth where African dock workers went on strike the trend has not been reversed (SALB, 3,7:74). Far from it, it has continued as the flipside of capitalist accumulation.

The advent of the National Party to power brought about an increasing attempt to control and regulate industrial conflict (as witnessed by the various legislative measures that were brought into operation - see below). Initially there were signs of success. For instance, from 1955-60 there were 420 strikes involving 34 854 workers (an average of 5 800 a year). In the 1960's the number of workers on strike per year decreased to about 2 000. But from 1969 onwards things start going haywire: a dockworker strike, then in 1971 the strikes involving 15 000 Ovambo workers, then the 2 000 Durban stevedores strike, and in 1973 things come to a head in the famous Durban strikes. Furthermore, in 1974, 1975 and 1976 one witnesses 194 strikes (38 961 workers), 173 (12 451) and 113 strikes (16 170 workers). These are the usually conservative estimates of the Department of Labour (Survey of Race Relations, 1977).

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Compared to the relative quiescence of the 60's, the intensification of labour action in the 70's has again emphasised the normality of strikes in our capitalist process of production. In terms of the 70's, the labour/capital relation has not been one of peaceful coexistence. More and more workers downed their tools, voiced their grievances and made demands. In 1973, admittedly a rather noisy year,



67 338 African workers (1) took SA by surprise in participating in the phenomenon called "strike". What is the nature of this phenomenon, and why must it be seen as normal?

Usually a strike is seen as a collective action by workers which entails a stoppage of work in order that their grievances and demands are met by employers. Yet strikes are only the 'dramatic' manifestation of the unharmonious relationship between capital and labour in capitalist production. / Indeed, views that claim that employers and workers share similar interests in an essentially harmonious economic system refuse to take cognisance of the fact that on the one hand the goal of capital is maximisation of profit and that of labour the maximisation of wages, which, of course, is a portion of the capitalist's cost. Furthermore, to ensure the smoothness of production to generate the profits, efficient control of production is aimed at. This control is seen by management as its prerogative. But...efficiency at the expense of whom? The worker, who in his attempt to gain a greater control over the way his labour is used, is blocked by management's hostility to any trespassing on what they have declared as their area of jurisdiction. Thus the tension arises that perpetuates itself through all capitalist production (2). These tensions permeate the life of every worker, and the conflict expresses itself in a variety of ways that "are as unlimited as the ingenuity of man. The strike is the most common and most visible expression." (3)

Although SA in the 1970's is witnessing an upsurge of strikes, these strikes are not comparable in size, in length and organisation, or in articulation of working-class grievances to those which occur in many other capitalist countries. In fact, the distinguishing features of South African strikes involving African workers, have been their short duration and their lack of organised representative bargaining bodies. Applicable is Hyman's distinction between 'trials of strength' and 'demonstration strikes'. The former is the "industrial equivalent of war between nations" while "the latter, are short, usually spontaneous in origin; the decision to stop work is often virtually spontaneous - though the dispute would probably still centre around, or at least reflect, long-standing grievances which peaceful application had failed to remedy" (4). Indeed, most strikes have been variations of the latter kind.



However, before plunging into the central theme of this project, which is an analysis and collection of strikes in the 70's, a brief digression is essential. In order to understand the specific structural position of any form of labour action in South Africa, some analysis of the social formation must be presented. We begin this with a look at legislation.

In 1948 the Industrial Legislation Commission (Botha Commission) was appointed to report on:

- (a) "the desirability or otherwise of having separate trade unions and employers' organisations for Europeans, Coloureds and Asiatics..."
- (b) "the functioning of existing trade-unions or similar organisations composed of Natives, and the desirability or otherwise of regulating such organisations..."
- (c) "the setting up of machinery for the prevention and settlement of industrial disputes involving Natives..." (5)

In 1951 the Commission's major recommendations to the Government were that:

- (a) "existing trade-unions and employers' associations with mixed racial membership should be separated on a racial basis, and further, in case of mixed trade-unions, this division should be into separate branches with white executive committees;"
- (b) "African trade unions should be recognised in terms of separate legislation, subjected to a measure of reasonable control, and given sympathetic guidance..." (6)

The first recommendation was accepted by the Government. Thus it came to be that formally mixed unions became separate White and Coloured unions or separate branches of the same union. The second recommendation was rejected thus barring African unions from being registered. One of the foremost rationalisations for the rejection of this recommendation was the government's fear of African trade unions becoming political. (Botha Commission was appointed by the Smuts government and the recommendations were presented to Strijdom's administration). This was clearly expressed by the Minister of Labour at the time, when he stated that:

"What we must bear in mind is that these trade unions will be used as a political weapon... Whatever form of control is introduced you will not be able to prevent them being used as a political weapon... (T)hey can use trade unions as a political weapon and they can create chaos in South Africa at any given time". (7)

In 1953 the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act No 48 was gazetted which redefined the terms employee in the Industrial Conciliation Act to exclude all Africans. (This provision had already been met by the Industrial Conciliation Acts of 1924 and 1937, but Africans still qualified until 1953). The Act prevented registered trade unions from having African members and prohibited



strikes by African workers. (This provision had also been met by the War Measure 145 of 1942). Sympathetic strikes by workers of other racial groups, lock-outs or the instigation of such strikes or lock-outs were prohibited. The Act provided for the setting up of separate industrial conciliatory machinery for certain categories of African workers. It did not prohibit African trade unions but denied them official recognition and status. As an alternative to trade unions the three tier system was adopted which made provision for:

- (a) Works Committees elected by African workers;
- (b) Regional Native Labour Committees appointed by the Minister of Labour from Africans (not necessarily workers) from the local community with a white Labour Officer in the chair;
- (c) A Central Native Labour Board consisting of white officials appointed by the Minister.

The Works Committee was to be the first recourse if a dispute arose, yet one might wonder about their effectiveness given that by 1969 only 24 such statutory committees had been established. The duties of the second tier, namely the Regional Native Labour Committees were:

- (a) to maintain contact with employees with a view to keeping itself informed of conditions of employment of employees in its area and in particular trades;
- (b) to submit from time to time reports on any labour disputes which exist or are likely to arise; and
- (c) to assist in the settlement of disputes. (8)

The functions of the upper tier, the Central Native Labour Board, was to attempt to resolve disputes which had been "unsuccessfully" dealt with by regional Bantu Labour Committees, but if it, too, was unsuccessful it had to report to the Minister of Labour stating whether it considered such a dispute should be referred to the Wage Board (9). This Damoclean sword hung over the heads of the workers for twenty years before it was amended.

Then came the Industrial Conciliation Act No 28 of 1956. In terms of this Act no further mixed trade unions (catering for white and Coloured workers or Asian members) could be registered; machinery was created for the splitting of such unions along racial lines; and it was laid down that any mixed unions that continued to exist should create separate branches for white and non-white members and hold separate meetings. The Act also made provision for job reservation which specified types of work for persons of a specified race group. The Act was amended in 1959, (the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act No 41 of 1959) further restricting the operations of the remaining mixed trade unions. The collection of trade union



dues from Africans was made illegal and the canning industry was classified as an essential industry, thus prohibiting strikes in that sector. The machinery for job reservation was further perfected. Another amendment took place in 1966 (Industrial Conciliation Further Amendment Act No 61 of 1966) which prohibited strikes and lock-outs for any purpose connected with the relationship between employers and employees. The Act was further amended in 1970 (Industrial Conciliation Further Amendment Act No 21 of 1970).

What we witness here is an avalanche of legislation which is an attempt by the state to accommodate conflict and ensure industrial peace in such a way that, firstly, the economic grievances of the African working class do not develop any political manifestations; and secondly, the state here is providing institutions which will replace trade unions as independent bargaining bodies for Africans. Thus the state is politically disorganising the working class, whilst at the same time it is restructuring the mode of economic negotiations in industry to favour and reinforce capital's prerogative over the production process.

The state's fear that economic grievances of the African labour movement would manifest themselves in political activism, occupies a central place in latter-day South African history. The wide range of legislative measures taken to prevent this synthesis are partly entrenched in direct labour legislation. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 was also primarily concerned with curbing the possibilities of any such political activism which challenged the essential foundation of the South African way of life. Yet, it took a decade or so to finally eliminate all the legitimate channels through which political aspirations could be realised.

The most significant organisation to emerge in the Apartheid state stressing political activity as inseparable from the economic, was SACTU.<sup>†</sup> In March 1955, a conference of 33 unions, consisting of 14 unions who had opposed the exclusion of African trade unions from TUCSA,<sup>†</sup> and 19 affiliated to CNETU,<sup>†</sup> formed SACTU. The latter formed part of the Congress Alliance<sup>†</sup> and maintained links with the now banned organisations - the SA communist Party, the African National Congress and its military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe. The basis of SACTU's labour mobilisation policy centred around broader political issues raised by the abovementioned organisations and their resistance campaigns against apartheid. The response of the state was aggressive. SACTU was forced into exile after the elimination of its



leadership in the early 60's. This hammered the final nail into the coffin of politically based trade unionism at that stage in time.

Black trade unions now had to resort to new forms of organisation. Prior to 1955, the economic gains which black trade unions made were largely due to the right which they had in demanding Wage Board investigations in their industries. After 1955, this obligation on the Wage Board was removed from the provisions of the Wage Act, thus depriving African trade unions of an independent access to any determination of African wages. They were now dependent on registered unions for an access to the institutions determining African wages (10). Hence black trade unions are left with two options: either parallel unionism or independent unionism in the confines of bread and butter issues. The former was the preferred strategy adopted by most prior independent unions, especially Coloured and Indian unions.

The abovementioned must be seen as a form of labour control. Yet, hand in hand with the measures taken to stunt the political expression of the labour movement went the introduction of sophisticated machinery designed to regulate and control the physical flow of labour in the economy. The establishment of a system of labour bureaux in 1952 must be seen as one of the most significant aspects of the apartheid state's labour policy. It catered more efficiently for the demands of the different sectors of capital: firstly, by reserving certain areas for specific kinds of labour (especially agricultural), and secondly by allowing for the removal of 'excess' population from one area to another, depending on the needs of capital. This is the infamous system of influx control (11). The 'homeland' policy fits in admirably with the above measures, in so far as they provide both a source of labour as well as a dumping ground. Consequently, the shuffling back and forth of the migrant worker, subject to these systems of control, both militates against and attenuates his organisational strength.

The weakness of the working class can be summarised in terms of the following conclusions:

- 1) Its inability to express itself politically;
- 2) Even the necessary economic basis of trade unionism is rendered ineffective because of the state's substitution of trade union roles by measures such as the three-tier system;
- 3) The unstable position of a large part of the working population and its easily controllable status (12) makes even the most nominal form of trade union activity well nigh impossible.



In contrast to the migrant labourer the urban black, as defined by Section 10 a&b of the Urban Areas Act, enjoys a marginally stronger position in the sale of his labour power, being relatively unrestricted with regard to his workplace. The maintenance of this 'permanent' population is to a large degree in accordance with the needs of the manufacturing sector. Nevertheless, he is still subject to stringent forms of political control. The division of the South African working class is reflected in the dichotomy between the urban dweller and migrant worker.

However, both share a common relation to capital at the shop-floor level, and are subject to controls within the labour process itself, the latter being sensitive to fluctuations within capital itself.

So far though, we have been hinting at the homogeneity of the interests between capital and the state. The chief emphasis given above has been to the state's labour policy which is ultimately functional for capital. This is not to say that the interests of different fractions of capital are always met by the state. The changing policy of the state can partly be explained by the conflicting interests within capital. Nevertheless, insofar as the state maintains the overall dominance of the capitalist system, which might entail working against the short-term interests of certain sectors of capital, in the long-run its interests are the maintenance and reproduction of that system. Not only does it procure a labour force but it facilitates capitalist production by even more direct measures such as import substitution, infrastructural development, taxation policies and control of foreign investment (13).

It is against this background of the complicity of interests between state and capital that the response of the working class, especially strikes, must be seen. What appears to be a capital/labour conflict must be extended to include the role the state plays in maintaining the conditions of capital accumulation. In SA this role is strongly interventionist, impinging upon the actual work situation itself.

### STRIKES from 1970-1973:

1970 August

McPhail's Coal Yard (Denver, Johannesburg), 450 involved, 2 days. Coal loaders and yardmen refused to start work on 12 August because the directors refused to dismiss a white foreman who had 'sacked' 2 Africans. 450 were arrested and the next day they agreed to go to work, but a director said that a 'hard core of Africans have taken control of the compound and are threatening any Africans returning to work with physical violence'. 67 returned to the 'homelands' and 84 appeared in court on

charges of contravening the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, No 48 of 1953, by participating in or influencing others to participate in a strike (Star, 70-8-12&13)

1971 June

McWillaw Iron and Steel Foundry (Isipingo), 200 involved, 1 day. 200 Africans stopped work on 9 June demanding higher wages. By 16h00 the strikers assembled outside the factory gates and claimed they were told that their services were not needed, and that they could call for their pay. Truckloads of policemen armed with batons arrived and the Africans were called into the premises for a lengthy discussion with the employers. It appeared as though a settlement was negotiated (NM, 71-6-10)

June

Clairwood Clothing Factory, 37 involved, ? days. 37 Indian women garment workers were convicted in the Durban magistrate's court for taking part in an illegal strike (The Friend, 71-6-17)

September

Durban Abattoir, 200 involved, 1 day. 200 men walked out at 09h00 on 10 September, and refused to return to work despite the presence of police and negotiations with officials from the Labour Department. Workers went on strike after officials refused to accept demands for reinstatement of workers who had been fired (NM, 71-9-11)

1972 October

Durban docks, 2 000 involved  
Dock workers went on strike demanding wage increases

January

Roberts Construction, 450 involved  
A three hour strike by workers was the result of a misunderstanding over holiday bonuses (Star, 72-01-20)

June

Putco Reef, 300 involved  
Strike to back wage demands. An offer of 2% increase was rejected. 300 drivers were arrested and charged for striking but were acquitted. They received a 33,5% increase.

June

Ferro Plastic and Rubber Industries, (Industria)  
Strike - found guilty of refusing to work. Arrest of four by security police (Star, 72-11-09)

October

Cape Town Docks, 2 000 involved  
Stevedores staged a work-to-rule campaign during October and November after a dispute over changed conditions of employment

October

Fibres, Spinners and Weavers (Pty)Ltd (Benoni), +150 involved. Factory workers were paid off for allegedly refusing to work a 12-hour day. 'We asked for increase in June. We used to get R13 a week for working from 7.15 am to 4.30 pm. Last week we were paid R1,30 extra but we were told to work from 6 am to 6 pm.' (RDM, 72-10-27)



December  
 Pretoria Municipality, 200 involved  
 Municipal bus drivers went on strike. 57 were arrested, out of  
 whom 13 were convicted for participating in an illegal strike.  
 A number of workers lost their jobs in consequence.

#### COMMENT on strikes from 1970-1973

Prior to the 1973 Durban strikes, one witnesses a few sporadic acts of resistance by wage earners in the form of strikes. These isolated events were important in so far as they indicate that unorganised labour can still take collective action and present demands. This period is also important in that it possesses some of the features which have become characteristic of the 70's. The 84 coal yard workers who appeared in court in August 1970 on charges of contravening the Bantu labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 by participating in or influencing others to participate in a strike, seemed at the time an isolated event in a boom economy. This prosecution policy of the state was, however, to become frequent practice.

Post-Sharpeville SA showed all the signs of an ever-expanding, profiting, arrogant capitalist economy. The optimism which went with this euphoria experienced by capital in a booming economy was punctured by the isolated events of working class resistance which brought to the foreground two crude facts: that African wages were appallingly low; and that inflation was creeping in by the back door, pushing the value of wages even lower.

The Putco bus drivers' strike and the Durban stevedores' strike of June and October 1972, apart from demanding higher wages and in the case of Putco receiving a 35% increase, manifest a remarkable degree of worker solidarity. The gains that these workers made were not merely material. Out of the Putco conflict, the Drivers' Committee which was formed to take care of the strikers' needs, especially of those who had been arrested, became the Transport Workers and Allied Union after consultation with the Urban Training Project. By 1975 its membership was 700.

The Cape Town stevedores showed an acute perception of their bargaining power by staging a work-to-rate campaign and banning overtime in October and November 1972 at a time when the Suez Canal was closed and Cape Town traffic was at its peak.

#### Footnotes

1. Report of the Department of Labour for 1973 (RP 33)  
 Quoted in O Horner, "African Labour Representation and the Draft Bill to amend the Bantu Labour regulations Act" in SALB 2, 9&10:20.



2. Although conflict exists in Eastern European countries and the African socialist countries, it is of different form and content - see WH Friedland and CG Rosbey (eds) African Socialism, introduction.
3. C Kerr, Labour and Management in Industrial Society, p 171.
4. R Hyman, Strikes, p 20&23, quoted in J Maree, "Seeing Strikes in Perspective - review article of The Durban Strikes, 1973" in SALB, 2, 9&10:91-2.
5. D Horner, op cit, p 11.
6. Ibid, pp 11-12.
7. Hansard, vol 82&83, 53-08-04, cols 869-870.
8. D Horner, op cit, p 15.
9. Ibid, pp 15-16.
10. L Ensor, "TUCSA's relationship with African trade unions - an attempt at control, 1954-1962" in SALB, 3,4.
11. See also ML Morris, "Apartheid, Agriculture and the State" (unpubl paper), and "Capitalism and Apartheid" in T Adler (ed), Perspectives on South Africa; also Black Sash, "Memorandum on Influx Control".
12. See also ibid.
13. See recent debates centering around R Davies et al, in RAPE, 2,7.
  - + SACTU: The South African Congress of Trade Unions.
  - + TUCSA: Trade Union Congress of South Africa.
  - + CNETU: Congress of Non-European Trade Unions.
  - + Congress Alliance: An alliance of popular groups - the African National Congress (ANC), SACTU, Congress of Democrats (Cods), South African Coloured Peoples Organisation (SACPO) and the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses (TIC and NIC). The alliance based its common policy on the Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955.

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