Half a century later: *Durban Strikes – 1973*

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Synopsis of the strikes

In early 1973 more than 60,000 (some reports are of 100,000) workers downed tools in a number of industries (but especially in textiles) and in social services (such as municipal work) in Durban and surrounding industrial areas. What made that a noteworthy disturbance in the oppressive pervasiveness of apartheid rule? Why, along with the 1976 Soweto uprising amongst school children, should the strikes in 1973 regularly be referred to as a turning point in the struggle against apartheid?

In South Africa's racist and class-informed legislation at the time, black African workers were deliberately excluded from the legal definition of employee, and from the right to form unions recognised in the formal labour relations system. Strike actions by black African workers were illegal. But this did not mean that they did not occur. However, the figures reported in the book on the events, *Durban Strikes – 1973*, indicate the very small numbers of annual participants before the 1973 strike wave (5).[1] Between 1955 and 1968, for example, numbers of strikers, as reported, did not exceed 2,000 per annum. In October 1972, however, action by 2,000 stevedores brought much of the Durban harbour to a standstill. But the scale of what took place from early January 1973 and over the next few months – largely in industrial and municipal service areas around and in the port city of Durban – effectively illustrated that worker grievances and demands could no longer be seen as localised in individual firms, nor as isolated exceptions to a generally enforced calm. Rather, they represented concerted action against a *system* of enforced 'cheap labour' and of daily-experienced conditions of an extremely unequal and racist society.

Durban Strikes provides a brief history of the strikes as its first chapter.[2] A few aspects are notable, relevant in considering subsequent developments. It is generally accepted that the first event, separable in many respects from what followed, was the strike

[1] References in this introduction is to the first edition of the book (and will appear as a number in brackets). The book itself will be referred to as *Durban Strikes*. When the term 'author(s)' is used, without specific attribution, it is to refer to participants in the research and report in 1973/4..

[2] See, also, the article by anthropologist Brian du Toit, referred to earlier (fn 5), published shortly after the strikes, which provides a useful historical and legal background to labour issues, and specifically as displayed in the Durban 1973 events.

at Coronation Brick and Tile (CB&T) on January 9, 1973, involving some 2,000 workers (9-14). The distinctiveness is that this strike *was* related, through outsiders entering the labour field, to a specific form of politics. This intervention linked workplace grievances already expressed by workers to non-class and contentious political dynamics. At CB&T Zulu ethnicity, bantustan politics, and the involvement of contracted migrant labour, housed in hostels, all featured. It introduced several individuals – and their complex contestation for power, then and later – into the events unfolding then and into the future. The first of these was 'paramount chief' (title later changed to 'king') Goodwill Zwelithini, favoured, by the apartheid state to lead the embryonic KwaZulu Bantustan. This pitted him against Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, seen as untrustworthy when loyal participation in driving the process to 'independence' for the 'Zulu nation' was required. Zwelithini had visited the migrant hostels and factory in late-1972 to address, and make promises of wage improvements to 'his people'. His uncle and chief minister, Buthelezi (who, for the first decade or so of his Bantustan leadership, had ANC support for his participation in this state structure, but had his own agenda in this role), was thus inevitably brought into the picture. Most directly linked to labour issues was the third outsider, then KwaZulu councillor for community affairs, Barney Dladla. He became prominent in direct support for strikers (118-120) – but was dismissed by Buthelezi in 1974.[3] This ethnic dimension became irrevocably entangled within the developing political field of 'separate development' and resistance to it: internally, with an ethnic union formed later by Buthelezi's Zulu movement, Inkatha; and externally, through vicious conflict – described as a 'civil war' – between Inkatha and the state, and the ANC from 1979 into the 1990s.[4]

This initial strike immediately raised the central issue of discriminatory and low wages paid to workers, especially as internal migrants, but also to all un-represented black workers.[5] Coronation Brick and Tile, in its own way, highlighted the failure of existing, and management-preferred, means of communication and representation in, and in relation to

[3] See Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton (1987). Chapter 6 deals specifically with the implications of KwaZulu and its politicians' involvement in labour matters, in which Dladla featured prominently in 1973.Also Maré 2020.

[4] See, for example, Mxolisi R Mchunu (2020) *Violence and Solace: the Natal civil war in late-apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

[5] Do we even need a reminder that, then, all classified as 'non-white' did not have the vote and the majority of those were also in process of being denied citizenship through the 'homeland' policy, hidden behind the euphemism of 'separate development'?

the workplace. Most important, in this regard, was the absence of truly independent organisations, trade unions, that would give power to workers free from the tenuous goodwill of employers.

What was also specific about this first strike to make the news was the hostel housing of the workers, increasing their dependence on the firm (much as is the case with farm workers), but also serving, to some extent, to isolate the incident from other workers: hostel accommodation meant no shared transport, or neighbours in residential areas as was the case for the majority. Because of the spatial proximity of scattered rural and township parts of KwaZulu to these industrial areas, the majority of workers were commuters. However, the CB&T strike 'was widely reported in the local press. Banner headlines were accompanied by photographs of [brick and tile] workers massed on the football field [provided for workers in the hostels], or marching down the road carrying a red flag – for traffic control, rather than as a sign of political allegiance' (13). The entry into the labour field of 'traditional authority' carried very different meaning in the late 1960s and early 1970s than is the case with present continuities of ethnic rule.

While the strikes was in progress at Coronation several smaller strikes occurred, some traceable to specific issues such as a 'derisory pay-offers' made at the start of the new year by the employers. Prominent in newspaper reports generally were the demands for wage increases, with the amounts called for, and comparison with existing wages. The reports featured management and Labour Department responses, as well as the presence or absence of police and the military. Dismissals were mentioned in some cases. Even during the initial small scale of the strikes, the publicity prompted calls for improvement of working conditions, especially in wages. The strikes became a public issue, of shame and of blame.

By late January 'the trickle became a wave', now amongst larger firms, and most prominently in textiles, featuring the notorious Frame Group, in the New Germany-Pinetown industrial areas in the greater Durban metropole (22-38). Pickets, street protests, and marches made the strikes visible as *mass* protest – no longer just from dissatisfied workers in recognisable separate firms.

From the first strike, the state, as well as some employers and members of the public, employed the terms 'agitators' and 'instigators' to make common 'sense' of local worker action and local protests. Such blame was a common knee-jerk attempt, not only then, nor only in response to worker action, to deflect attention from systemic exploitation,

onto a few devious and revolutionary 'agents' or ideological positions sowing discontent in a situation where all was otherwise well. More specifically, the finger was pointed at 'communists', already a state favourite, decades before 1973. Closer to home, and with at least some evidence, 'university students' and 'the Wages Commission' fitted also within conspiratorial sense-making. The term 'spontaneous' was used in press coverage, as if there were no preconditions for each new group of strikers to recognise their own grievances in the defiance, and to join the growing solidarity in action.

The purpose and arguments in, and response to, what occurred in 1973, are necessary in an evaluation half a century later. It provides a view of what was seen as important, and feasible*, at that time* in the country's history. Extending this historically enables evaluation of responses that can be linked to the strikes – why adaptations, successes and failures occurred over the next 50 years; what happened to class politics after 1973? And, in 2023, to discuss what social goals should be in future goals, and what stands in the way of their realisation.

Biography of a book

When I recently opened my own copy of *Durban Strikes – 1973*, written 50 years ago, with underlining and marginal notes scribbled over the years, I discovered that it also contained some items folded into it. There were two photocopies, one of a 1975 review of the book by Richard Hyman, and one a 1975 published eye-witness account by anthropologist Brian du Toit. There was a newspaper article, dated 2003, by sociologist Ari Sitas, looking back on the strikes from 30 years on. And most immediate to the moment there were some small stickers printed in isiZulu and English – pre-social media tools of communicating protest -- calling for wage increases of R30 per week, and for the recognition of trade unions for all. The stickers had been affixed all over the city's landscape by members of the student Wages Commission and by Durban workers themselves, in the early 1970s. The call for R30 was radical, compared to actual wages, as revealed in *Durban Strikes* (85). So, another set of memories, other than the book and photographs, engaging with those times, were brought to mind.

Reflections on the events captured through research and text in 1973 itself, and first published in 1974, would be best written, half a century later, through the voices of all those

involved in the production of the original text. However, that is unfortunately not feasible. I was employed, at the time, in the regional office of the SA Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), did the interviews with managers for the study, and had my name appended to the original 'Acknowledgements' because I had not been 'banned' and could therefore be named. Even if I did not write it. How did *Durban Strikes* come about, by whom, and why; and how did state action affect its production and circulation?

It was especially the scale of the strikes, and their confrontational visibility, that made it largely unforeseen in 1973. Worker actions at factories and facilities in greater Durban were thus a clear and notable instant, an occasion discussed by publics, and by worker organisations, locally and internationally. A response that could document and analyse, and centrally assist, direct and produce further activism, was understood by those already engaged in a number of ways with workers and members of their families. The need urgently to capture, explain and shape opinion and action around the events and what lay behind them was clear. *Durban Strikes* was, therefore, a *strategic production, defined by the immediate context of this historical moment and the necessity perceived by its producers*. Who were they?

No author names appear on the cover, but were implied. The cover and spine simply displayed 'Institute for Industrial Education' and 'I.I.E.' respectively. The publisher and printer are both also given as I.I.E. (or the Institute for Industrial Education, an initiative itself still in very early progress at that stage);[6] the address is Durban's Gale Street, a major commuter bus and delivery route, with some businesses lining it. It was certainly not recognisable in the world of publishing. But it was familiar to workers in the city, at the busy harbour close by, and from the surrounding industrial areas, travelling to and from work, and visiting the union office, Bolton Hall. It was a favourite site for activists to distribute pamphlets, and not easy for the police to prevent such dissemination.

The book was largely, the brain-child of Rick Turner, recently arrived but already an influential lecturer in politics at the University of Natal on its Durban campus (UND). Rick operated from his arrival as an intellectual activist. However, the strikes project had, from

[6] https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/institute-industrial-education-iie; also Edward Webster (2021) . Publisher included 'in association with Ravan Press', in Johannesburg (https://mg.co.za/article/1996-11-01-ravan-child-of-a-special-time/). The connection probably brings in Peter Randall, who had been active in Spro-cas who had just published Rick Turner's *Eye of the Needle* (1972).

the start, the active involvement of a number of others; obviously, and most closely, Rick's partner, Foszia Fisher. The writing was done in the main by Rick Turner, David Hemson, Halton Cheadle – all three banned in February 1973 by the state, under 'security' legislation, which prevented their names being listed as authors in the book, and placing obstacles in the way of meeting around the production – and Maré. Two interviewers, gaining data on African worker attitudes, Irene Dlamini and Alpheus Mthethwa, are acknowledged, as are four (students then from the University of Durban-Westvile) who assisted in interviews of Indian workers. In addition, three lecturers from UND and two SAIRR staff are thanked in the 'Acknowledgements' for advice and comments on sections of the text. In summary, it drew together people with skills – academics, students, researchers – usually in the service of systems of control and exploitation; but here informed by a resurgence of critical thinking around capitalism, racism and domination, towards democracy, non-racialism and socialism.

The first copies showed physical signs of the rush in production – inconsistent layout, type-written text, and poor binding – reflecting the need of the moment, urgently to respond; motivated by the realisation that the events signified important political and economic actors and action. To keep costs down, as well as for reasons of security, the technology was basic: layout was certainly done on a 'light-table', by hand.

The first four chapters cover the events, the participants, as well as contemporary responses from such as business (individuals and organisations), the state, existing unions, and the public. Chapter 1 supplies a chronology with specific focus on the textile industry, and reactions from the press, police and existing unions – all of direct relevance to pressure for immediate and future actions from business and the state. Chapter 2 presents research findings through surveys initiated and coordinated by the participants in the book. Chapter 3 explores and evaluates explanations offered; while chapter 4 covers debates in the white parliament and 'The black response'. The final two chapters – 'Political economy of labour' and 'Trade unions' – make the educational and political argument and purpose of the publication clear. Giving effect to these aims – through making use of the book – continued subsequent to publication through sympathetic journalists, existing trade unions, and other civil society institutions. For example, the present author, employed at the SAIRR regional office, spoke at a meeting of business men in Pietermaritzburg on the findings and proposals of *Durban Strikes*.

The earliest review of *Durban Strikes* followed soon after it was published, written by Richard Hyman, the author of *Strikes* (1972) and outspoken in debates on trade unionism.[7] His contribution appeared in an early issue of SALB (1975, 2(2)). The *Labour Bulletin* turned out to be a long-lasting initiative directly linked to the people engaged in *Durban Strikes*, and part of a multi-pronged strategy around progressive change. Hyman summarises the content of *Durban Strikes*, notes that it 'compares most favourably with other recent accounts on individual strikes and strike movements'; and adds that '… While the authors admit candidly the limitations of their evidence, their explanation of the … strikes has the ring of plausibility'. He draws comparison with British union history and notes that 'the prediction that the Durban strikes will herald increasing Black self-assertiveness is wholly reasonable'. Hyman here focuses on the reason why reference to '1973' remains important to any subsequent serious examination of social change in the country. A first period after 1973 (the rest of the 1970s) did lead directly to important aspects of the achievement of an inclusive democratic order. But Hyman also, already, correctly writes that 'legal and recognized African trade unionism' is the only way in which the 'militancy unleashed in 1973 [can] conceivably be *contained*' (emphasis added).[8] I return to this point, of containment through trade unionism, below.

Intention and context: radical reform

The research for and the publication of *Durban Strikes* were collective efforts with purpose. First, to offer a counter narrative to state and conservative media interpretations of the strikes. Second, to argue in favour of extending organisational form to worker dissatisfaction within South Africa's racial capitalism.[9] These aims were a part of other initiatives towards

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[7] Richard Hyman was then at the University of Warwick: *Strikes* was published in 1972 (London: Fontana), and his later, 1975a, *Industrial Relations: a Marxist introduction* was also on many a bookshelf and course and seminar reading list in South Africa.

[8] Hyman 1975:63

[9] In this wider perspective and during the same time, within which the strikes had such an impact and why the dissemination of *Durban Strikes* was undertaken, there were other examples of analysis and engagement with specific readerships, such as the SA Council of Churches and Christian Institute of SA, Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Spro-cas) publications – which included Turner's *Eye of the Needle*. Further Spro-cas books, in 1972, included such as *Power, Privilege and Poverty*, and Francis Wilson's *Migrant Labour in South Africa*, dealing with issues similar to *Durban Strikes* (both published in 1972). In 1973 Peter Randall, Spro-cas director before he took charge of Ravan Press (see fn6 above), published the final, summary, report

the same ends. Initial steps were in progress to assist in organising the majority – black African workers – into worker organisations. Practical assistance for workers engaging state structures, such as Wage Board hearings, that affected working conditions was operational – this also entailed research into poverty, such as PDL (Poverty Datum Line) studies, in which Lawrence Schlemmer, at the UND played a major role, and Wages Commission members assisted in various ways. The university-based worker education initiative, the IIE was under way. An academic journal, the *South African Labour Bulletin* (*SALB*), serving as a platform for research and analysis related to the world of work, was launched. Workers themselves and a range of supporters – individuals with previous and present engagement with worker organisations, students and academics, especially from the University of Natal campuses, were drawn in. Students were offered the opportunity to engage in practical activities towards social change, in this case in the labour field. Organisational support came from NUSAS (the National Union of SA Students), and especially through the newly formed Wages Commissions at both campuses of the University of Natal. Later the Commissions were expanded to most NUSAS-affiliated campuses and Community Commissions were also created.[10] These are aspects of the context within which the intentions with *Durban Strikes* have to be understood, as part of wider activities, many of them inter-related, both in personnel and aims.

The book starts with a quotation from then prime minister BJ Vorster (iii) – an inclusion meant to be both strategic (in holding the state to its parliamentary words) and to underscore the obvious ironies in the statement:

> Employers, whoever they may be, should not only see in their workers a unit producing for them so many hours of service a day. They should also see them as human beings with souls.

Vorster may well have intended, through this cynical remark, to take a shot at United Party-supporting businesses in the Natal province. This was the only province where the National Party had struggled to get majority support from white voters – but where the United Party was little different from the NP (except in its 'English' prejudices against Afrikaners). Vorster's contribution to the parliamentary debate could also be seen as an attempt to

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of the series under the title *A Taste of Power*, in which a case for trade unions for all is made (1973:76-8) – in my copy sections are blacked out – Bennie Khoapa had been banned and blacked out, as well as a quote from 'B.S.Biko (ed) *Black Viewpoint*', itself a Spro-cas publication from 1972, because Biko had been banned.

[10] For more on students involvement in labour and general radicalism, see such as Moss (2014).

deflect, along with the 'homeland' policy, from the state's legislative dehumanisation of all those South Africans excluded from citizenship in the country. In his account of the strikes, Brian Du Toit found it appropriate to observe, for an international readership, that under NP apartheid policies 'Africans in South Africa, especially African workers, have increasingly been legislated into objects'![11]

What was the approach in *Durban Strikes* to what Hyman described as 'self-assertiveness', displayed so spectacularly and bravely in 1973, and soon reflected in the creation of further unions, and in changes in labour legislation. But what also of 'containment' that Hyman identifies in even a victory for full trade union rights? Confronting Hyman's favourable, and also challenging, comments are necessary to understand the purpose of the authors through this book in 1973. These questions are, therefore, also important in evaluating labour struggle and history over the next 50 years in relation to the 1973 intentions, proposals and hopes.

The general purpose and the specific recommendations in the book can confidently be described as *reformist* – especially if measured against increasing calls for socialism or social democracy; and certainly against revolutionary calls made from exile. It can also be contrasted with the growing importance of Marxist analyses of historical and contemporary 'racial capitalism' in the country. In other words, following from Hyman's use of the term 'containment', calls for extending trade unionism would appear to be a long way off a call for 'revolutionary change' and 'armed struggle' in the country. Hyman himself concludes his review, with this qualification, even of 'containment':

> Even this [incorporation of African workers into legal labour relations practices, or containment] may well be insufficient. Where class antagonism is overlaid by racial oppression, *the institutionalization of conflict* [containment] through trade unionism alone may prove impossible (italics added).

I will, therefore, briefly discuss the 'Recommendations' as much as they reveal the aim of the research and of the book, that were presented. They come, in chapter 5, after an introduction to 'the actual shop-floor function' of any trade union and of unionists, serving as a brief lesson to a general readership. What is stated, as well as elsewhere in the book, is that it is not a 'lack of communication' that leads to strikes. Even though it was, and is, a

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[11] 1975:199.

very widely circulating notion, always present in explaining conflict in the management-labour relationship. But, rather, the systemic power imbalance in the workplace that results in withdrawalsof labour. *Durban Strikes* notes that workers who had been interviewed indicated that grievances had been communicated long before the strikes occurred; as they had at the Coronation strike. Instead, the vastly unequal power relationship between owners and managers, on the one hand, and workers, on the other, lay at the root of the issues: in essence, capitalism.

The limits of perceptions of the workplace and of workers, of labour relations, aggravated by embedded racial stereotypes and racism of state and 'opposition' (the United Party) positions are presented. The NP position is illustrated in *Durban Strikes* through then exiting discriminatory legislation, and two quite different arguments advanced during apartheid: the first in the Botha Commission, which reported in 1951, shortly after the NP came to power. It rejected '"the complete social and political equality of all races"', and thus of inclusion of Africans in existing unions. It did, nonetheless, propose African trade union rights, which was rejected by the new national Party government. Second, 21 years later, the 'Van der Merwe Plan', referring to a proposal by professor P.J. van der Merwe ,presented in a talk he delivered to the conservative Trade Union Council of SA (Tucsa) conference in 1972.[12] This proposal was made, interestingly, from within the parameters set by the bantustan policy, envisaging separate (and even 'independent') governments, and thus African workers as 'citizens of Homelands' and thus 'foreign migrants' to 'white South Africa' and its industries. This would mean that the ethnic 'governments' would create their own 'internal' labour legislation, and would negotiate with the apartheid government to establish rules affecting 'their citizens' (173-5).

In conclusion to this introduction to the recommendations, the authors speak to 'Trade Unions', returning to the 'functions' of trade unions within a capitalist order, addressing the 'asymmetrical dependence' of employer and worker, and the institutional place of unions, strikes, pickets, etc. It is worth noting, that the authors acknowledge that

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[12] Professor PJ (Piet) van der Merwe, then in the University of Pretoria Economics Department, 'in 1979 he became deputy chairman of the National Manpower Commission. He was also a member of the Wiehahn Commission' (see https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/61/ZP_Files/2021/department-of-economics-100-year-history.zp209884.pdf).

workers are not only workers, but that conflicting interests may exist within the working class and be experienced amongst them, the most important of which exist at the core of racial capitalism itself: competition between workers in finding employment, skill differentials, and also race. I have already mentioned the introduction of ethnicity into the workplace and into organisational strategies.

Recommendations by the authors of *Durban Strikes*, concluding chapter 5, start with an overall point:

> Trade unions, with the right to organize freely, and to use the strike weapon as a last resort, organized on democratic lines, and possessing their own sanctions over members, *are the precondition for industrial peace* in South Africa. Only full trade unions can integrate African workers into the industrial economy in such a way that they will begin to *co-operate wholeheartedly* in its development. (179-80, italics added)

The important specific proposals are directed at:

African workers, should reject the existing 'liaison committees'and 'works committees' as adequate, although 'they should attempt to manipulate them' (181); 'should form Trade Unions, as, even though they remained unofficial [under then existing conditions], these are the best means available to workers for the defence of their rights' (181); and these should be open to all workers.

Employers are advised 'that it is in the long-term interests of both employers and workers that there be adequate institutional forms for dealing with inevitable industrial conflict through peaceful negotiations'. All are warned of international union actions against the apartheid state and specifically foreign companies investing in South Africa (183-5).

Registered trade unions, protected at the time on both skill and race bases, should give advice and assistance to new unions, and pressure employers where they have already organised; and where they have representation, such as at industrial council meetings, they should 'ensure that all fringe benefits are extended to African workers'. However, they

> should not try to control the African union. … There exist independent bodies such as the [IIE], the Urban Training Project and Central Administration Services, which offer valuable facilities to African unions … [which] should be supported as one means of ensuring the independence of African unions from domination by the existing registered unions (187-8).

Here, the existence of inter-related activities in support of African workers mentioned earlier are raised.

‘Homeland Governments’, clearly with the KwaZulu version in mind, are reminded that while state policy sees workers as properly belonging in those ethnic territories (as ‘citizens’), this is not the case, in fact, as they labour beyond the ethnic creations; but that, within their devolved powers, they could recognise branches, provide ‘technical and financial assistance’, appeal to employers to recognise unions, and make clear to those located in these territories that unions are legal, albeit with limited participatory rights [189-90].

Finally, ‘The Government’ is reminded, quoting professor Sheila van der Horst’s ‘remark [in a SAIRR sheet] that “one cannot and should not rely on the decency, religion or social responsibility (or anything else) of either employers or employees to bring about social justice … it is the function of Governments to govern and to provide a framework to ensure that employers’ and employees’ actions conform to the public interest”’ [190]. The authors, however, draw attention to the political context of white domination that shapes notions of justice in SA. In this context conflict is inevitable and increasing, and peaceful resolution less likely:

> In such circumstances a Government has two alternatives. It can attempt to hold back the process of change by increased repression. Or it can resign itself to the necessity of making creative compromises, compromises which will retain for the time being some aspects of White privilege, but will at the same time begin to integrate African workers into the society. (191)

‘Reformist’ certainly, calling for the ‘*institutionalization of conflict*’ in the arguments made both to capital and the state. However, to label *Durban Strikes* as ‘reformist’ is inadequate without locating it as strategy, within the pervasive political repression and restrictions of the time, chosen within limited options – direct participants in even the Durban strikes project were banned. Rick Turner was assassinated a few years later, because he was perceived to be central to much of the political ferment in the region and nationally.[13] Steve Biko was murdered because he was perceived also to inform struggle,

[13] See Billy Keniston (2013) *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

widely and effectively. What was the progressive 'politics of the possible' during these years?

Eddie Webster alerted me to an appropriate qualification that he had used, looking back 20 years after the strikes, namely to characterise Rick Turner's approach to analysis and activism as *radical reform*.[14] This clearly applies to Turner's *Eye of the Needle*, published the year before *Durban Strikes*, and the strategic arguments and initiatives he took in several areas then and later. Webster writes: 'Turner's combination of a radical vision *with a strategy* was to have a profound impact on the intense debates in the early seventies on economic growth and social and political change' (emphasis added). That 'radicalism' is there also in the call for member-driven democracy in the trade unionism proposed as goal.

In 2022 I was invited to reflect on Turner's *Eye of the Needle* (importantly subtitled : *towards participatory democracy in South Africa*) published 50 years earlier, at an event organised by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS). I referred to the method of 'utopian thinking' for which Turner argues in the book.[15] It demands, as Webster noted, a 'radical vision' – which Turner presented as a challenge towards a South Africa beyond race and racism, and one in which participatory democracy and socialism would be goal. The strategy is that of practical reform on a shared journey to the 'utopian' vision. In *Durban Strikes*, too, participatory democracy in the proposed unionisation is foregrounded, as is a critical view of the dehumanising and exploitative history of capitalism in southern Africa and as a system everywhere. Rick Turner's first step was, in both instances, to speak to a range of potential participants, by arguing that it was both necessary and possible.

Fifty years later

What do we want from such reminders of things past, in this case events that took place half a century ago? Nostalgia possibly, if you were one of the thousands who took their futures into their own hands in early 1973; one of the tens of thousands who lived under the conditions inflicted on those racialised as non-citizens, as inferior, as available under

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[14] Argued for in his (Webster 1993) 'Rick Turner memorial lecture', and is valuable to an understanding of the Durban Moment, to which he adds the presence of 'class theory and the new labour studies' (1993:2). Also see Webster's contribution – '"Exodus without a map": what happened to the Durban Moment?' – delivered at a 'Symposium in honour of Vishnu Padayachee', July 2022.

[15] Forthcoming in *SA Historical Journal*.

massively discriminatory conditions as 'labour'; as people who could see who the beneficiaries were of their daily effort. But, who, yet, acted and had ideas on what could be. However, the authors and other participants in the creation of *Durban Strikes*, who are aware of the historical date in 2023, will find a somewhat different set of memories: of commitments, visions, hope, expectations, and effort over the next couple of decades, until 1990 and the achievement of an inclusive representative democracy. We were of a different class location, after all.

What were those hopes, what were the commitments and engagements, and what are the retrospective assessments? And that is why, earlier, I wished that all those who were around would present their subsequent experiences and satisfactions and disappointments – with assessment of why.

Durban, and South Africa, were in major ways, more than can be listed, a different world from that which exists in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. The changes are impossible fully to capture in their complex inter-relationship, globally and locally. But we desperately need to reflect on them: some in new expressions of what was imagined then, others unimaginable 50 years ago. The strikes that have come to define 1973 took place in a smaller ideological and political space. The enemy was clearly 'Apartheid' – with a capital letter – as system: even if an articulation of race, gender, capitalism, and with ethnicity and tradition unfolding in ways that broke with past forms of domination. Resistance, defined by a common enemy, took different forms then; but measured mostly against agreed-upon criteria.

In 1990 Tony Morphet, University of Natal (Durban) lecturer, labelled the late-1960s and early-1970s as 'the Durban Moment'.[16] This evocative term, oft-repeated since, drew primarily on what was happening in the university during this period, and referred directly to political science lecturer Rick Turner, murdered in 1978, and to medical student and Black Consciousness founder Steve Biko, killed in 1977 a few months earlier. These names came

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[16] Morphet's 1990 'Turner memorial lecture' (with first appearance in *Theoria*) is available in Richard Turner (2015). A more inclusive 'Durban Moment' would also include specifics such as the Wages Commision (first launched in 1971 at UND), the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund, the IIE, and further organisational activism. On student-related radicalism, which then also includes union and social activism, see, for example, Glenn Moss' memoir (2014); and https://www.thenewradicals.com/. For a tribute to Morphet, see John Higgins at https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-05-10-tony-morphet-1940-2021-the-durban-moment-public-intellectual-who-merged-social-and-civic-life/; also Xolela Mangcu at https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/Durban_Moment_Abstract_Xolela_Mangcu.pdf

to signify a set of socially formative influences, geographically and socially much wider than what was then unfolding in just Natal province. Yes, it was a period of *intellectual* ferment, especially at the University of Natal (Durban), in several disciplines amongst staff and students. But, as the strikes certainly signified, activism and 'agitation' was to be national.

The period of the Durban Moment in this wider recognition that is clearly called for is also distinguishable from the *preceding years* of intensified repression of most forms of visibly organised resistance. Repressive measures can, however, also – correctly – be read as signs of on-going opposition to forms of racist domination and exploitation.

The authors of the fifth volume of *From Protest to Challenge* appropriately, in retrospect, sub-titled it *Nadir and resurgence, 1964-1979*, to capture both repressive apartheid state action through most of the 1960s, and also indicating that therefore subsequent oppositional events and social action were especially significant. Resistance took a variety of forms, challenging power in labour and cultural and community life.[17] Black Consciousness initiatives from the late 1960s (Biko was then studying at the medical school at the UND, and several other student leaders were to be found in Durban); white students' seemingly unlikely, but innovative, labour activism through 'Wages Commissions', spreading nationally from UND and UNP – set off initially by concerns with wages for black workers on campuses; Soweto 1976 which thrust youth politics and school education to the frontline; trade unions and labour action grew; a proliferation of community and religious organisations came into existence, acting often in collaboration with worker campaigns; to name a few.[18] Change was in the air; youthful energy was present; individuals from older generations with their own histories constructively engaged, but also brought in confusions and allegiances from the past and from commitments to politics taking place in and from exile. The formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the early 1980s well illustrates such interaction of multiple forms of opposition to apartheid that developed from the late-1960s.

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[17] Thomas G Karis and Gail M Gerhart (series editors) (revised and up-dated by Gail M Gerhart) (2013) *From Protest to Challenge: nadir and resurgence, 1964-1979*. Johannesburg: Jacana. Read especially, in relation to *Durban Strikes*, the article by David Lewis (2013:194-225) 'Black workers and trade unions'. Lewis has a sub-heading 'Survival years: 1964-1972' in this overview. Scanning through the documents in the collection reveals the span of resistance. In addition, Brian du Toit (1975), researching in the Natal region at the time, also provides useful social and economic background information in his article, 'written in Durban during the current strikes'.

[18] See such as Ian MacQueen (2018).

It has to be noted that in 1973 there was no internet, cell phones or personal computers. That has to be taken into account towards an understanding of the day-to-day forms of interaction, of planning, of publicity, of organisational types, of the nature of trust that operated then. This explains in part the importance that Turner, and then labour and political organisers, attached to direct democracy. And why the discussion of participatory forms of democracy featured in discussions and practices. Distanced, virtual, hybrid practices today have created new forms, and shaped, too, our return to understanding the past.

What does 1973 demand of us in 2023? What relevance do the calls then on the working class to lead struggles against apartheid have today? How has the form of inclusive *constitutional* democracy fared since 1994 measured against the previous calls for participatory democracy; what about trade union and trade unionism? Where do we stand with regard to the equality, safety and economic and political location of women? How do we rate education at all levels, when the claims were made so forcibly in 1976? And so on.

I will refer to three conditions, as they might encompass most of the multiple forms in which the demands of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, for a future, present themselves: inequality; the climate catastrophe; and recognising the absence of easily identifiable social cohorts as agents for fundamental change.

Göran Therborn rewrote, originally in 1980, for me and for many others how to rethink 'the ideology of power and the power of ideology', in a book of that name. More recently, in 2013, he tackled inequality, again in the same condensed and readable style. Therborn proposes that inequality should not be measured purely in material terms – what he calls *resource inequality*. But, if it is to be addressed effectively, inequality should also be measured in terms of *vital inequality* (that relates to the body, health, survival rates, etc), and then *existential inequality*. The last fairly obviously refers to gender and race, but not exclusively. Applying measures of existential, vital and resource inequality to SA today, we fail miserably, especially if we take into account the aims of struggle against racial capitalism that informed 1973. There are daily occurrences of brutal violence against women, so common that an acronym, 'GBV', is sufficient to convey meaning.[19] Hierarchies of difference

[19] I have just read, from the Nelson Mandela Foundation release, on Sep 7, 2022, of 'three disturbing figures that are well reported. "In South Africa's largest corporations, women in top leadership positions earn 72 cents for every 1 Rand earned by their male counterparts"; "One study based on samples from Gauteng Province

fill this nation-state. A failing and failed public health system characterise life for poor people in all provinces. Gini-coefficient numbers place us at the bottom level globally. How can I read in a newspaper of children dying of hunger in the Eastern Cape in 2022.

The climate catastrophe – global warming, droughts, rising ocean levels, and the rapidly increasing devastation through 'extreme weather events' – were not in the public consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s. Sure, we spoke about 'weather', and heat, and drought, but that had nothing to do with present common knowledge that much of life on the planet is doomed, if not already extinct, through human activity: unless we accept measures that we have no intention of accepting. This is, unfortunately, not the space to raise the implications, already experienced by millions globally, and the numerous actions required and the similar number of social obstacles that make it near meaningless: obstacles include such basic aspects of our existence as democracy, the nation-state, nationalism, short-term thinking, notions of growth, consumerism, capitalism, enough and too much, and on and on.

Finally, here, and related to the previous two, why is there at present hardly a thought of who credible agents of major and effective change could be. In 1973, firmly founded in Marxist and broadly 'left' thinking and practice globally, the working class was argued, and accepted, to be the agent, around which notions of material, political and social existence were thought and discussed. Trade unions, organisations of the working class, and related political parties were to be stepping stones towards a world beyond capitalism. Remember? What is the 'working class' in 2023, what is the present and future forms of 'work', where are 'trade unions' in relation to emancipatory visions? How are these questions addressed in South Africa and globally? And how would the answers relate to issues of inequality (vital, existential and resource), agency, and the climate catastrophe?

In his mapping of left theory in the twentieth century Razmig Keucheyan makes the following important point, one I argue is of direct relevance to looking back at 1973 and what seemed, to many, to be obvious then. But also to identify the challenges for 2023 and the future:

> With its turbulence, today's world resembles the one in which classical Marxism emerged. In other respects, it is significantly different – above all, no doubt, in the

found that 51 per cent of the women surveyed reported that they have experienced gender-based violence"; and "women account for nearly 63 per cent of all new HIV infections."'

> absence of a clearly identified 'subject of emancipation'. At the start of the twentieth century, Marxists could count on powerful working class organizations, of which there were often leaders, and whose activity was going to make it possible to surmount what was supposedly one of the ultimate crises of capitalism. Nothing similar exists at present or, probably, for the immediate future. How, in the light of this, are we to continue thinking radical social transformation? Such is the challenge facing contemporary critical theories. (2014:4)

And such is the task confronting us as we think back to the working class action in Durban '73. Thinking can no longer be contained within specific disciplines, problems, claims and demands. It certainly can no longer be focused on humans only.[20]

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[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REeWvTRUpMk

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