

Writing The 1973 Durban Strikes: The 'Birth Of Independent Trade Unions'

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ABSTRACT

The 'Durban strikes' is a signifier of many things – the 'start' of the independent labour movement, the onset of a period of labour reform, and the impetus for the resistance that eventually brought down the apartheid regime. While a Google Scholar search yields thousands of references, research specifically focusing on the strikes themselves has been limited. What, then, constitutes the scholarship of the Durban strikes? This article locates, documents and analyses the archive of research and writing on the 1973 Durban strikes. It poses the following questions: How extensive is the literature on the Durban strikes? What are the narratives of the strikes? What are the main themes in this literature? Does the literature change over time? The article argues that three distinct narratives emerge from the writings on the Durban Strikes. First, there is a focus on the causes of the strikes. Second, there is an argument suggesting that the strikes were unorganised and spontaneous. Third, there is the assertion that the 1973 Durban strikes marked the birth of the independent trade union movement. The narrative of the Durban strikes as the genesis of the independent trade union movement has become the dominant narrative over time. The article concludes by arguing that 50 years later, the IEE publication *The Durban Strikes 1973* remains the seminal research on the strikes.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1973, starting at Coronation Brick and Tile, workers across the city of Durban began a strike. This was to be a 'rolling' strike wave lasting months, involving tens of thousands of workers, located in hundreds of workplaces across Durban. Fifty years later, in hindsight, it is easy to recognise that the 1973 Durban strikes were a significant moment. They hold a distinct place in history, connected to past experiences of worker organisation and action, while foreshadowing future developments in building worker organisations with their role in the eventual liberation of South Africa.

This article focuses on the way in which these events have been written about, not only at the time of the strikes but also subsequently. I argue that from the writing of the early 1970s, three distinct narratives emerged. First, was a focus on the causes of the strikes; second, was the argument that the strikes were unorganised and spontaneous; and third, that the 1973 Durban strikes birthed the independent trade union movement.

Later writings about the strikes and associated events show that the question of an organisational presence behind the strike and their spontaneity has continued to be debated in the literature up to the present moment. The narrative of the Durban strikes being the point of origin of the independent trade union movement has become the dominant narrative across time.

IDENTIFYING THE ARCHIVE

The initial task involved identifying the writings on the Durban strike. I wished to gather everything that had been written and published about the 1973 Durban strikes. I excluded news articles from daily and weekly newspapers, as the press narrative was discussed extensively in the pioneering book *The Durban Strikes 1973*.

I initiated my research by conducting a Google Scholar search using key words such as '1973 Durban strikes' and various related terms such as 'Durban strikes' and '1973 unions'. Articles that provided substantial coverage of the strikes were identified and downloaded. In addition, I perused the citations of those articles and reviewed their reference lists to uncover other pertinent literature, including books and dissertations.

Second, I explored iconic books on labour and unions in South Africa, including edited collections derived from the *South African Labour Bulletin*¹, *Organize ... or Starve* (Luckhardt and Wall 1980); *Building Tomorrow Today* (Friedman 1987); *Striking Back. A History of COSATU* (Baskin 1991); and *A Paradox of Victory* (Buhlungu 2012), among others. This enabled me to identify discussions related to the Durban strikes and further explore relevant texts cited within these works.

Third, I conducted targeted searches in specific journals known for covering labour in South Africa, such as the *South African Labour Bulletin*, and *Indicator South Africa*.

Last, I examined the writing of specific (prolific) South African labour scholars to see if they had written on the 1973 Durban strikes. This comprehensive approach yielded a diverse bibliography as represented in the reference list.

When reading the articles I sought to answer the following questions:

- (i) What are the main themes and narratives of the writing about the strikes?
- (ii) How have the strikes been framed, both in the historical moment and later?
- (iii) What debates have emerged?
- (iv) Are there similar arguments across the literature and what might be the silences?

The literature is organised into three periods. First is the period immediately after the strike ie from 1973 until about 1975/76. At this time, there was little writing on labour or trade unions and revisionist writing was just beginning to find its voice (see Friedman 2014, 527-529). Second is the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. This could be called the 'celebratory' period; unions were growing in organisational strength and influence (Baskin 1991; Friedman 1987). Writing on labour history, work, workers and trade unions was flourishing, new oral history methodologies were utilised and the teaching of labour studies was at its zenith (see Sitas 1997a; Webster 1978, 2; Webster 1985b). Third is the period from the mid-1990s to the present – a period that has seen a decline in the organisational strength of the union movement, and a similar decline in labour studies (see Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi 2017; Craven 2016). However, in the last decade there has been a renewed interest in writing about the 1970s. These texts, I argue, while addressing the earlier debates, also place the strikes in a broader context of organisation building and resistance history (see Brown 2010, 2016; Davie 2007, 2015; Macqueen 2018; Moss 2014).

WRITING IN THE MOMENT

The 1973 Durban strikes are extensively documented in the seminal work *The Durban Strikes 1973... "Human Beings with Souls"* (IIE 1977). The book, published by the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) has no accredited authors. In the 'Acknowledgements', Maré (IIE 1974, 2) writes that it was a 'collective work' and due to state repression many of those involved could not be 'associated with the publication'. Rick Turner, David Hemson and Halton Cheadle, the primary authors, could not be named at the time as they had been served with banning orders (Maré 2023). The first three chapters originally written by Maré were presented in March 1974 at a workshop organised by the Institute of Race Relations (Maré 1975, 21).

This iconic study provides a wide-ranging and in-depth account of the strikes. The book commences with a detailed overview of the strikes (Chapter One), thus laying the groundwork for a thorough analysis of the strike itself, its participants and their perspectives (Chapters Two and Three). Interviews were conducted with workers, employers and white members of the public (see Maré 1975). These interviews are combined with extensive use of newspaper articles and parliamentary debate to provide a comprehensive account. Furthermore, it offers an analysis of the immediate reasons for the strike (Chapters Three and Four), places labour in a historical context and analyses the broader political economy that created the South African labour market characterised by cheap black labour and an authoritarian workplace (Chapter Five). The book concludes with a discussion of trade unions, in itself a motivation for the recognition of the rights of black workers to join trade unions (Chapter Six).

Chapter Six is at the heart of the book's political project. It begins with a discussion of what the authors argue are some of the key concepts needed to understand the purpose of trade unions. These include communication, conflict, power, profit, a fair wage and length of the working day. The problematisation of these concepts allows for an evaluation of the ways in which the South African state has attempted to institutionalise conflict. The chapter concludes with a series of recommendations regarding industrial relations and trade unions. The overarching argument is that a free, democratic and independent trade union movement that is open to all workers, legally recognised by employers and the state and able to legally strike is the only way to ensure that African workers are fully integrated into the economy and that it (the economy) will continue to develop.

Besides the legendary *The Durban Strikes 1973*, little else was written about the strikes in their immediate aftermath. I identified five other texts, none of which could be described as definitive studies and, while some are lengthier than others, they lack the analytical depth or political purpose of *The Durban Strikes 1973*. Furthermore, none of them develop or reinforce (or even dispute) the political message of *The Durban Strikes 1973* regarding the need for African workers to form trade unions.

Pogrud (1973), an assistant editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, wrote a very short article that was published as the strikes were abating. In essence, it is a report on the strike. While the article is primarily an account of events, it places the Durban strikes within a broader context of labour discontent. Pogrud (1973, 26) makes three points. First, there had been many warnings regarding the low wages paid to African workers; second, given the 'total powerlessness' of the African working class there was no other way workers could express their discontent; and third, while the outcome was by no means certain, 'a new era of labour relations has started'.

Second is a report by Frene Ginwala (1973), 'African Workers Strike Against Apartheid'. Ginwala, based in London and a member of the African National Congress (ANC) in-exile, wrote the report for the United Nations' Unit on Apartheid. She identified the strikes as 'a significant event in the course of the liberation of South Africa' (Ginwala 1973, 1). The report locates the strikes within the broader context of the control of African labour and the creation of a cheap labour system. It refers to the labour discontent, particularly around wages, that preceded the strikes. Her discussion of the strikes is primarily drawn from local and international newspaper reports. The report concludes by raising three issues – the lack of trade union rights for African workers, wages below the poverty datum line (PDL) and the role of foreign companies and the need for their withdrawal from South Africa. Ultimately, the report is descriptive; its primary purpose was to garner support for the ANC's call for disinvestment.

Alongside these primarily descriptive accounts were two journal articles published in 1974 and a book chapter in 1975. Boulanger's (1974) study is based on interviews with 92 firms located in Durban, each employing more than 100 workers,. The interviews were conducted in 1972 (the year before the strike). The main aim of the paper was to examine the origins and causes of the strikes. Drawing on a conflict framework, Boulanger (1974, 352-353) analyses the presence of 'latent' and 'manifest' conflict in

these firms to determine if working conditions in 'strike firms' were more oppressive than 'non-strike firms'. Boulanger (1974, 357) concludes by stating that:

the conflict over wages was obvious [but] much more than that was involved ... explanation should thus be sought in the wide context of South African society.

The Durban strikes, according to Boulanger (1974, 358), needed to be understood within the 'colour-class structuring process of South African society'. At the root of the strikes were poor wages, limited job mobility and lack of 'voice' in the workplace – all determined by the 'socio-economic and political structure of South African society'.

Du Toit's (1975) article is based on the fieldwork he was undertaking in Durban townships at the time of the strike. Using life stories, he vividly portrays the extreme poverty experienced by the urban African working class in the early 1970s and illustrates the inadequacy of their wages to meet their living expenses (du Toit 1975, 213-218). He demonstrates that this poverty was inextricably linked to the way the labour market was structured to ensure that the participation of African workers was managed through legislation and regulations around influx control and job reservation. Furthermore, he suggests that, given the political climate, striking was the only viable means of drawing attention to their plight.

Kooy (1974, 53) locates the 1973 strikes in a larger discussion of 'black worker unrest' in the early 1970s which 'follow[ed] a long and remarkable quiescence'. The Durban strikes or, as they are termed here, 'the Zulu strikes' (Kooy 1974, 55) were the ones with the 'most impact' (Kooy 1974, 54). The 'unrest' is ascribed to the low wages paid to the African workforce. Although blame is attributed first to the deliberate policies and legislation of the segregationist state and later to the apartheid state, Kooy (1974, 65) also points out that while the low wages paid to African workers had long been a topic of public discussion, 'employers had been very slow to substantially raise African workers' wages of their own accord'. The article concludes by commenting that the strikes did not significantly improve wages or working conditions, and the recurrence of strikes in 1974 indicates that the issues were far from being resolved.

The foremost concern of these articles was to understand the 'causes' of the strikes. The causes were attributed to poverty wages with some articles delving deeper into the analysis and situating 'poverty wages' within the apartheid system (Boulanger 1974; du Toit 1975; Ginwala 1974). All suggest that, given the dire circumstances of poverty wages, the strikers' actions were justified. It is implied that the unusually restrained response by government and police was due to their acknowledgement that the workers' wages were intolerable. Boulanger (1974) brings questions of power/powerless to his analysis and suggests that workers had no alternative means to express socio-economic or political grievances, 'and so [they] remain unresolved and latent. Workers instead focus[ed] their grievances on the wage issue' (Boulanger 1974, 357).

The second narrative is that the strikes were unorganised and spontaneous. This follows the argument that poverty wages were the cause of the strikes. Workers had reached the point where surviving on their wages had become impossible (du Toit, 1975) and their representations to management had been disregarded (IIE 1974, 49). When they heard other workers had won wage increases by striking, they followed suit and went on strike. *The Durban Strikes 1973* (IIE 1977, 92) draws attention to pre-existing informal networks between workers that facilitated the spread of information, news and discussion. Furthermore, it considered the effect of Wages Commission activities, the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund and the Black Consciousness movement on the workers' decision to strike, but concluded that, while they might have influenced the general climate, their activities had not been sufficiently significant to convince or organise the workers to strike (IEE 1977, 97-99). In the preface to the second impression of *The Durban Strikes 1973* published in 1977, the authors speak directly to this issue and emphasise that the informal communication and leadership networks among workers were 'probably utilised in the strike situation'. The 'organisation' of the strikes continually surfaces as an area of deep debate in the writing on the Durban strikes.

The third narrative is that these strikes were the 'start of something new' in South African labour relations. Pogrund (1973) and Kooy (1974) conclude their articles with statements to this effect, while *The Durban Strikes 1973* (1977) incorporates worker organisation and trade unions into its analysis from the beginning. It is this theme that, in time, leads to the development of a dominant discourse – that the 1973 Durban strikes are the founding moment; they birth the independent trade union movement.

The inaugural edition of the *South African Labour Bulletin* (Anon, 1974a), an initiative of the Institute for Industrial Education (as was *The Durban Strikes 1973*), republished Chapter Six (Trade Unions) of the book in its entirety. Following the strikes, many thousands of workers joined the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund – its membership reached 22,000 by June 1974 (Maree 1987, 3). The first of the new unions, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), and the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) were formed in 1973 and the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) in early 1974. *The Durban Strikes 1973* had advocated an independent and democratic trade union movement and had outlined the characteristics of such. During its early years, the *South African Labour Bulletin* sustained this vision and supported the organisation of African workers into unions. To illustrate, vol 1, no 2 presented a comprehensive report 'The problems of African unions' (Ensor 1974a, 39). This report stemmed from an Institute for Industrial Education workshop convened in October 1973. Vol 1, no 3 featured an article titled 'The problems of established trade unions' (Ensor 1974b, 17). Each subsequent issue chronicled strikes from the preceding month and progress in the development of the newly formed unions. Webster (1987, xiii), in his discussion of the early history of the *Labour Bulletin*, asserts that the *South African Labour Bulletin* was 'an important outlet for the viewpoint of these unions'. Two of the first five issues were banned. According to the Publications Control Board they were "'promoting workers' unrest" and opposition to the government's alternative to trade unions for black workers' (Webster 1987, xiii). Through these articles and others, the *South African Labour Bulletin* reinforced the narrative of the Durban strikes as an important moment in the formation of the independent union movement.

In the early writing, there is a significant silence as pertains the role of women during the strikes. In all industries, through Wage Board determinations, women's wages were lower than men's (IEE 1977, 25). Women workers constituted a significant portion of the textile labour force, with many of them being young migrants. Besides being paid less than men, they also held the lowest paid, least skilled jobs in the industry – with little chance of promotion (Berger 1992, 280). Textile workers played a very prominent role in the strikes. Nearly all the textile factories were affected by the strikes with some of those strikes among the longest in duration (IEE 1977, 29). And yet, as Berger (1992, 280-281) points out

Despite the large number of female textile workers, the detailed study of the 1973 strikes published by the Institute for Industrial Education leaves many gaps in its information about women. A list of the percentages of workers in each grade of employment contains no breakdown by sex and, more important, the sample of workers interviewed gives information on Indian women but not on their African counterparts.

It is only decades later that the part played by women in the organisation of strikes and the union movement is examined (Lichtenstein 2017b).

CELEBRATORY WRITING - THE BIRTH OF THE INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

From the mid-1970s, research and writing on labour and trade unions increased exponentially. This was, in part, the result of the Marxist-influenced critique of the dominant paradigm of liberalism, which emphasised race rather than class, but it also sprung from the resurgence in working-class organisation through the newly established trade union movements (Webster 1978, 2-3). Lively debates and discussions happened within unions, social movements and political formations. Alongside this were the development of university-based labour study courses and degrees and the flourishing of industrial sociology within the discipline of sociology (Sitas 1997a, 12-16; Sitas 1997b, 102; Webster 1985b).

While the literature on labour and trade unions during this period was vast and diverse, from debates and discussions within the *South African Labour Bulletin* to the publications emerging from the History Workshop conferences, the documentation of workers' struggles and the many student dissertations, there was little focus on the Durban strikes. Unlike other large and important strikes, such as the 1922 Rand Revolt (Hirson 1993; Simons and Simons 1983), the 1946 mineworkers strike (Moodie 1986; O'Meara 1975) or even the strike at Amato Textiles (Bonner and Lambert 1987), no further studies of the 1973 strikes were published. Instead the Durban strikes became a footnote in discussions of the 'birth' of the independent trade union movement.

With the exception of Friedman's (1987) book *Building Tomorrow Today*, the strikes hardly merited a page or two in the publications that documented the development of the trade union movement during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Baskin's

(1991) book on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) *Striking Back* discusses the Durban strikes as part of a general discussion on the growth of the independent trade union movement in the 1970s (Baskin 1991, 17-18). Similarly, Lodge (1983) references the Durban strikes when discussing developments in the 1970s, locating them as the moment at which 'post-Sharpeville quiescence ended' (Lodge 1983, 326) and 'an African trade union movement came to life once more' (Lodge 1983, 328).²

Building Tomorrow Today (Friedman 1987) focuses on the 'new' trade unions until the launch of COSATU with a chapter dedicated to the 1973 strikes. While following closely the account in *The Durban Strikes 1973*, the chapter extends the discussion to document the development of the workers' movement in the years immediately after the strikes. Confirming the forecasts of the earlier writings that the landscape of labour relations would be forever altered (see Kooy 1974; Poggrund 1973), the chapter investigates worker responses to amendments to the Black Labour Relations Regulation Act and the effect on the work environment (Friedman 1987, 53-59), as well as the embryonic emergence of the independent unions (Friedman 1987, 59-60). Subsequent chapters, such as 'Birth of a Strategy, 1974 and After' (Friedman 1987, 86-111) and 'The Darkness Is the Dawn: The Unions 1976 and After' (Friedman 1987, 112-148) concentrate on the growth of the new union movements, describing the strategy of organising and setting out the gains and losses of the emerging unions during this time.

Friedman (1987, 68) effectively supplements his analysis through oral interviews³ conducted with some of the key players, both in Durban and nationally, thereby enriching insights into the organising strategy of the new unions. This demonstrates the relationship (in Durban) between the strikes and the subsequent organisation of workers into the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund and then into the 'new' independent unions. However, little is added to what we already know about the strikes themselves (as outlined in *The Durban Strikes 1973*). The study (Friedman 1987, 60) casts wage committee activists as key agents and leaders in creating the new union movement.

For a year after the strikes, this new movement continued to grow – it reached its zenith early in 1974, when Frame workers struck again and

Halton Cheadle, one of the new breed of ex-Wages Commission activists, led a march of thousands of strikers from the back of a truck, so fulfilling the romantic fantasies which lay deep in the heart of every student activist.

Many of the themes associated with the initial writing on the Durban strikes became consolidated and entrenched through the writing of this time. The narrative of the Durban strikes as the ground zero of the independent trade union movement was firmly established as arguments demonstrated the almost seamless movement from the militancy of the strikes to joining the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund and launching new trade unions. Into this story are woven regional variations in the development of the independent unions, as well as the setbacks and the triumphs (Baskin 1991, 18-19; Friedman 1987, 86-148). Nevertheless, while on the one hand this narrative became entrenched, on the other hand other narratives became increasingly contested.

Hemson⁴ (1978, 23), in an article published in the late 1970s, drawing on his first-hand experience as a member of Wages Commission and then a union organiser in the early 1970s, argues that it was not solely the activists' leadership that resulted in the mobilisation of workers into trade unions. He notes that, without the 'support of the organic leadership in factories', the independent trade unions would not have succeeded in mobilising workers. Hemson (1978, 22) points to underground networks linked to activists of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the many ways in which workers ensured that their demands reached management, including demands pinned to notice boards, 'round robins', petitions and secret strike committees (1978, 23). Old political and union-based networks existed among workers, with SACTU unions having been strongest in Natal: '[D]ecisions on strike action [were] taken among workers, and leadership comes into being through groupings in production' (Hemson 1978, 23; see also von Holdt 1993, 27).

Unlike the early writing of the 1973 strikes and subsequent worker mobilisation, which downplay the influence of SACTU activists, writings from this period attribute greater significance to the role. Additional research (see Bonnin 1999, Webster 1985a) into union organisation during this period corroborates the existence and role of these underground networks. This challenges the argument that the Durban strikes were entirely 'spontaneous' and 'unorganised'.

Webster (1985a, 131-132) argues that while *The Durban Strikes 1973* might have interrogated the notion of the spontaneous strike, they left 'the actual dynamics of conflict in particular factories unexplained'. Webster (1985a, 132) maintains that it is possible to identify 'influences and networks of communication that began before the strike in 1972 and came together after the strike to form trade unions'. He identifies three as key: the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund, the Wages Commission, and the regrouping of SACTU trade union activists. Baskin (1991, 20) and Bonnín et al (1996, 154-160) also indicate the involvement of SACTU and ANC activists, some recently released from Robben Island, in rebuilding the union movement. Furthermore, they argue that workers' prior involvement with SACTU unions significantly predisposed them to join the Benefit Fund. In addition, these workers actively advocated the establishment of unions and played a pivotal role in recruitment.

In her research on the Sarmcol strike, Bonnín (1999) advises that the workers referred to these networks, the links between the informal worker leadership in the factory and SACTU organiser Harry Gwala. In the early 1970s, Gwala, recently released from Robben Island, used to visit the factory and confer with Zondi⁵ and others under the trees. Likewise, Omar Badsha, an organiser for MAWU at the time, recounted how people like Zondi (from Sarmcol) and others (from Alcan and Scottish Cables) used to bring the membership cards and subs of those they had signed up to the union office (Bonnín 1999, 53).

Sambureni (1997, 232) identified similar dynamics using the oral interviews he had conducted with some of the workers who had participated in the strikes:

There were at least two kinds of leaders: the informal group leaders who defended the wages of workers against management action, were established figures, and shaded into the new union leadership, and the small cluster of ex-ANC, SACP and SACTU leaders who met on the basis of friendship and shared interests.

What then became a matter of debate within the literature was the relative importance or influence of each of these groups.

Sithole and Ndlovu's (2006) discussion of the 1973 strikes and the period thereafter suggests extensive involvement of SACTU underground activists in the creation of a fertile environment for the workers' action and in the unions that emerged thereafter in Natal and other provinces (in contrast to Davie (2007, 2015) who emphasises the role of the Wages Commission). Their discussion of the role of SACTU activists in the revival of unions in the early 1970s (214-220) implicitly challenges the narrative that placed Harriet Bolton and Wages Commission activists at the forefront. Sithole and Ndlovu's (2006) analysis supports that of Luckhardt and Wall (1980, 453) who had taken issue with the assertion in much of the literature that the 1973 strikes were unorganised. Luckhardt and Wall (1980, 453) maintain that the strikes, while spontaneous, could not be unorganised, as it would have been impossible for a rolling mass strike 'if workers [did not have] their own underground organization that made decisions ...'. These interventions directly challenged the narrative that the 1973 Durban strikes were spontaneous and unorganised, with much of the groundwork that sparked the strikes being done by Wages Commission activists. First published in 1980, Luckhardt and Wall had not provided much evidence to substantiate their claims. Writing more than 15 years later, when the risk of exposure was no longer a concern, Sithole and Ndlovu (2006) set out in greater detail the role and strategies of these activists.

There are few studies that consider the agency of workers themselves both in participating in the strikes and in later joining the trade union movement. Besides being paid extremely low wages, black workers were dehumanised by employers. As Sitas' 'grassroots sociology' (2010, 69) of the trade union movement illustrates: workers joined trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s because of the 'terrible wages', because they were 'treated like dogs' and, using Zulu imagery, because they needed a 'shield' (Sitas 2010, 73).

This dehumanisation was what workers found unacceptable and what drove them onto the streets in 1973 and later into the union movement (Bonnin 1987, 109-121; Sitas 1996). The 'narratives of grievance' (see Bonnin 1987, Sitas 1996, 225) were passed from senior workers to those starting their working life. In this way, they became part of popular memory, whether directly experienced or not. And so when the call came, many workers answered, even if in a variety of ways (see Sitas 2010, 84-85).

‘Somebody started a song,’ Martha Sithole, a textile worker from Durban’s mills remembered, ‘and then everything happened’... Sithole switched off her loom in January 1973 and joined the thousands of other women who streamed into the yard. The ‘surge’ was imitated by the women in the mill next door; this in turn spread to the mill further down the road.

These stories that emerged from other research (see Bonnin 1999; Hemson 1978; Khwela 1993; Sambureni 1995, 1997; Sitas, 1996, 2010; von Holdt 1993) demonstrate that the narrative of the Durban strikes was not singular. Neither was it a binary narrative – organised vs spontaneous. Furthermore, while there was something new in the structure and purpose of the unions that emerged after 1973, their emergence was facilitated by continuities of organisation and memory.

WRITING WITH HINDSIGHT

More recently there has been revived interest in the 1970s and a revisiting of the 1973 strikes. The debates that have dogged the literature are once more being addressed. One strand of writing, often using new archival records and memoir, has concentrated on developing more nuanced insights about the independent union movement in the 1970s (eg Buhlungu 2012; Davie 2007, 2015; Lichtenstein 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Moss 2014). A second strand of work has re-examined the place of the 1970s in the history of struggle, protest and organisation, with the 1973 strikes fitting neatly into these larger projects (Brown 2010, 2016; Macqueen 2018).

Lichtenstein’s research (2015, 2017a, 2017b) revisits the start of union organisation in Durban following the 1973 strikes. He argues that while there were a variety of actors assisting workers in the early 1970s, the strikes themselves were ‘a genuine “spontaneous upheaval” from below, driven by nothing more than the desperate circumstances in which many black workers found themselves’ (Lichtenstein 2015, 116). He thus sharply disagrees with those arguing that the strikes were less about ‘spontaneity’ and more about ‘organisation’ – whether that organisation derived from SACTU or student activists. He locates the cause of the strike ‘within structural features of South African working-class life and racial capitalism during the 1970s’ (Lichtenstein 2015, 117). Furthermore, he suggests that changes to the work environment – by this he means increased capital concentration and bigger plants with larger semi-skilled workforces – had increased workers’ bargaining power. Thus, when the first group

of workers at Coronation went on strike in response to their intolerable economic situation, the other factories followed, with management doing their best to contain the strikes and get workers back to work.

Almost all the writing on the Durban strikes has agreed that the immediate cause of the strikes was the 'poverty wages' paid to workers and the absolute refusal of management to respond to requests to increase the wages. Lichtenstein (2015, 2017a) adds a new dimension to the discussion by reflecting on the way in which the economy had changed over the previous decade and the implications for work and the 'kind' of worker needed, and how this shifted the power balance between management and worker. However, I would suggest that this argument, located in the economic, needs to be married with the organisational so that it is possible to understand how workers came to know that the bargaining scales had moved, ever so slightly, in their favour. What were the networks, meetings, ideas, 'knowledge creep' (Webster 1992, 89) that were also part of this process?

Lichtenstein's research (2015, 2017a, 2017b) adds richness and detail to our knowledge of union organisation following the 1973 strikes. His exploration of 'Works Committees' (2017a) highlights the multifaceted engagement of various actors, showcasing the determination and agency of black workers in their union-building efforts. Notably, Lichtenstein's work begins to address the earlier silence around gender. He brings to light the pivotal role played by women in these early struggles, shedding light on the challenges they faced, the price they paid for their involvement in the new unions and their battles against both male workers and patriarchy within the union – a silence in the earlier writing (Lichtenstein 2015, 2017b).

Davie (2007; 2015) revisited the Durban strikes as part of a larger project examining the way in which statistics and other economic data have been used (Davie 2015, 5)

to speak back to employers, to white society, to the apartheid state, and to international organizations ... [thus enabling] ... activists and organizers to make political claims and to legitimate contentious protest campaigns.

Some have argued that the historical accounts give too much attention to 'white students' (Sithole and Ndlovu 2010, 241). While acknowledging that the 'contributions

of black intellectuals are underrepresented in the written records of this period' (Davie 2015, 195), Davie (2007, 413) nevertheless maintains that Wages Commission students made significant contributions and she takes issue with earlier studies⁶ that 'downplay(ed) the extent to which white university students may have prepared the ground for the strikes' (2007, 403). In this way, her writing speaks to the debates around organisation and the part played by the various actors.

Outlining the work of Wages Commission⁷ students, Davie demonstrates the broad reach of their campaigns, and the way in which their endeavours affected the organisational milieu in Durban. These campaigns encompassed a range of activities that included publicising the poverty datum line (PDL) among both workers and the wider public as well as organising a well-attended meeting at Bolton Hall;⁸ researching wages in specific industries, disseminating the results and then mobilising workers to attend and participate in Wage Board Meetings; launching a newspaper for workers named *Isisebenzi*; and collaborating with trade union leaders such as Harriet Bolton to establish the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (see Davie 2007, 412; 2015, 186).

In that moment, ie in 1972, it was unclear what might be achieved by the work of Wages Commission activists. Many of their representations to Wages Boards were unsuccessful. However, Davie argues that by the time the Coronation Brick workers went out on strike in January 1973, these students had helped to popularise the idea of the PDL. Through their work, the claim that workers were living below the poverty datum line had become part of public discourse (Davie 2015, 193). She maintains that, while it is indeed true that the students did not organise the strikes, 'nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the Wages Commissions had significantly altered the dynamic between workers and employers' (Davie 2007, 418).

Macqueen (2018) also turns his attention to the 1973 strikes in his study of the Black Consciousness movement and its engagement with other intellectual ideas in the 1970s. He discusses the strikes in the broader context of the Durban moment and the development of key ideas that influenced popular movements. Drawing extensively from Davie's arguments, Macqueen (2018, 124) demonstrates the contributions made by Wages Commission members to the moment of the Durban strikes. He argues this was implicitly a challenge of white society and the 'exploitative labour policies of Durban companies' (2018, 122). In addition, an inexperienced group of students were

able to link up with an older network of trade unionists who could 'educate' them on union work and facilitate their integration into the organisational space. Macqueen suggests that the significance of the Durban strikes was that they allowed workers to take back some of their control from management and set the stage for new militancy from workers (2016, 124-1215).

In his book *The Road to Soweto*, Brown (2016) examines the forms of politics and protest that preceded the Soweto Uprising in 1976. His objective is to counter what he posits as the dominant discourse – an assertion that the Soweto Uprising emerged from a period of political stagnation (Brown 2016, 3). The Durban strikes, where thousands of workers gathered in the streets of Durban, took place just three years before the Soweto Uprising; this stands as a moment that challenges this narrative of quiescence. Brown (2010, 2016) offers an in-depth account of the strikes, their nature and progression from the initial strike at Coronation Brick in January to the end of March 1973. He contends that the acceptance by the media, employers and the state that the strikes were triggered by the poverty wages paid by employers and were not the work of 'political agitators' serves to depoliticise the strikes. In other words, the strikes had not 'been caused by the discontent with the government's policies or practices' (Brown 2016, 97). Consequently, agency was removed from the workers; their actions were deemed 'reactive' in this desperate situation, outside of their control and apolitical (2016, 97). Thus, the onus was placed on employers, rather than the state, to address the immediate crisis (and resolve the strike).

Those writing at the moment of the strikes saw them as the start of something new, as opening up a space for labour organisation. Brown (2016, 105) however claims that it 'also served [at the time] to sever workers' strikes from the broader politics of protest and dissent in the period'. And yet, upon reflection, 40 years later, it can be seen this was not the case. The strikes, he says, were not pre-political; rather 'they were founded on [workers] abilities to reflect on their own experiences ... experiences of material deprivation in the context of a wealthy white economy – and to then translate those reflections into localised calls for action' (Brown 2016, 105). Brown (2016, 105) concludes by pointing out that while, in time, this space for labour organisation became a site for the development of politics and resistance against the state, 'in the early 1970s ... this was still the future'.

Brown's (2016) argument that the strikes and the period of labour organisation that followed were 'not political' or 'pre-political' speaks to the debate that the strikes were unorganised and spontaneous. The early literature (Boulanger 1974; du Toit 1975; Ginwala 1974; IIE 1974) attributes the immediate cause of the strikes to poverty wages. This exploitative wage system was then located within a broader labour market and political economy based on cheap labour. Moreover, the actors involved, whether SACTU activists, Wages Committee members, unionists or workers, argued for the transformation of workplace labour relations. It is somewhat challenging to embrace an argument suggesting that the workers' actions in this period were pre-political.

As Lichtenstein's research on the building of the union movement shows, this was very much political and neither the state nor companies took this lightly. He notes ((2015, 128):

Nxasana ... [a former SACTU activist who had worked at Frame and subsequently became part of the IIE] ... pointed to the use of black personnel officers, mandated liaison committees to dampen union organisation, the victimisation of trade unionists and even active members of works committees, and constant threats of police harassment as persistent obstacles to organisation. In Natal alone, in 1975 the security police detained more than a dozen trade unionists (including Nxasana), and between 1974 and 1976 many others were banned. The National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), one of the most vibrant new unions to spring from the strike wave, was especially hard hit by bannings and retrenchments. Only 16 per cent of the union's first executive committee survived in their jobs. Black workers who had joined in 1973 and built the union from inside the textile plants proved vulnerable to direct state repression as well; two of NUTW's leading African organisers, June-Rose Nala and Obed Zuma, were detained in solitary confinement for seven months during 1976.

CONCLUSION

The IIE publication *The Durban Strikes 1973* stands as the gold standard for research on the strikes. Fifty years later, most, if not all, subsequent writing that references the strikes draws upon this text for their primary narrative.

The issues highlighted at the time have continued to be central points of debate. The primary narratives linked to the writing of the 1973 Durban strikes were established within the initial writings on the strike. These narratives are: (i) the strikes were as a result of wages significantly below the breadline; (ii) the strikes occurred spontaneously and were not organised in any formal way; (iii) the strikes gave birth to the independent trade union movement.

However, subsequent literature has demonstrated that these narratives are not singular; they are contested and laden with politics. Imbued within them are diverse political positions – workerist, vanguardist, nationalist. Given the inherently political nature of the times, this complexity is unsurprising. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the positionality of the authors. Often their (unacknowledged) positionality is reflected in their writing of the 1973 Durban strikes and the subsequent struggles to build the independent union movement.

NOTES

1. Webster, Eddie, ed. 1978. *Essays in Southern African Labour History*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press. and Maree, Johann, ed. 1987. *The Independent Trade Unions 1974-1984. Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
2. Two other short articles should be mentioned. Wood (1992) gave an account of the strikes and the subsequent development of the independent trade union movement. Khwela's (1993) discussion of the strikes was published in the *Labour Bulletin* to mark the 20th anniversary of the 1973 strikes. Both of these articles utilised existing secondary literature.
3. This is one of the only studies to do so.
4. According to the *Capital and Class* citation, the author of this study is Henson, a typo, it should be Hemson.
5. Lawrence Zondi was a worker at BTR Sarmcol, the Howick rubber factory. He had been an active member of the SACTU affiliated union at the factory in the 1950s and early 1960s. He emerged as one of the worker leaders at the factory in the early 1970s.
6. Among the texts mentioned by Davie (2007, 403) are Baskin (1991), Webster (1985) and Luckhardt and Wall (1980).
7. In March 1971, a Wages Commission (as part of the National Union of South African Students, NUSAS) was established at the University of Natal (Durban), thereafter being launched on other university campuses.
8. The meeting was organised in June 1971 at Bolton Hall (home of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union). Harriet Bolton, general secretary of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union had agreed it could be used for the meeting. The meeting was attended by about 400 people; they discussed minimum wages as set by Wage Boards, the PDL and how these minimum wages were far below the PDL.

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