

# Commemorating the 1973 Durban Strikes: 50 years on

**DEBBY BONNIN, uMBUSO weNKOSI  
AND ARI SITAS**

---

This Special Issue of *Transformation* commemorates the 50th Anniversary of the 1973 Durban Strikes. The papers are drawn from a conference held at the Durban University of Technology in January 2023. Initiated by Omar Badsha, the conference (as discussed in the piece by Bianca Tame) was organised by a small group of labour sociologists, historians and activists – Omar Badsha (South Africa History Online), Sithembiso Bhengu (Chris Hani Institute), Debby Bonnin (University of Pretoria), Musawenkosi Malabela (Chris Hani Institute), Monique Marks (Durban University of Technology), Noor Niefertgodien (University of Witwatersrand), Ari Sitas (University of Cape Town), Nicole Ulrich (University of Fort Hare) and the late Eddie Webster (University of Witwatersrand).

The three-day conference was attended by academics, trade unionists and labour activists from South Africa and abroad. The 34 papers presented spanned a wide range of themes from across five decades: from the strikes themselves to the cultural activism of the 1980s; from worker-student alliances to the transition and trade union investment companies; from the politics of the past to the burden of the future.

While the conference papers addressed the last 50 years, the papers in this collection explicitly focus on the Durban strikes themselves. We decided that at a time when the trade union movement is in crisis, when its purpose is questioned, a focus on this moment was necessary (Kenny 2020; Tshoaedi et al 2023). Partly, it is nostalgia – recognising the need to commemorate a time on the cusp of possibility. Yet, the focus on this moment is also an opportunity to take stock and ask what can be learnt from the past.

It was this desire to learn from the past and bring it into a conversation with the present that lay behind the conceptualisation of the conference panel discussion. The intergenerational discussion ‘Trade Unionism in My Time’ brings together trade unionists from the 1970s to the present. Each of the panellists were asked to reflect on their time in the union movement, how trade unions were organised, the difficulties they faced and the challenges of the present. The edited version of this discussion provides a unique historical record and an implicit critique of the current weaknesses.

In a similar vein, Bianca Tame sets out the debates of the conference: issues that speak directly to the 1973 strikes but that also resonate for the labour movement today. Debby Bonnin’s paper analyses the archive of research and writing on the Durban strikes. She concludes by arguing that 50 years later, the Institute for Industrial Education publication *The Durban Strikes* remains the seminal research on the strikes.

Both Gerhard Maré and Alex Lichtenstein focus on the iconic text *The Durban Strikes 1973 ‘Human Beings with Souls’*. Gerhard revisits the writing of the text, providing context and nuance that could not be included in the original. He concludes by asking (and answering) the question: ‘What do we want from such reminders of things past, in this case events that took place half a century ago?’ His answer firmly links the lessons of the strike – organisation, the vision of the future that informed the actors of that time – to the need to consider the way we should be thinking through our ‘collective responsibility’ to solve the problems of the present. Alex’s article directly engages Chapters 5 and 6 of the book. These are the “theoretical” chapters on workplace “authority and legitimacy” (Chapter 5) and on the precise role and function of trade unions (Chapter 6). He engages with the intellectual groundings of the analysis presented in the book and offers new insights into the thinking and politics of the small group associated with the writing of *The Durban Strikes*.

David Hemson's article 'Striking Against the "Wrongful Heirs": Shenge and the Stevedores' takes us back to the period immediately before the 1973 strikes. In examining the 'hybrid' systems of management that black workers were subjected to, and the intricacy of power relations opposing the organisation of black workers, whether on the docks or the factory floor, David's article illuminates a number of the arguments made by Alex. However, David goes further and brings to light new and important historical evidence regarding Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi's relationship to the emerging labour movement of the early 1970s.

The final article is uMbuso weNkosi's '1973: Manichean Society and Neo-Apartheid'. In this article, Mbuso is explicitly forward looking, locating the 'inception of neo-apartheid in the gains and losses which came as a result of the 1973 strikes'. Mbuso is interested in interrogating our understanding of 'society'. He asks if we, as labour scholars, can imagine a different future, if we do not deeply question our notion of 'South African society'.

The special issue also includes reviews of a number of significant, newly published books on work and the labour movement in South Africa. These include *Recasting Workers' Power* by Edward Webster with Lynford Dor; *Labour Struggles in Southern Africa, 1919–1949. New Perspectives on the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union* edited by David Johnson, Noor Nieftagodien and Lucien van der Walt; *Organise and Act. The Natal Workers' Theatre Movement* by Astrid von Kotze; and a review essay focusing on the four books published under the Jacana Hidden History Series (a project of Eddie Webster).

We would like to thank the editors of *Transformation* for their engagement and support, the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria for funding that enabled the Special Issue, and the two reviewers of the papers for their helpful feedback. While not among the editors of this special issue (due to his wanting to focus on finishing his book *Recasting Workers' Power*) the late Eddie Webster played a behind-the-scenes role in providing encouragement and support. His last email in early February carried his congratulations: 'great news that all these publications [arising from the conference] are in the press. [I am sorry mine is not there] as they were committed elsewhere'. Where Eddie? We are sorry too. Thus, it would be

remiss of us if we did not comment on Eddie Webster's passing in this special issue of *Transformation* focusing on the 1973 Durban strikes.

Eddie Webster was 33 years old when he started at Wits 48 years ago – a career that spanned the tentative beginnings of an Industrial Sociology to the challenging contemporary period, where South African Labour Studies is an internationally recognised field of study. During those nearly five decades Eddie had the privilege of teaching more than 10 000 undergraduate students and more than 400 graduate students. And he did this in the midst of a profound insurrectionary period and a decisive democratic breakthrough.

When he started at Wits, he was young, energetic and fresh from Durban, the epicentre of black worker struggles and radical organisation. He started at Wits during 1976, the year of the grand insurrection: the Soweto Moment. If the Durban strikes of 1973 made Industrial Sociology necessary, Soweto 1976 made the transition unavoidable and, by implication, public sociology a social fact. He arrived at Wits with a load, a legacy and a mission.

The load: the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) trial loomed heavy on his career. He was being accused by the state, together with Glen Moss, Cedric de Beer, Charles Nupen and Karel Tip, not only of furthering revolutionary aims but also of harbouring revolutionary *ideas* (Moss 2014, 221).

The legacy: starting from the Durban strikes and the formation of so-called independent and democratic industrial unions based on shop-steward structures, the priority among a cohort of academics that included Eddie was to struggle for their recognition as the legitimate representatives of workers by management and by the apartheid state.

What was achieved in Durban was achieved by important but harassed and marginal figures: the Durban moment at Natal University had its undoubted inspirational figure in Rick Turner, a political philosopher, a libertarian socialist who saw in the black working class the agency for social and democratic transformation. But the intellectual and organisational ferment of the time was not restricted to what was happening on the university campus. Around Durban there were a number of important spaces

of engagement and dialogue – these included the Phoenix Settlement (just north of Durban), the Alan Taylor residence (in Wentworth), the newly established University of Durban-Westville, Bolton Hall in Gale Street, the Beatrice Street complex, where the South African Student Organisation (SASO), the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) had offices, and Red Acres Farm (near Howick). It was here, in these spaces, that the key political figures and intellectuals of the time – Steve Biko, Fatima and Ismail Meer, Mewa Ramgobin, Ela Ghandi, Mafika Gwala, Omar Badsha, Strini Moodley, Harold Nxasana, Dilly Naidoo, George Sewpersadh and others – met, and across politics and ideology exchanged ideas and debated the issues of the day (Keniston 2013, Lambert 2010, Macqueen 2018, Vahed and Desai 2014, Webster 1993).

Turner and his protégés threw themselves into the organisation of black workers after the Durban strikes and established educational support systems such as the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE). One such protégé was a youthful Eddie Webster who joined the fray with some aplomb and through those heady years helped establish the *South African Labour Bulletin*. The journal’s importance needs no comment and its endurance is not unrelated to a Websterian tenacity.

The mission: to establish an academic curriculum at Wits, responsive to the needs of an emerging trade union movement and to the winds of change everywhere in the country. The fact that Eddie Webster was acquitted (from the charges under the Suppression of Communism and Unlawful Organisations Act) so that he could continue establishing an Industrial Sociology major at Wits was of great consequence.

What was invigorating in the first years of the new curriculum, for example, was the idea of direct democracy: trade unions accountable to their members, shop-stewards accountable to their shop floors. Furthermore, the idea of workers’ control of production, distribution and exchange that was gaining ground. What fascinated further was the possibility of a non-hierarchical world of work and non-bureaucratic apparatuses of governance.

Fifty years on, the celebration of the Durban strikes in Durban was a great moment of recognition for his work and effort to establish a vigorous labour studies tradition. His passing away on March 5, 2024 has inaugurated a process of deep appreciation

and commentary. The South African Sociological Association is planning a special issue on his intellectual contribution; Wits had already put together a series of major memorial talks a day after his funeral; and the Research Committee 44 of the International Sociological Association is gathering material for a special tribute.

We would like to dedicate the pages that follow to his memory.

**Editor's note:** It is with deep respect and gratitude that we present David Hemson's latest article. Due to personal circumstances, David is no longer able to participate in public debates or discussions related to his work, including this piece. His brother, Crispin Hemson, has kindly assisted in ensuring that this article meets David's high standards and wishes for its publication. While David may not be able to respond directly to any commentary, we hope that his work continues to inspire critical thought and meaningful engagement.

## REFERENCES

- Institute for Industrial Education. 1977 [1974]. *The Durban Strikes 1973 'Human Beings with Souls'* (2nd impression). Durban: The Institute for Industrial Education.
- Keniston, Billy. 2013. *Choosing to be Free. The Life Story of Rick Turner*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media.
- Kenny, Bridget. 2020. "The South African labour movement: A fragmented and shifting terrain." *Tempo Social* 32: 119-136. <https://doi.org/10.11606/0103-2070.ts.2020.166288>.
- Lambert, Rob. 2010. "Eddie Webster, the Durban moment and new labour internationalism." *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 72/73: 26-47. <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.0.0066>.
- Macqueen, Ian. 2018. *Black Consciousness and the Progressive Movements Under Apartheid*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Moss, Glenn. 2014. *The New Radicals: A generational memoir of the 1970s*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media.
- Tshoamedi, Malehoko, Christine Bischoff, and Andries Bezuidenhout, eds. 2023. *Labour disrupted: reflections on the future of work in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Vahed, Goolam and Ashwin Desai. 2014. "A case of 'strategic ethnicity'? The Natal Indian Congress in the 1970s." *African Historical Review* 46(1): 22-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17532523.2014.911436>
- Webster, Eddie. 1993. "Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction: Richard Turner and Radical Reform." *Theoria* 81/82: 1-13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41801980>.