

‘For our self-sufficiency and autonomy’: International Worker Solidarity and the Global Networks of FOSATU in the Democratic Struggle in South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the place of the trade union movement in the democratisation project in South Africa. While scholarship exists which shows the role of the labour movement in the ending of apartheid, the focus tends to emphasise what has been called political or social movement unionism. However, one labour centre, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), pursuing a workerist approach to its trade unionism, created and extended tentacles of democracy during apartheid, outside the ambit and influence of political parties and the nationalist movement. FOSATU also created global networks and outreach in search of international worker solidarity. That solidarity was imperative for FOSATU’s self-sufficiency and autonomy as well as that of the broader anti-apartheid movement. The article argues that FOSATU broadened the platforms of the democratic struggle in South Africa beyond the nation-state boundary. In doing so, it contributes to the historiographies of the trade union movement, the struggle for democracy in South Africa and the transnational turn in the South African labour movement. The study uses the minutes and reports of FOSATU’s national executive, its central committee meetings and also news reports from the FOSATU *Worker News*, all of which are housed at Wits University’s William Cullen Library, in the Historical Papers section.

Key words: FOSATU; international solidarity; trade unionism; democratic struggle; South Africa.

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Opsomming

Hierdie artikel stel ondersoek in na die plek van die vakbondbeweging in Suid-Afrika se demokratiseringsprojek. Alhoewel daar navorsing is wat wys op die rol van vakbondbeweging in die beëindiging van apartheid, val die klem oor die algemeen op dit wat politiese- en sosiale vakbondaktiwisme genoem word. In teenstelling daarmee het een vakbond, die Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), wat 'n werker-gesentreerde benadering tot sy praktyk gevolg het, die drade van demokrasie tydens die apartheidjare geskep en uitgebou, weg van die invloed sfeer van politieke partye en die nasionalistiese beweging. FOSATU het ook 'n globale netwerk en teenwoordigheid geskep in sy soektog na internasionale werkersolidariteit. Daardie solidariteit was van kritiese belang vir FOSATU se self-onderhoudendheid en onafhanklikheid, sowel as vir die breër anti-apartheidsbeweging. Die artikel voer aan dat FOSATU die platform vir die demokratiese stryd in Suid-Afrika verbreed het, en dit daardeur wyer laat strek het as die grense van die nasie-staat. Dit lewer 'n bydrae tot die historiografie van die vakbondbeweging, die stryd om demokrasie in Suid-Afrika en die transnasionale wending in die Suid-Afrikaanse vakbondbeweging. Die studie maak gebruik van die notules en verslae van FOSATU se nasionale uitvoerende komitee, sy sentrale komitee se vergaderings, sowel as nuusberigte uit FOSATU se *Worker News*, wat by die Universiteit van die Witwatersrand se William Cullen biblioteek se historiese manuskripte-afdeling gehuisves word.

Sleutelwoorde: FOSATU; internasionale solidariteit; vakbonde; demokratiese stryd; Suid-Afrika.

Introduction

Black trade unions in Africa broadly, and those in South Africa in particular, have a long history of involvement in the struggle for democracy.¹ One view traces this participation back to the introduction of wage labour in South Africa in 1919, when the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), the first recorded representative organisation of black workers, was formed.² Another perspective suggests that the origins of labour movements in the continent are rooted in the anti-

1. This research is generously funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation under Grant and Project No. 05/DE/19 for the project on 'Southern African Democracy and the Utopia of a Rainbow Nation.'

2. Wits University Library, Historical Papers (hereafter WULHP), FOSATU Records Collection, AH 1999/C.1.1.1.2, 'FOSATU History: An Introduction to FOSATU', June 1983.

colonial movements, which were essentially a fight for democracy.³ Both views acknowledge that organised workers were an important and effective social force in advocating independence and the transformation of the status quo. Despite this being the case, Edward Webster remarks that ‘trade unions, while being important actors, usually played the role of junior partners to political parties, without developing an autonomous social agenda outside and beyond the struggle for political independence’.⁴ This view, to some considerable degree, holds in the case of trade unions in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Botswana, for example, where nationalist political parties submerged them. However, in the case of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) this view is contested. Between 1979 and 1985 in apartheid South Africa, trade unions could be, and indeed were, autonomous organisations that set their own social agenda without the overbearing influence of nationalist movements. Furthermore, organised labour pushed for the attainment of democracy in multiple ways other than through the orthodox political struggle or by politicising trade unionism.

In this regard, trade unions exhibited the force of a social movement in bringing a new socio-economic and political order into being. Indeed, this social endeavour is proof that ‘the power of labour does not only lie in its strategic location in the workplace and its capacity to mobilise and organise, but also in the power of ideas and its ability to present ideas’ that counteract systems and policies that hamper the attainment of democracy and enjoyment of civil liberties.⁵ As Jon Kraus has argued, while trade unions worked with liberation movements, they ‘also demanded political autonomy for their unions. Explicitly or implicitly, this raised a persistent demand for democratic and civic space for the exercise of trade union (and democratic) rights.’⁶ This article uses FOSATU’s experience to buttress this point. It details the approach that FOSATU adopted to advance the democratic cause outside the influence and control of political parties.

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3. See H. Jauch, ‘Trade Unions in Southern Africa’, Paper presented to: ‘Futures for Southern Africa’, Symposium organised jointly by the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR/ICD), the Southern African Catholic Bishop’s Conference (SACBC), the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) and the Institute for Commonwealth Studies (ICS), in Namibia, September 2003. See also E. Webster, ‘Trade Unions and Political Parties in Africa: New Alliances, Strategies and Partnerships’, *International Trade Union Cooperation, Briefing Papers*, No. 3 (2007).
 4. Webster, ‘Trade Unions and Political Parties in Africa’.
 5. Webster, ‘Trade Unions and Political Parties in Africa’.
 6. J. Kraus, ‘Trade Unions in Africa’s Democratic Renewal and Transitions: An Introduction’, in *Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa*, ed. J. Kraus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

Trade Unions in the South African Setting

In South Africa, the role of trade unions in the fight against the apartheid system has been investigated extensively by a range of writers including workers' representatives.⁷ In his autobiography, *Solidarity Road: The Story of a Trade Union in the Ending of Apartheid*, for example, a former General Secretary of the organisation, Jan Theron, showed how a predominantly black workers' trade union, the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) played an important role the anti-apartheid struggle.⁸ In addition to FCWU, other federations such as the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), FOSATU, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) were also visible in the anti-apartheid struggle. Apart from FOSATU, all the other unions established some alliances or working arrangements with the nationalist movements. The involvement of SACTU in political unionism was also examined, showing how its approach of 'political unionism' also became its downfall.⁹

Political unionism entailed a fusion of orthodox workers' struggle with national politics, challenging apartheid policies as they affected the wider African population. This strategy resulted in SACTU forming an alliance with the Congress Alliance, that is, the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the 1950s.¹⁰ Meanwhile, COSATU's role is also well documented in the literature.¹¹ It formed the core of the civic organisation, the United Democratic Front (UDF), which emerged in the 1980s to lead the popular mass struggle.¹² Like SACTU, COSATU also practised a kind of political unionism and forged alliances with the ANC and the SACP.¹³ These unions adopted the principle of non-racialism in their organising

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7. N. Ulrich, 'The Wheel is Turning: Fighting Apartheid with Workers' Democracy, 1950-1990', in *If Not Us, Who?: Workers Worldwide against Authoritarianism, Fascism and Dictatorship*, ed. D. Azzellini (Hamburg: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2021), 82-88.
 8. J. Theron, *Solidarity Road: The Story of a Trade Union in the Ending of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2016).
 9. R. Lambert and E. Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa?', in *Popular Struggles in South Africa*, eds W. Cobbett and R. Cohen (London: James Currey, 1988), 21.
 10. Lambert and Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism?'. See also S. Buhlungu and E. Webster: 'Workers Divided, Workers Uniting: South African Unions since 1945', in *Trade Unions: Past, Present and Future: Trade Unionism since 1945: Towards a Global History, Volume 1: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East*, eds C. Phelan and P. Lang (Auflage: Taschenbuch 2009), 387-412.
 11. M. Budeli, 'Trade Unionism and Politics in Africa: The South African Experience', *Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 45, 3 (2012), 454-481; S. Buhlungu, ed, *Trade Unions and Democracy: Cosatu Workers' Political Attitudes in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006); S. Buhlungu and M. Tsholedi, eds, *COSATU's Contested Legacy* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012).
 12. Theron, *Solidarity Road*, 269-71; 298-300.
 13. D. Pillay, 'Cosatu, Alliances and Working Class Politics', in *Trade Unions and Democracy*, ed. S. Buhlungu, 167-198.

as did FOSATU, but the latter differed in being politically non-aligned. That uniqueness warrants its own investigation which this article offers.

Examining FOSATU entails understanding the history of the labour movement in South Africa. To be sure, this history is ubiquitous.¹⁴ Focus has ranged from the evolution of unionism and its nature to the organisational tactics, principles and approaches of unions. The role of trade unions in the broader democratic struggle has received special attention from scholars who analysed what they termed ‘political or social movement unionism’, which linked shopfloor and production struggles to wider political matters.¹⁵ Our understanding of unions’ struggles was deepened by Sakhela Buhlungu and Edward Webster who surveyed the emergence of trade unions, showing as they do, the divergences and convergences in their evolution since the end of the Second World War, and the impact this had on both the trade union terrain and national politics.¹⁶

Trade union organising and its fight for democracy came under scrutiny when later scholars re-examined the structural features and approaches of the various successive trade unions to workers’ democracy, political autonomy, and organising, and how these characteristics, in turn, helped define the classification, labelling and identity of these organisations.¹⁷ FOSATU itself has been studied by several scholars, who show its history, organising approach, what it stood for and its characterisation as a workerist and syndicalist organisation.¹⁸ Its workerism (giving control of unions to workers) has also been described as being a ‘prefiguration of a democratic revolution’ in South Africa.¹⁹ Taken in its totality, this literature offers a nuanced appreciation of the role and significance of the South African labour movement in the democratic struggle during apartheid. But even then, there is a particular dimension that has been understudied and overlooked, as is articulated below.

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14. Buhlungu and Webster, ‘Workers Divided, Workers Uniting, South African Unions since 1945’; C. Ludwig, ‘Trade Union Organising during Apartheid: A Divided Labour Movement in a Divided Country’, in *Das Politische System Südafrikas*, eds D. de la Fontaine et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2017). See also essays in Part II and III in W.H. Thomas, ed., *Labour Perspectives on South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1974).
 15. Lambert and Webster, ‘The Re-emergence of Political Unionism?’, 20-41.
 16. Buhlungu and Webster, ‘Workers Divided, Workers Uniting’, 387-412.
 17. See especially, Ludwig, ‘Trade Union Organising’; and Ulrich, ‘The Wheel is Turning’, 82-88.
 18. M. Friedman, *‘The Future is in the Hands of the Workers’: A History of FOSATU* (Johannesburg: Mutloatse Heritage Trust, 2011); S. Byrne, N. Ulrich and L. van der Walt, ‘Red, Black and Gold: FOSATU, South African “Workerism”, “Syndicalism” and the Nation’, in *The Unresolved National Question in South Africa: Left Thinking under Apartheid*, eds E. Webster and K. Pampallis (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017), 251-273; and J. Foster, ‘The Workers’ Struggle: Where Does FOSATU Stand?’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 24 (1982), 99-114.
 19. S. Byrne and N. Ulrich, ‘Prefiguring Democratic Revolution? “Workers’ Control” and “Workerist” Traditions of Radical South African Labour, 1970–1985’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 34, 3 (2016), 368–387.

One of the most visible strategies adopted in fighting apartheid was through international solidarity. This culminated in the birth of what became known as the international anti-apartheid movement. Broadly defined, this referred to:

various activities and campaigns of organisations, governments and peoples in solidarity with the people of South Africa's struggle for liberation and the support they gave directly to the liberation movements and other anti-apartheid organisations within South Africa for the conduct of the struggle.²⁰

Of these activities, the often-referenced ones are sanctions and embargos, isolation and cultural and sports boycotts as well as financial support. Scholars have examined this international solidarity in various dimensions but all concur that it was by far the most significant factor that brought pressure to bear on Pretoria leading to its collapse in the early 1990s.²¹ According to Greg Houston, the international anti-apartheid movement 'drew effective international support from governments, organisations and peoples from all regions of the world, as did no other prior movement except the international campaign against slavery.'²² Indeed, this magnitude of support proved potent in the anti-apartheid struggle.

International solidarity emerged because of several factors. The international community responded to the apartheid state's mass shooting of the protesters against pass books and pass laws in 1960, in what is now known as the Sharpeville Massacre.²³ The implementation of 'grand apartheid' and continued state repression against the nationalist movements and black people increased debates at international fora, triggering ever more support for liberation movements. At the same time, South African activists were also lobbying for international assistance and solidarity. For instance, Nelson Mandela had skipped the country and toured the African continent. Meanwhile, Oliver Tambo, the ANC's president in exile, moved about in Europe and elsewhere while clergymen like Desmond Tutu appealed to other international church organisations. Alongside these organisations, trade unions were

20. G.Houston, 'Introduction: International Solidarity', in South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 3, International Solidarity, Part I* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2008), 5.

21. See the full range of essays in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 3*. See also, R. Skinner, 'The Anti-Apartheid Movement: Pressure Group Politics, International Solidarity and Transnational Activism', in *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*, eds N. Crowson et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and R. Skinner, 'The Dynamics of Anti-Apartheid: International Solidarity, Human Rights and Decolonization', in *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa: Future Imperfect?* eds A.W.M. Smith and C. Jeppesen (London: UCL Press, 2017), 111-130. See also M. Graham and C. Fevre, "'Mandela's out so Apartheid has Finished": The British Anti-Apartheid Movement and South Africa's Transition to Majority rule, 1990-1994', *Contemporary British History*, 36, 3 (2021), 323-354.

22. Houston, 'Introduction: International Solidarity', 1.

23. Skinner, 'The Dynamics of Anti-Apartheid', 116.

also involved in their own international lobbying. Literature acknowledges that the support of the international trade union movement, among others, was crucial. Among these were the International Confederation of Trade Unions; the Organisation of African Trade Unions Unity; the World Confederation of Labour; the World Federation of Trade Unions and their affiliates, as well as several independent unions.²⁴

This article advances the argument that FOSATU was central in stimulating international trade unionism's support. In what follows, the article unpacks how FOSATU forged and harnessed this solidarity. It also demonstrates that the primary objective of FOSATU in creating international synergies was for its own self-sufficiency and autonomy as a labour movement. In rebuffing and avoiding the temptation to work with political parties, FOSATU thus avoided the risk of being subordinated. This was important in its fight for workers' struggle and democracy. While this may have appeared narrowly focused, ultimately the international solidarity it generated from its international fraternity worked in tandem with other fora of international support to bring down apartheid. Moreover, such solidarity laid the base for its successor federation, COSATU, to expand its influence in the late 1980s.²⁵ In emphasising FOSATU's international solidarity networks, the paper contributes to histories of the anti-apartheid movement, as well as histories of the labour movement in South Africa and its role – as orthodox trade unions and as a social movement – to advance the democratisation project.

Noteworthy also is that South African trade unions had a long tradition of international and transnational solidarity, dating from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.²⁶ FOSATU's resort to international solidarity was, therefore, neither novel nor a stroke of genius. Rather, it was pragmatism. As Rob Lambert has highlighted, unionists active in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s 'became conscious that the apartheid state could not be brought to its knees by a narrow workplace focus, no matter how militant that focus might have been'.²⁷ Besides, globalisation revolutionised economies, especially in relation to the emergence of transnational corporations (TNCs or MNCs) which brought another reality to worker's struggles and

24. Houston, 'Introduction: International Solidarity', 6.

25. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 9.

26. R. Southall and A. Bezuidenhout, 'International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa', in *Labour and Globalisation: Results and Prospects*, ed. R. Munck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 128-148; L. van der Walt, 'The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW, and the ICU, 1904-1934', *African Studies*, 66, 2/3 (2007), 223-251; H. Dee, 'Central African Immigrants, Imperial Citizenship and the Politics of Free Movement in Interwar South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46, 2 (2020), 319-337; P. Bonner, J. Hyslop and L. van der Walt, 'Rethinking Worlds of Labour: Southern African Labour History in International Context', *African Studies*, 66, 2/3 (2007), 137-167.

27. As cited in Southall and Bezuidenhout, 'International Solidarity and Labour', 129.

mobilisation. Charles Levison, Roger Southall and Andries Bezuidenhout have also advanced the view that because MNCs subjected workers to shared exploitation, ‘... at the global level, the international labour movement [needed] a comprehensive programme of industrial action in order to advance towards full collective – and centralised – bargaining with TNCs.’²⁸ FOSATU was one those labour organisations of the 1970s and 1980s that resorted to international solidarity, yet its turn to global networks and strategising remain neglected in the literature.

Against this backdrop, this article analyses the nature of FOSATU’s international imagination, exploring how the federation sought to position itself to create networks of solidarity without subordinating the trade union movement to nationalist-inspired movements striving exclusively for political control. This in turn reflected FOSATU’s commitment to trade union democracy. In so doing, I show how FOSATU contributed to the international anti-apartheid movement. This analysis is presented in two parts. The first section provides background information and context to the formation of FOSATU and outlines its aims and objectives. The second part focuses on FOSATU’s international solidarity networks in the context of the emergence of the international anti-apartheid movement, teasing out the specifics of how it went about implementing its objectives. The discussion concludes with reflections on the ramifications of FOSATU’s international solidarity on its primary objectives and the democratic and anti-apartheid struggle.

The Evolution of FOSATU: A Brief History

Tracing the historical formation of FOSATU is imperative to understand its objectives, *modus operandi*, and its eventual turn to international solidarity. FOSATU was formed in April 1979 as a federation of independent, non-racial trade unions. During its six-year existence, ‘FOSATU organised over 120,000 workers in 11 affiliated unions, becoming the largest non-racial, independent trade union federation of its time.’²⁹ Its formation is part of a long history of struggle to organise black workers in South Africa. Black worker resistance emerged alongside the introduction of wage labour but the ‘first effective recorded organizing of black workers began in 1917 to be followed by the famous ICU in 1919.’³⁰ From then onwards, these organisations battled against both state and employer hostility to their unionisation. The first real challenge came in 1924 when the state promulgated the Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA). As Byrne and Ulrich noted, the ICA became ‘the cornerstone of South Africa’s modern industrial relations system ... [and] entrenched the rightlessness of African workers ... by excluding “pass-bearing Natives” from the

28. Southall and Bezuidenhout, ‘International Solidarity and Labour’, 129.

29. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 18.

30. WULHP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999/C.1.1.1.2, ‘FOSATU History: An Introduction to FOSATU’, June 1983.

definition of “employee”³¹. Even though they could form unions of their own, such organising was *brutum fulmen* because those unions had no recognition from employers who were not obliged to recognise the unions.

With time, a number of black workers’ organisations rose and some fell along the way. Organisations like the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) emerged and then faltered in the 1920s. The situation temporarily ‘improved’ somewhat during the Second World War. Before the war, under the auspices of the ICA, black people were barred from occupying semi-skilled or skilled jobs. But due to the high demand for labour during the war (because of rapid industrialisation and the departure of white men for the war front) black workers found themselves occupying semi-skilled and skilled positions.³² Although Africans were allowed to do these jobs, they were nevertheless paid low wages. By 1941, black workers had organised themselves under the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) whose major affiliate was the African Mineworkers Union.³³ This in part explains the 1946 African mineworkers’ strike for increased pay. The brutal response to the strike by the state showed just how repressive it could be. Although the strike was shot down ruthlessly, it had demonstrated the political strength of organised black workers in challenging the cheap labour system. This industrial job action aroused the fear of white employers, workers and politicians alike (the so-called *swart gevaar*), triggering the minority regime’s a call for tougher laws and action against Africans.

This call came to pass after 1948 when the Afrikaner-backed National Party (NP) won political power. The D.F. Malan-led government introduced hard-line apartheid which compounded the situation for black people across South Africa. Through a plethora of laws, such as the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, the ‘Immorality Act’ and the Suppression of Communism Act, all of which were passed in 1950, South Africa became a repressive, legal socio-political order, in addition to being racialised. Of these laws, the Suppression of Communism Act was often notoriously invoked to thwart any thought of organising African-led trade unions because these were deemed to be ‘communist-inspired’ forms of expression. Buhlungu and Webster advance that:

Ostensibly designed to curb the activities of members of the Communist Party, its effect was to clamp down on all forms of union organisation and to restrict the activities of key union organisers through the draconian system of banning, an order that restricted the banned person to their home and prevented from communicating with more than one person at a time.³⁴

31. Byrne and Ulrich, ‘Prefiguring Democratic Revolution?’, 369.

32. W.H. Hutt, *The Economics of the Colour Bar: A Study of the Economic Origins and Consequences of Racial Segregation in South Africa* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 82-89.

33. Buhlungu and Webster, ‘Workers Divided, Workers Uniting’, 390.

34. Buhlungu and Webster, ‘Workers Divided, Workers Uniting’, 391.

Despite the repressive laws, the 1950s actually marked a great rise in political and worker organisation with the emergence of SACTU as part of the Congress Alliance. Politically, for example, the revitalised ANC launched the Defiance Campaign in 1952, attracting huge masses including the industrial working class.

The new slew of apartheid regulations also mobilised widespread anger. There was a realignment of forces as labour aligned with the African nationalist movement to respond to the social engineering intended and imposed by the NP-led apartheid regime. The convergence culminated in the formation of SACTU in 1955 which apparently drew its support from the defunct CNETU.³⁵ Comprising mainly unregistered black unions, SACTU was, however, non-racial in its organising. This was in part a reflection of its proximity to the Congress Alliance which also adopted a similar principle the same year through the Freedom Charter. Lambert and Webster have described SACTU's organising principle as being:

political or social movement unionism ... a form of union organisation that facilitates an active engagement in factory-based, production politics and in community and state power issues ... it engages in alliances in order to establish relationships with political organisations on a systematic basis.³⁶

Noteworthy also is that orthodox unionism still existed alongside political unionism. At the same time, recognised white unions, organising under the reformed South African Trade Union Council, experimented with what were called 'parallel unions' in which they negotiated on behalf of African workers.³⁷

Severe state repression in the 1960s marked a low point in worker organisation. While the decade experienced massive economic growth underpinned by huge foreign capital inflows, accelerated industrial growth, and the influx of black workers to urban areas, it was also marked by an increase in militant African nationalism and its subsequent repression, which had begun with the protests in Sharpeville resulting in the massive shooting of protesters by the police. With the concentration of workers and industries, the potential for increased shopfloor organising and trade unionism existed, however, this potential could not materialise or be utilised because of the increased state repression against political activism and unionism.

The height of the repression was the banning of nationalist organisations and the political persecution and prosecution of their leaders. For example, Nelson Mandela and nine others were imprisoned after the Rivonia Trial in 1964. The clampdown on African political activism had ramifications for SACTU. By virtue of its

35. Lambert and Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism?', 21.

36. Lambert and Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism?', 21.

37. T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), 190.

proximity to African nationalist parties, SACTU also suffered at the hands of state repression. As Buhlungu and Webster observed:

Many union organisers were recruited by the armed wing of the ANC, uMkhonto we Sizwe, and were arrested and served long terms of imprisonment, and others were sent to the gallows. By 1964 SACTU had ceased public activities in South Africa and a few of its leaders had regrouped in exile where they actively lobbied for sanctions against South Africa. This brought to an end yet another cycle of trade union militancy and popular mobilisation that was only to re-emerge a decade later.³⁸

The burgeoning industrial working class of the 1960s later led to an upsurge in worker militancy in the 1970s. This worker militancy manifested itself in the massive wildcat strikes in early 1973 in Durban. As Byrne and Ulrich remarked, ‘the collective, and mass character of the strikes – all the more remarkable given the extremely repressive era of high apartheid in which they took place – emboldened workers and gave [them] a glimpse of their potential power’.³⁹

Meanwhile, in 1972, workers initiated the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF) – a benefit society – which essentially ushered in a new form of organizing which was broad-based and democratic. Indeed, the GFWBF funded the formation of the Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (MAWU), the Furniture and Timber Workers’ Union (FTWU), the Chemical Workers’ Industrial Union (CWIU) and, later, the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), all of which would become central to the formation of a new federation of trade unions.⁴⁰ This gave further impetus to new union organisation in Natal, the Transvaal and Port Elizabeth. By 1974, new coordinating bodies had emerged, that is, the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC), the Industrial Aid Society, Council of Industrial Workers of the Witwatersrand (CIWW) and the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions.⁴¹ These organisations revived the idea of non-racialism in organising, in addition to advocating worker control, trade union autonomy and democratic shop-floor based mobilisation. These principles ultimately shaped the unionism of the largely black trade unions that emerged at the end of the decade.

Meanwhile, the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), which represented unions of white and coloured workers and the so-called parallel unions, neglected to organise African workers. Consequently, unregistered black unions

38. Buhlungu and Webster, ‘Workers Divided, Workers Uniting’, 393.

39. Byrne and Ulrich, ‘Prefiguring a Democratic Revolution?’, 371.

40. Byrne and Ulrich, ‘Prefiguring a Democratic Revolution?’, 371.

41. WULHP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999/C.1.1.1.2, ‘FOSATU History: An Introduction to FOSATU’, June 1983. See also WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.1.1, FOSATU Formation, Minutes of Feasibility Committee, 23 March–April 1979.

became sceptical of TUCSA's intentions, triggering a breakaway by some of the unions that were affiliated to it. In the face of this neglect, hostility from the state, employers and established unions, the unity of unregistered black unions became imperative. Exploratory talks were initiated by the Port Elizabeth based National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA) in early 1977.⁴² These talks led to the establishment of a feasibility committee. Participants in this committee were the four affiliates of the TUACC, NUMARWOSA and the United Automobile Workers' Union and three unions that broke away from the Transvaal-based Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions. Numerous meetings of workers and representatives between 1977 and 1978 culminated in an inaugural Congress of 150 delegates at Hammanskraal near Pretoria to form FOSATU in April 1979.⁴³ FOSATU was bound by six major policies, namely, non-racialism, worker control, industrial unions, shopfloor organisation, worker independence and international worker solidarity. It is necessary to briefly explain what these policies entailed.

In accordance with its policy of non-racialism, FOSATU emphasised that all its affiliates should be open to members of any race, sex and creed. This was codified in its constitution and was eerily similar to the principle of the Freedom Charter:

that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, *black and white* ... that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birth-right without distinction of *colour, race, sex or belief*... [and that] the rights of the people shall be the same, *regardless of race, colour or sex* (my emphasis).⁴⁴

FOSATU was fundamentally opposed to racism in the worker movement. However, its organising objectives focused firmly on the needs and aspirations of the majority of the oppressed workers in South Africa, most of whom were black people and were disadvantaged because of South Africa's abhorrent apartheid policies.⁴⁵ The policy of worker control stipulated that all affiliated unions and the Federation should be controlled by the worker members of the unions while the idea of industrial unions essentially meant 'one industry, one union', notwithstanding its implications to the right to the freedom of association. FOSATU believed that this gave unions the opportunity to grow nationally and to be powerful.⁴⁶

42. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.1.1, FOSATU Formation, Minutes of Feasibility Committee, 23 March – April 1979.

43. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.1.1, FOSATU Formation, Minutes of Feasibility Committee, 23 March–April 1979. See also, Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 18.

44. 'The Freedom Charter: As adopted by the Congress of People, Kliptown, 25 June 1955', accessed 23 May 2022, <https://www.anc1912.org.za/the-freedom-charter-2/>

45. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C.1.1.1.2, 'FOSATU History: An Introduction'.

46. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C.1.1.1.2, 'FOSATU History: An Introduction'.

Its organising approach was shopfloor-based and required the setting up of elected shop steward committees in organised factories. A shop steward, considered the focal individual in FOSATU's mobilising and organising, was 'a man or woman who is elected by their fellow workers with whom they work daily to represent them in dealings with management and in their Union committees'.⁴⁷ They were important because they were the worker leaders with the greatest contact with other workers and met daily with them. This made the FOSATU leadership aware of worker needs, and accountability was easier because the shop stewards answered to their fellow workers each day. They were, therefore, crucial to building democratic unions. This approach bodes well with the notion of worker independence. Geoffrey Wood argues that the high levels of 'internal democracy, grassroots participation' and 'embedded notions of accountability and recall' are characteristic of COSATU and can be traced back to their roots in FOSATU.⁴⁸ FOSATU had set the precedence. It deliberately chose not to affiliate or support any party-political organisation. This was because 'FOSATU feared that involvement in national politics would subsume workers' interests in the name of a nationalist agenda, and thus compromise workers' democracy and control.'⁴⁹ Therefore, its political position was to oppose the apartheid regime completely and to build an effective and powerful worker organisation within the wider liberation struggle.⁵⁰

This stance, however, also created tension between FOSATU and national political parties. As Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt have remarked, workerism challenged the notion that apartheid could only be defeated through nationalism.⁵¹ Rather, it held that apartheid, with its cognate twins of racism and capitalism, needed a radical working-class movement to end it. More bluntly,

this required a movement separate from the nationalists, including the African National Congress (ANC), [the] epicentre of the Congress movement; from the Marxist-Leninists, including the South African Communist Party (SACP); and from the multi-class, nationalist popular fronts they promoted.⁵²

Essentially, workerism as it manifested in FOSATU, challenged the ANC and SACP modus operandi. Influenced by a range of left ideologies, FOSATU was broadly socialist, but sceptical of nationalist organisations such as the ANC, and of the Communism of the SACP. It followed a similar stance to that taken by the ICU earlier. According to Henry Dee, Clements Kadalie, the leader of the ICU attacked those 'still

47. FOSATU, *The Shop Steward*, July 1980, 1.

48. G. Wood, 'Solidarity, Representativity and Accountability: The Origins, State and Implications of Shopfloor Democracy within the Congress of South African Trade Unions', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 45, 3 (2003), 326.

49. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 49.

50. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 23-24.

51. Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt, 'Red, Black and Gold', 255-256.

52. Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt, 'Red, Black and Gold', 256.

thinking in terms of outworn nationalism’, asserting that ‘[w]e are utterly opposed to nationalism. Our goal is international Socialism’.⁵³ The ultimate effect of this was a response from the nationalist movement that appropriated terms such as ‘workerism’, ‘economism’ and ‘syndicalism’, not as compliments but as labels of castigation against FOSATU. Crucial to note is that while FOSATU carved out this trade union autonomy, it did not do so easily, and its ideas were consequently critiqued and contested.

FOSATU’s approach of non-alignment created something of an internal challenge, at least momentarily, among its members. While the non-alignment was informed by hindsight and precedence from SACTU’s experience, the general membership of FOSATU held a different view. Friedman captured this point trenchantly:

while workers in the workplace recognised the strength of a focused union, many found it difficult to divorce themselves from the political struggles raging outside the factory floor. Inside the factory, they were workers; but outside, they were oppressed victims of the apartheid regime. Their identities did not begin and end as workers at the factory gates.⁵⁴

To continue avoiding national politics, therefore, posed a difficulty for FOSATU although this was not insurmountable. The voice of one worker employed by Volkswagen reflected the feelings of many when he said ‘...you are a worker here at Volkswagen. When you come out there, something is going to happen. Maybe they beat you with the batons. So how can you not support politics? So, they ought to support politics.’⁵⁵ To be sure, the workers wanted their federation to create some linkages with like-minded political organisations rather than to ‘remain aloof from the broader struggles’.⁵⁶ This in part, later forced FOSATU’s hand into negotiations about trade union and labour unity that ultimately birthed COSATU. What becomes clear, therefore, is that FOSATU operated in a highly tense environment, imbued with tensions from within its membership and national political parties. Its operating space was in many ways constrained to achieve its desired goals. However, one of its principles, that of international worker solidarity, helped loosen this constraint.

International worker solidarity was important in the following way. For FOSATU, global worker to worker contact was the most effective way to counter multi-national corporations (MNCs). It was for this reason that it believed international worker-focused visits in and out of South Africa ‘should happen at the

53. Dee, ‘Central African Immigrants, Imperial Citizenship and the Politics of Free Movement in Interwar South Africa’, 329.

54. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 49.

55. As cited in Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 49.

56. Wood, ‘Solidarity, Representativity and Accountability’, 328.

request of the independent non-racial trade unions and such visits should only be for the purpose of building worker solidarity in the fight against multi-national corporations and the oppressive policies of the South African regime'.⁵⁷ An analysis of how FOSATU maximised on international solidarity is missing in the historiography. This missing dimension is given particular attention in the next section.

International Worker Solidarity: FOSATU's International Relations

To be sure, South Africa's international solidarity movement during apartheid has occupied the interest of many scholars, as alluded to earlier. The best-known solidarity campaign was that orchestrated by the British Anti-Apartheid Movement launched in 1959.⁵⁸ Much of its activity in the apartheid years focused on the political dimension of this international solidarity. The condemnation of the apartheid system at an international forum began in 1946 when the government of India reported South Africa to the United Nations (UN) over the regime's treatment of Indians in South Africa. Following this, considerable attention sparked during the 1960s in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre which aroused global condemnation.⁵⁹ In 1961 South Africa was kicked out of the British Commonwealth partly for its abhorrent apartheid policies but also for its declaration of a Republic and severing its colonial ties with Britain. As worldwide consternation grew, in 1962, the United Nations Organisation established a Special Committee against Apartheid.

International solidarity campaigns played out through the following main channels: economic sanctions, trade and disinvestment campaigns, cultural and sports boycotts and financial and material support. This involved national governments of the world, but also inter-government and international organisations, non-governmental organisations, churches, workers and ordinary people. It is in this context that FOSATU's international relations campaign should be understood, with a caveat, however. The primary goal for its international solidarity networking was for its own self-sufficiency and trade union autonomy. International worker contact was, therefore, an avenue towards achieving its policy of worker independence and building strong and independent unions. Ultimately, a stronger federation or working-class movement could fare better against racist capital that was supported by the apartheid state.

57. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C.1.1.1.2, 'FOSATU History: An Introduction to FOSATU', June 1983.

58. See Graham and Fevre, 'Mandela's Out so Apartheid has Finished'; and Skinner, 'The Anti-Apartheid Movement'.

59. Skinner, 'The Dynamics of Anti-apartheid', 115.

FOSATU pursued international worker contact to achieve a number of goals: i) to build international solidarity in the struggle against the economic, social and political oppression of workers; ii) to build effective worker organisation to counter and reduce the power of MNCs; iii) to support workers struggles in other countries in whatever way FOSATU could; iv) to ensure that institutions of the international trade union movement were not used by anti-worker forces to create divisions and a loss of independence within the South African worker movement; and v) to assist in increasing the international condemnation of and pressure on the racist regime in South Africa.⁶⁰ The realisation of these general goals required a wide range of activities and these were not without their own difficulties and problems. However, the challenges that FOSATU faced in its international relations campaign were not new. The ICU, SACTU and other unions before it had grappled with the same issues.⁶¹ In order to achieve its broad goals, FOSATU therefore had to put in place guidelines to facilitate the execution of this work.

A priority goal of FOSATU's international solidarity campaign was access to financial assistance.⁶² Ordinarily, a union should be funded from its membership through subscriptions and affiliation fees – although it was often difficult to collect dues from severely underpaid workers. FOSATU was hoping to create other streams of revenue and in this case, it meant seeking overseas donations. Several member unions were financially weak and unable to raise sufficient income from subscriptions to cover their expenses.⁶³ Meanwhile, there were overseas international trade secretariats who were more powerful, wealthier and more concerned with the southern African situation who stood ready to finance their particular affiliates. Financial assistance was an important imperative to build an independent worker organisation in South Africa. Financial self-sufficiency was also a pre-requisite for building autonomy. The life of TUACC, FOSATU's predecessor, had demonstrated that access to international assistance was indispensable to fund the formation of other unions like MAWU and TGWU from its general benefit society funds.⁶⁴

FOSATU sought financial support to cater for the Union's needs in three ways. First, financial assistance was required for the federation and its affiliates to cover general expenses. Second, funds could be availed to an affiliate for self-sufficiency in

60. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement, Statement passed at FOSATU Central Committee, 28-29 April 1984.

61. Southall and Bezuidenhout, 'International Solidarity and Labour'; and Dee, 'Central African Immigrants, Imperial Citizenship and the Politics of Free Movement'.

62. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement, Statement passed at FOSATU Central Committee, 28-29 April 1984.

63. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.1.1.2.2., FOSATU Central Committee Minutes, Financial Structure for discussion, at central committee meeting, 19-20 May 1980.

64. Byrne and Ulrich, 'Prefiguring a Democratic Revolution?', 371.

operating expenses while the federation focused on building structures and facilities that were beneficial for its affiliates. Lastly, financial assistance could be used for additional projects to develop and expand the worker movement.⁶⁵ While financial assistance was fundamental, FOSATU was aware that this could be a double-edged sword that could potentially build or destroy. Alive to this spectre, FOSATU was therefore cautious, and it warned that ‘any financial support [should] not be used to create dependency and division within the South African worker movement.’⁶⁶ If this were to happen, it would defeat the broader goal of trade union autonomy which FOSATU aimed at when it spoke against any alliance with nationalist movements. Without autonomy, advancing the democratic worker agenda could be compromised.

Furthermore, this ‘double-edged sword’ of funding from overseas could cause division in the trade union movement, as FOSATU had learnt from its predecessor’s (SACTU’s) experience. In 1959, for example, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) inspired and funded the formation of the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA) to rival SACTU.⁶⁷ Through the ICFTU programme of action (1974), this confederation channelled financial assistance, amounting to well over US\$6.6 million between 1976 and 1984 to emergent unions in South Africa as part of its solidarity campaigns. As Southall and Bezuidenhout have shown, ‘most of this money originated from the foreign aid budgets of Western governments, and inevitably aroused fears of dependence and imperialistic intentions among recipients.’⁶⁸ Rather than aiding the worker movement cause in South Africa, it appeared that the international solidarity networks were dividing and weakening it. These were fears that FOSATU was well aware of, and it cautioned that the form and nature of the financial assistance offered had to be scrutinised carefully. It is little wonder that ‘FOSATU did not support the ICFTU programme because they believed the support should come directly from affiliates and feared that ICFTU had its own agenda.’⁶⁹

Even as FOSATU was alive to the spectre of dependence and divisions, it faced yet another challenge to receiving this financial assistance vis-a-vis the prohibitions of the Fund Raising Act (1979). In September 1979, the apartheid government enacted the Fund Raising Act which monitored how political and civic organisations raised their revenue.⁷⁰ On 6 June 1980, this Act was invoked for the first time against

65. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

66. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee, 28-29 April 1984.

67. Southall and Bezuidenhout, ‘International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa’, 134.

68. Southall and Bezuidenhout, ‘International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa’, 136.

69. Southall and Bezuidenhout, ‘International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa’, 137.

70. *FOSATU Worker News*, June 1980.

FOSATU when the government prohibited it from receiving donations from overseas trade unions and even locally. Inevitably, FOSATU spoke out against the prohibition. First, it argued that it violated the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) charter. Second, FOSATU argued that this was an attempt to break it as an effective national federation.⁷¹ The decision was also likely to benefit parallel unions who were supported by management and who could draw on the finances that their registered status provided. Should this prohibition stand, FOSATU could be rendered ineffectual, because without funding, it would be difficult to undertake the federation's activities.

Solidarity was even more important regarding handling multi-national corporations (MNCs). It was FOSATU's belief that MNCs possessed excessive power which they used to the detriment of workers both in South Africa and in their home countries.⁷² In light of this, it was in the interest of all workers that their unions were strong in each and every country where MNCs operated. For FOSATU, strong factory-based organisation around a Shop Steward Movement and active membership was an absolute necessity to counter the power of capital, and that of the MNCs.⁷³ Effective solidarity was, thus, necessary at all levels, including the membership, shop stewards and the Union Secretariat. FOSATU further advocated setting up international workers' contact within each MNC. Shop stewards or their equivalent in countries where these MNCs operated would be the contact points, and could also initiate and facilitate such contact. It was hoped that such organising would build up an active exchange of information and allow for common demands on wages and working conditions.⁷⁴ The starting point for this organising was in the so-called Third World countries which shared many similar problems to those experienced in South Africa. The cases of Atlas Copco in Benoni and Forbo-Krommenie, based in Durban, best exemplify the necessity and efficacy of this international worker contact within MNCs.

The FOSATU Secretariat toured Europe (Germany, Sweden and Britain) in late 1979 and early 1980. They visited trade union offices and several factories, including Atlas Copco and Forbo in Sweden where FOSATU appraised the workers of the challenges in South Africa. Following the visit, workers of the Atlas Copco plant in Sweden wrote to MAWU which organised workers at Atlas Copco in Benoni South

71. *FOSATU Worker News*, June 1980.

72. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee, 28-29 April 1984.

73. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

74. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

Africa.⁷⁵ All the 700 workers of Atlas Copco Sweden were organised under the Swedish Metal Workers Union (SMWU). The purpose of their contact with MAWU was to share their experiences and approach in dealing with their grievances. They also discussed their organisational structure, explaining that they had a recognised shop steward system, with one contact person and one safety shop steward in every department. The contact person informed workers in their department about discussions, negotiations and agreements with management. Crucial to note is that Atlas Copco was an MNC and the workers in Sweden were responding to fellow workers' plight and reaching out to 'friends overseas' on the basis that there were common problems.⁷⁶ To keep abreast of all developments, SMWU created the South African group to keep contact with South African friends and to spread information about FOSATU to other unions.

At Forbo-Krommenie in Durban, the workers had, since 1978, struggled for the union to be recognised by the management. If anything, the company was so hostile that it tried many tricks to break the union, where at one instance, it fired all the three shop stewards employed by the company.⁷⁷ Forbo-Krommenie was owned by a Swiss Company called Forbo which had factories all over Europe. Workers at the Swedish factory, Forbo-Forshaga, were made aware by FOSATU of the struggles of the workers at Krommenie. In response to this information, Forbo-Forshaga workers demanded an explanation from their management. They sent one of their shop stewards, Hugo Persson, to South Africa on a fact-finding mission.⁷⁸ He was accompanied by an official of the Forshaga Workers' Union. They met with workers and management and discovered how strong and united the local union was. They produced a long report and also began pushing the mother company, Forbo, to nudge their South African subsidiary to recognise the local union.⁷⁹ These cases demonstrate how international solidarity was working to the benefit of FOSATU unions.

Fraternal links were also opened up and cemented through international travel and visits. The biggest advantage arising from this line of action was the opportunity for FOSATU leadership to learn about common problems of the working class elsewhere. Travels were part of a systematic programme of study, research and working activity. The visits were also an opportunity to popularise FOSATU's work to other fraternities. In 1982, the FOSATU president, Chris Dlamini, visited Germany and England where he met with union representatives and management of some parent companies to some South African-based subsidiaries. In Germany, he met a Mrs Kalbitzer of 'Heltineite Partnerschaft' where they discussed building solidarity among workers, and while at a BMW plant he handed her a report on the goings-on

75. *FOSATU Worker News*, February 1980.

76. *FOSATU Worker News*, February 1980.

77. *FOSATU Worker News*, April 1980.

78. *FOSATU Worker News*, April 1980.

79. *FOSATU Worker News*, April 1980.

at BMW Pretoria.⁸⁰ In England, Dlamini met with shop stewards from Kellogg and Plesseu, a subsidiary of GEC and TMSA. All these firms were MNCs with subsidiaries in South Africa, hence through his visit Dlamini was able to update them on labour activism, including strikes happening at their subsidiaries.⁸¹ This is a trend that had begun with earlier visits by FOSATU to Europe as highlighted in the Atlas Copco and Forbo examples discussed above.

At the union level, FOSATU president, Chris Dlamini also visited TGWU of the United Kingdom (UK), which was a sister union to the FOSATU-affiliated TGWU back home. At this meeting, Alex Kitson, the deputy general secretary of TGWU-UK raised concerns about a communication breakdown with South African unions and emphasised that it was ‘important to keep the lines open for solidarity purposes.’⁸² The same concern was raised in Dlamini’s meetings with the Trade Union Congress office in London which complained of FOSATU’s seeming disinterest in engaging with TUC. It also expressed as worrying that it was ‘unions in developing countries where MNCs operated ... [that] needed strong structures and support to curb exploitation by MNCs.’⁸³ The London-based TUC stood ready to render such support but needed a cue from unions in South Africa. Dlamini assured the TUC that FOSATU was indeed ‘open to any support for workers by workers mostly because [it believed] that workers should get together to share problems ideas and even facilities.’⁸⁴ FOSATU’s reluctance to engage openly with the TUC should be understood in the context of the ideological dispositions of the two federations as well as FOSATU’s desire to avoid being entangled in Cold War politics in which the TUC was heavily involved. Despite this potential tension between TUC and FOSATU, it is noteworthy here that this fraternal visit was already yielding some encouraging developments for FOSATU, by demonstrating how much international support there was for the South African federation.

Related to fraternal visits was the sharing of expertise and information.⁸⁵ In particular, the workers’ struggle in South Africa could benefit from hard lessons learnt overseas. For instance, to capacitate the recruited shop stewards, FOSATU

80. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.4, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 1982. Report on Executive Meeting: Overseas Visits.

81. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.4, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 1982: Report on Executive Meeting: Overseas Visits.

82. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.4, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 1982: Report on Executive Meeting: Overseas Visits.

83. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.4, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 1982: Report on Executive Meeting: Overseas Visits.

84. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.4, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 1982: Report on Executive Meeting: Overseas Visits.

85. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement, Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

drew from the history of stewards' struggle in Britain. Britain was seen as a good yardstick because the South African industrial relations and trade union movement reflected the struggles that were experienced in the early years in the United Kingdom where there was hostility from both employers and the state.⁸⁶ In matters of health and safety of workers, for example, 'advances had been made [in Europe] and it was advantageous for South Africa to rely on the knowledge already available rather than try and learn it all again'.⁸⁷ Moreover, the local leadership realised that there was great benefit to be gained from fraternal visits to South Africa by overseas leadership. These labour movement visitors would have time for greater contact with shop stewards and officials, as opposed to FOSATU's overseas visits.

In addition to international visits, another possible route to the sharing of expertise and information was through publications. The union argued that it was imperative that FOSATU circulate its publications, particularly its monthly bulletin, the *FOSATU Worker News*, to inform the public, stakeholders and partners, of developments in South Africa. At the same time, it also had to acquire foreign publications to acquaint its members and leadership with information on worker issues (including problems and solutions) elsewhere in the world. This was necessary because of the anti-worker propaganda that the press, radio and TV broadcasted in South Africa.⁸⁸

Even as this solidarity movement was building, FOSATU urged vigilance against division and loss of trade union independence, especially in the context of the international political environment of the 1980s. Organisations of the international trade union movement worried FOSATU, because there were signs that some federations were 'bedevilled by politics of international power and the Cold War and that was likely to be detrimental to workers'.⁸⁹ Based on its own experience, meddling with politics could lead to organisational collapse. Therefore, there was a 'need to guard against being caught in the web of international politics rather than building effective worker solidarity'.⁹⁰ Alec Erwin, FOSATU's national education secretary, had cautioned in his report to the union's Executive Committee in August 1979, of the possible dangers of going international at every opportunity, notwithstanding the advantages of such an approach.

86. FOSATU, *The Shop Steward*, 6.

87. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement, FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

88. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement, FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

89. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

90. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

These dangers were epitomised by the earlier experience of SACTU which had suffered from the international politics of the trade union movement. For example, SACTU had identified with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) for ideological reasons, but then faced antipathy from other international trade union movements such as ICFTU, which was against the politics of WFTU. These international movements had sought to push local worker movements toward a particular ideological direction. The meddling of the ICFTU into internal affairs of local unions and the consequent animosity between it and SACTU led to SACTU attacking direct contact between local and international unions, as typified in its slogan 'Direct Links Stinks'. The allegation was that this international contact had jeopardised 'internal unions [that were] deliberately attempting to bypass the liberation movement'.⁹¹ It should be noted, however, that the animosity was not solely based on interference but also on SACTU's frustration that ICFTU queried SACTU's legitimacy, viability and strategies. To spite the ICFTU, SACTU 'objected to direct connections between the emergent democratic unions and the Western labour movement.'⁹² Such entanglements were what FOSATU was very cautious about.

Between August and December 1979, FOSATU received numerous invitations to attend international events and tours, for example, to the International Confederation of Trade Unions Congress in Madrid and a Code of Conduct Conference in Bonn. While these invitations were welcome, Erwin warned:

these trips may set a bad precedent in that they direct our attention away from the hard work of organizing and toward the easy job of talking overseas when in all honesty we know that we are listened to not because of our strength as a workers' organisation but because of complex political factors.⁹³

The alternative to shunning international visits was either to seek publications from the international trade union movement or to get people from overseas to come to South Africa where they would also have an opportunity to meet more workers rather than just representatives. However, the latter suggestion put FOSATU in a quandary too. In the context where South Africa was facing isolation, visits by international trade unions could be used and manipulated by the apartheid government to gain credibility for its actions both within and outside the country.⁹⁴ It was also for this reason that FOSATU opposed the stationing of permanent representatives of the international trade union movement and related organisations inside South Africa. In this regard, international fraternal visits also posed challenges in as much as they cemented solidarity.

91. Southall and Bezuidenhout, 'International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa', 138.

92. Southall and Bezuidenhout, 'International Solidarity and Labour in South Africa', 138.

93. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.7.2.1.1, FOSATU Executive Committee Minutes, 8 August 1979.

94. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

Meanwhile, as FOSATU forged its solidarity networks, it was relentless in its opposition to the racist apartheid regime. Therefore, it fully supported international pressure on South Africa to bring about social justice and a truly democratic society and endorsed and encouraged most strategies to fight apartheid. However, one of the campaigns, the disinvestment campaign, raised a conundrum for FOSATU.⁹⁵ One of the objectives of trade unions is to protect and improve the jobs and livelihoods of its members. Against this backdrop, FOSATU therefore had to give a careful consideration to the implications of disinvestment on jobs, and ultimately also on workers, in South Africa. Cognisant of this fact, FOSATU's considered view was that 'the pressure for disinvestment had a positive effect towards change and, therefore, ought to be continued.'⁹⁶ Meanwhile, in the interest of preserving jobs, FOSATU welcomed foreign investment but only that which was opposed to apartheid. Should foreign investment support the apartheid regime, FOSATU rejected it. For this reason, the federation expended its energy on building a stronger worker movement that 'could set the terms of foreign investment' and ensure that 'machines and infrastructure already present in South Africa would be retained to the ultimate benefit of all.'⁹⁷ Crucial to note here is that FOSATU's position on divestment campaign put it at odds with the broader international anti-apartheid movement that saw disinvestment as a more effective way to hurt the apartheid regime.

In 1985, FOSATU once again clarified its position on disinvestment. The federation's education secretary, addressing students at Natal University, said the foreign MNCs already established in South Africa should not be allowed to pull out their investment in South Africa. He argued that they had become part of South Africa's social structure and should therefore remain. Buttressing this point, he noted that 'the workers helped build companies like Ford'.⁹⁸ In any case, withdrawal of investments would not correct the problem in South Africa. For example, he questioned how the creation of so-called 'homelands' or the tri-cameral parliament would be resolved by disinvestment. Instead, what was needed was 'international support from American workers and closer links with British and German workers to strengthen the fight for better rights in the workplace for workers in South Africa'.⁹⁹

95. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

96. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

97. WULHP, FOSATU Records AH1999/C1.6.1, FOSATU Policy Resolutions: International Policy Statement passed at the FOSATU Central Committee held on 28-29 April 1984.

98. *Cape Times*, 3 May 1985.

99. *Cape Times*, 3 May 1985.

Joe Foster, the general secretary of FOSATU repeated the same attitude on disinvestment. Emphasising the point, he noted that as a membership-based organisation, they had members at such MNCs as Ford, VW and General Motors and they had not received any mandate from their members there to call for their companies to withdraw from South Africa. Rather, he explained that ‘workers have a vested interest in those factories and we in fact believe we are part-owners of those factories. In any case, I don’t think workers would want to inherit a bankrupt country.’¹⁰⁰ From an economic and jobs perspective, FOSATU’s position was intelligible, because it had to balance worker interests against total support for international pressure to end apartheid. As a trade union movement, job tenure and security of workers ranked just as high as democratising the workplace, and ending apartheid, in terms of priorities. FOSATU’s stance on divestment must, therefore, be understood as a pragmatic way to handle the matter. After all, it took a combination of forces to bring down apartheid rule. FOSATU’s international synergies and somewhat nuanced strategies were important in that regard.

Conclusion

This article has examined how FOSATU used international worker solidarity and global networks to execute its mandate of worker representation, autonomously and with self-sufficiency. The ultimate goal of its global outreach was to build strong and independent trade unions that could square up to both capital and the apartheid state. Through pursuing international worker solidarity but without suffering ideological indoctrination, FOSATU distinguished itself from its predecessor worker organisations that looked up to political alliances rather than global fraternal relationships to advance workers’ struggle. By adopting the independent strategy of solidarity, FOSATU enhanced the principles of worker control, independence and democracy. Furthermore, it extended the fight for justice and democracy beyond the territorial boundaries of South Africa. Admittedly, this was not unique nor limited to FOSATU alone. As is apparent from the above, international solidarity was also deployed by other organisations in pursuit of ending apartheid. This resulted in the emergence of what has now become known as the ‘international anti-apartheid movement’ that was crucial in the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In this regard, FOSATU’s international worker solidarity, in a way, became an important part of this broader democratic struggle. To this extent, the federation became an integral social force in the anti-apartheid struggle.

What is also clear is that while international worker solidarity provided opportunities for FOSATU to receive financial assistance, to express international pressure on the apartheid regime, and offered lessons learned from elsewhere, for example, on how to deal with exploitative MNCs, there were risks too. International

100. *Cape Times*, 4 May 1985.

worker solidarity occurred in an international environment of Cold War politics. This posed a threat to FOSATU in that some in the international trade union movement subscribed to either of the ideologies (communism v capitalism) and thus, could try to influence FOSATU. Additionally, over-reliance on international financial assistance could potentially compromise its whole notion of self-sufficiency and autonomy. The old adage of ‘he who pays the piper, calls the tune’, was a real spectre to FOSATU. Even more, the most immediate risk was in the implications of the disinvestment campaign. Capital flight could mean the disappearance of jobs. For FOSATU, that could not auger well for its membership, therefore, the federation had to exercise great consideration in supporting or opposing the disinvestment campaigns.

Ultimately, FOSATU showed the other possibilities of advocating and advancing both workers’ rights and the democratic government without compromising trade union autonomy. Indeed, through its worker-control notions, non-racialism and worker independence, FOSATU set a precedent that there were alternatives to pursuing the democratic struggle other than the orthodox political struggles and confrontations. It is from this perspective that this article has argued that FOSATU played a crucial role in ending apartheid. More importantly, it has foregrounded the characteristics of shop floor democracy and accountability in COSATU today. Apart from ‘building the firm foundations for democracy in COSATU, FOSATU helped indirectly to establish the foundations for today’s vibrant democracy in the country as whole’.¹⁰¹

Yet, ironically the internal vibrant democracy FOSATU nurtured became a crucial factor in its metamorphosis. True to the spirit of giving workers control, the ordinary members decided the fate of the federation. By the mid-1980s, the general membership of FOSATU demanded that their unions work in proximity with political organisations that shared similar objectives, rather than clinging to an apolitical stance at the expense of the broader struggle. When the opportune moment came to decide a non-political trajectory or political unionism, they chose the latter. Ultimately, FOSATU respected that decision, agreeing to work with other unions and morphed into COSATU in 1985. That action was important for two reasons. First, it demonstrated that indeed the workers controlled the unions, and their decisions carried the day. Second, that FOSATU leadership was accountable to its membership. To this extent, FOSATU was able to implant and cement worker control, trade union democracy and accountability, and consequently was successful in distinguishing itself from other trade unions in South Africa at the time.

101. Friedman, *A History of FOSATU*, 11.

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