

# Debating the revival of the workers' movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and post-apartheid patriotic history\*

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The South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) was established to undertake research on the history of the liberation struggle between 1960 and 1994. By 2008 it had published a volume on the struggle in the 1960s, and one on the 1970s, with which this article is concerned, was published in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Ben Magubane, director of the project, whom I had known well since the time we were fellow-graduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles in the mid-1960s, asked me to participate in it from early on, and I contributed to the first volume as an author, as solicitor of contributors and editor of chapters. To his credit Magubane did so despite knowing of my suspension and subsequent expulsion from the ANC (African National Congress) and the doubts of the Minister in the Presidency, Essop Pahad, about my involvement in the project. He praised my work on the first volume: soliciting chapters and personnel and editing chapters, including his own.

I was asked, together with Dave Hemson and Nicole Ulrich, to contribute to the second volume a chapter on the Durban strikes and the revival of the workers' movement during the decade. The three of us submitted the draft chapter early in 2005, and it immediately came under severe criticism from Professor Magubane. I was totally taken aback by the vehemence and vindictiveness of his comments. He wrote three sets of comments on the chapter to which we responded.<sup>2</sup> Also the original chapter was far too long (145 pages), and was cut more or less in half by the authors, as well as revised, with new material added. The debate culminated in a unilateral decision by Professor Magubane to retitle the chapter. The original title, 'The revival of the workers' movement', was changed to '*White activists* and the revival of the workers' movement' (my emphasis). The authors reluctantly conceded to this only on the condition that a footnote was inserted stating: 'The authors disagree with the retitling of this chapter by the editors from the original.... This racialisation of the title, imposed by the editors, belittles the part played by the African workers themselves and the efforts, initiatives and self-sacrifice of many

\* Editors' note: In the interests of furthering debate, Ben Magubane, Sifiso Ndlovu and Jabulani Sithole were offered space in this volume to reply to arguments contained in this article. Sifiso Ndlovu and Jabulani Sithole have expressed their interest in submitting an article-length reply for the next issue of *Kronos*.

1 SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volume 1: 1960-1970 (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004); SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2: 1970-1980 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006).

2 Since Magubane's main criticism was directed at Hemson and Legassick, with her agreement Nicole Ulrich was not involved in writing the replies. Magubane's first set of comments was sent on 10 March 2005, addressed to myself only. They covered only the first 50 pages of the chapter. Hemson and I replied to Magubane on 17 March. Magubane sent further comments on 26 April, to which Hemson and I replied on 16 May. Magubane's third set of comments were sent on 15 June, significantly after I had criticized the chapter on SACTU in an e-mail to Sithole and Ndlovu dated 10 June. I replied to Magubane's comments on 3 July.

black activists, all covered in this chapter. It is also in conflict with the non-racialism of the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the democratic unions of the 1970s'.

The same SADET volume also contains a chapter originally titled 'The South African Congress of Trade Unions during the 1970s', written by Sifiso Ndlovu and Jabulani Sithole. I had known Ndlovu and Sithole since the South African Historical Society conference of 1999 and co-edited their papers, both exemplars of the study of historical method, for a special issue of *History and Theory*.<sup>3</sup> Ndlovu and Sithole's chapter in the second SADET volume was originally intended to follow 'The revival of the workers' movement'. It was subsequently retitled 'The revival of the labour movement, 1970-1980' and placed *before* the chapter now (wrongly) retitled, as indicated above, 'White activists and the revival of the workers' movement', in an attempt to assert its hegemony on the question.

The present article evaluates Ben Magubane's criticisms and reviews the chapter by Ndlovu and Sithole.<sup>4</sup> It first of all evaluates an internal editing process by this presidential project concerned with the history of resistance. Magubane, Ndlovu and Sithole all make a completely different assessment of the revival of the workers' movement from the chapter produced by Hemson, Ulrich and me, and in particular of the role played by SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions) in that revival. In our view, Magubane, Ndlovu and Sithole make fictitious claims about the activities of SACTU. They are practitioners of what Terence Ranger has in the context of Zimbabwe called 'patriotic history' – the falsification of history for nation-building purposes.<sup>5</sup> Their approach attempts to repress uncomfortable truths in order to present a seamless picture favourable to the ANC and SACTU. While the editors allowed our chapter to appear in the volume, its retitling was intended to diminish its significance, while the elevation of the Ndlovu and Sithole chapter to pride of place on the workers' movement constituted manipulation of the historical record.

Diversity was tolerated in the first volume on the 1960s – a chapter on the Non-European Unity Movement was included, for example. In the second volume, however, the stakes were different. Here the 'diversity' related not to a self-contained and relatively marginal movement (the NEUM), but to the construction of the trade unions, essential building blocks of the liberation movement of the 1980s. The essential reason why Magubane et al, on behalf of the presidential project, found it necessary to contest the Hemson et al chapter was because this chapter raised the issues of political independence of the working class from nationalist orthodoxy. The issues have resurfaced again (in a somewhat distorted form) today in the contested relationship between COSATU and the ANC in the Tripartite Al-

3 See Sifiso Ndlovu, 'Johannes Nkosi and the CPSA: Images of Blood River and King Dingane in the late 1920s-1930s'; Sibongiseni Mkhize and Jabulani Sithole, 'Truth or lies: Selective remembering, imaginings and representations of Chief Albert Luthuli in recent political discourses', *History and Theory: Studies in the philosophy of history*, Theme Issue 39, December 2000. The special issue's theme, 'Not telling: Secrecy, lies and history' was also the theme of the SAHS conference held at the University of the Western Cape in 1999 from which its papers were drawn.

4 This article is part of a longer critical account of the many defects of historical method in the comments of Magubane and the chapter by Sithole and Ndlovu. Only some of my criticisms are canvassed here.

5 Terence Ranger, 'Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.30 (2) June 2004, 215-234.

liance, as evidenced at the December 2007 ANC Polokwane Conference. Hemson and I were among the four activists suspended from the ANC in 1970, allegedly for forming a ‘faction’, but in reality for arguing that SACTU (and the ANC) should put forward socialist policies, i.e. promote the political independence of the working class. The reason that Magubane et al are so hostile to these four activists is precisely out of a nationalist fear at the political independence of the working class.

### **The chapter on the revival of the workers’ movement**

Our draft chapter began with a short section on the history of trade unionism in South Africa, including the rise and fall of SACTU, and then turned to the re-emergence of embryonic workers’ organization in Durban and Cape Town (initially before the 1973 Durban strikes) which it credited (as others have done) to a combination of SACTU activists recently released from jail and NUSAS members who had become involved in the Wages Commissions.<sup>6</sup> It dealt with the Durban strikes as a spontaneous eruption spreading to the mines and to other parts of the country in 1973-74; and with the re-emergence of workers’ organisation on the Rand, due to the same combination of SACTU and white students. In it we argued:

Building the unions involved both illegal and legal methods of work, of working underground as well as looking to exploit loopholes in the law. Despite suffering repression during the decade, the workers’ movement opened up more legal space to operate. ‘None of the African union movements before the 1970s endured’ wrote Friedman in 1987, ‘because none could turn worker support into a permanent source of power’. What was built in the 1970s [however] provided a solid base for the revolutionary struggles of the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

The chapter dealt with the formation of TUACC (Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council), the debates between different centres over strategies of workers’ organisation, the nadir of the unions as the result of state repression in the mid-1970s, their slow regrouping and the formation of FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) through the initiatives taken by NUMARWOSA (National Union of Motor Assemble and Rubber Workers of South Africa) in the Eastern Cape. The position taken regarding these trade unions was that of SACTU’s publication *Workers’ Unity* (quoted in the chapter):

within them and among their leaders [of the independent trade unions], various tendencies are to be found. There are, of course, not a few reformists, opportunists and even collaborators – but there are also

<sup>6</sup> See also, for example, D. Lewis, ‘Black workers and trade unions’ in T. Karis and G. Gerhardt, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, Volume 5: Nadir and resurgence, 1964-1979, 197-8; J. Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991), 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> D. Hemson, M. Legassick, N. Ulrich, ‘White activists and the revival of the workers’ movement’, SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 248.

many who walk a tightrope of personal danger in truly serving the struggle of the working class... These organizations are forced by the repression to keep themselves cut off from the liberation struggle as a whole, but we do not oppose them. Our policy is to fight for independent unions and to give these new organizations our support – in as far as they advance the workers' struggle.<sup>8</sup>

We argued, further, that SACTU should have formed a political underground to guide the work of the open independent trade unions.

In the chapter the re-emergence of the FCWU in the Western Cape, the impact of the Fattis and Monis strike, and the significance of the Ford Cortina strike in Port Elizabeth in 1979 was traced. It dealt with the re-eruption of workers' struggle in 1980 - in the rise of SAAWU (South African Allied Workers' Union) as a 'new type of unionism', in the motor strikes in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage, in the municipal workers strike and other strikes on the Rand. It noted that SAAWU-type, FOSATU-type unions, as well as others, were involved in the 'factory ungovernability' that arose in 1980, and made the point that, in times of forward movement of the struggle, differences in organisational forms ('work-place-based' or 'community-oriented') became less relevant.

Also explained was the workers' movement's exploitation of the exploited the increasing divisions and crisis in the apartheid regime, rooted in the economic crisis, and exacerbated by the struggles from the 1973 strikes through to the uprising of the youth in 1976. As the regime sought to detach itself from its previous base among white farmers and workers, it was compelled to try to draw African workers into a reformed industrial bargaining system, and to permit the registration of non-racial trade unions, including those of both non-migrant and migrant workers, by 1981.

In the course of all this, as maintained in the chapter, there were not only many struggles against employers and the state, but many internal debates and struggles which established a tradition 'of continually reassessing all union tactics', thus ensuring 'that they were often quick to adapt to new events'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover the new trade unions pioneered the tradition of 'people's democracy' and 'people's power' that sprung up in the 1980s by basing themselves firmly on a strong factory floor shop-steward-led organization, controlled by workers through democratically elected accountable representatives at every level.

### **Magubane's critique**

Magubane, in his first set of comments, took particular exception to a passage in the draft of the chapter quoting a letter from the veteran trade unionist Ray Alexander to the 1969 ANC Morogoro Conference. Summarised, this letter said:

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8 *Workers Unity*, No 5, September 1977.

9 Friedman, *Tomorrow*, 92.

No trade union ever succeeded in holding the loyalty of the workers... as long as it neglected the workers' material needs for purely political ends.... I am not saying that trade unions can live by bread alone, what I do say is that they cannot live without bread. We must mobilize the working people... for economic as well as political objectives.... Let us acknowledge that we have failed in this work. SACTU – part of the Alliance – has done... a great service in presenting our case before the world labour movement.... But the most urgent task is to rebuild a militant trade union movement in South Africa.... Nor must comrades say, we have no time for this work, as I heard said before.<sup>10</sup>

The passage in the draft chapter continued:

The 'most urgent task' for the ANC, Ray maintained, was to 'rebuild a militant trade union movement in South Africa.' This was what was achieved in the 1970s, not out of organisation spearheaded from exile, but through the painful work of people inside the country prepared to organise on the basis of the day-to-day problems of working people. The most democratic structures yet seen in South Africa were built as a result. Those who built them were students or former students from NUSAS together with SACTU activists recently released from prison. The role of these SACTU activists owed nothing to the rump [of SACTU] officials in exile. Throughout the 1970s the ANC-in-exile, and the SACTU rump with it remained fixated on rural guerrilla warfare. Far from building the unions, elements within the ANC and SACTU in exile, as well as the anti-apartheid movement, disgracefully, as we shall show also in this chapter, denigrated these unions as 'collaborationist' and 'yellow', and opposed international workers' solidarity with them. One consequence [of the position of SACTU officials] was the emergence of a tendency in the ANC supporting the building of independent democratic trade unions and advocating armed workers' self-defence rather than guerrilla warfare: several supporters of these ideas were unconstitutionally and undemocratically suspended from the ANC in 1979.

Magubane's objections to this line of analysis can be broadly summarised as follows:

**1. That 'democratic unions' were not possible under apartheid.** In his first set of comments, he wrote of the draft chapter that reference to 'the so-called "democratic unions" in a fascist society is a contradiction in terms. It must have sounded sweet to the ears of the apartheid regime!'

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10 See Hemson et al, 'Revival', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 248.

2. **That FOSATU comprised and fostered ‘parallel unions’.**
3. **That the chapter emphasized (white) service organizations over (black) trade unions.**
4. **That the black unions of the 1970s were foreign/white stooges.** Magubane’s first set of comments lectured on the pernicious influence of organisations such as the American AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) and the British TUC (Trades Union Congress) on the struggle for trade unions and national liberation in South Africa.
5. **That whites sought to ‘liquidate the national struggle’.** Magubane, in his first set of comments, wrote of ‘the NUSAS students who jumped into workers struggle from the comfort of suburban life... Influenced by the New Left movements in Europe and America... [they] wanted to liquidate the national struggle and to ignore the fact that it was because of conquest and national oppression that Africans had become helots of white capital’.
6. **That unions in the 1970s were ‘economistic’.** Magubane in his first set of comments wrote: ‘FOSATU was formed in terms of the counter-revolutionary Wiehahn Commission and FOSATU’s non-racial stance from its inception permitted whites to become full-time officials and organizers. But despite its shop-floor militancy, it was careful to confine its concerns to factory issues; it eschewed any form of political alignment’.<sup>11</sup> In his third set of comments Magubane returned to the theme:

The **whole thrust** of Martin, Hemson and Nicole is to prove that SACTU’s involvement with the politics of national liberation was not only wrong but that it led to its demise. NUSAS white activist/students who, after being rejected by SASO...following the path breaking labour strikes in the early 1970s, like missionaries of old, found themselves a new mission—they set themselves up as ‘Missionary’ advisors to the strikers on how to build non-political unions in contrast to the policy of the ANC-led alliance, where SACTU was an integral part of the liberation movement. The essay, through one-sided and carefully selected evidence, tries to show that working within the machinery set up by the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes Act) of 1956, but staying away from politics and only concentrating on shop-floor issues, was the only way. **All the 145 pages of this essay** are in one way or the other devoted to supporting this untenable position. (My emphasis)

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<sup>11</sup> FOSATU was not, of course, ‘formed in terms’ of the Wiehahn Commission. Its formation involved discussions which started in 1977, two years before the Wiehahn Commission reported, and it was launched in April 1979, also before the Commission reported. The issue for the chapter was not however predominantly FOSATU’s (post-April 1979) political standpoint but that of the unions between 1973 and 1979.

Thus for Magubane, the new unions of the 1970s were not, as they are generally portrayed, democratic trade unions. They were non-political, first presented as (Trade Union Council of South Africa)TUCSA-created parallel unions, then as student-created service organizations. Influence from abroad urged them to be non-political. The upshot of these criticisms by Magubane was the unilateral decision taken to re-title the chapter. When the authors protested at this, the chapter was sent to an (anonymous) reviewer who upheld Magubane's contention that the chapter dealt overwhelmingly with the role of white students in the unions.

We provided a point-by-point rebuttal of these criticisms. On the designation 'democratic unions', the trade unions of the 1970s have been referred to as 'open', 'emergent' and 'independent.' In our chapter we preferred 'democratic' – both to indicate their internal practice and the aspirations of their members, for a democratic South Africa. In responding to Magubane, we raised the question of COSATU, formed in late November 1985. Was this not a federation of democratic trade unions under the apartheid ('fascist' in Magubane's words) regime? Or was COSATU a 'yellow union'? 'Did COSATU sound "sweet to the ears of the apartheid regime"?' COSATU organised at least one general strike a year, and often more, between 1986 and 1994 against the regime. Was all this "sweet to the ears of the apartheid regime"?'<sup>12</sup>

In our response to Magubane's first set of comments, we had pointed out that COSATU's origins went back to the unions formed in 1973 in the wake of the Durban strikes. MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union) was the forebear of the COSATU union NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa). NUTW (National Union of Textile Workers), together with the GWU (Garment Worker's Union), was the forebear of the present-day COSATU union SATAWU. 'These are the unions which ... were built in the 1970s by a combination of SAC-TU activists and white ex-students. They are widely recognised by those who have written on them as extremely democratic in their organisation in the 1970s....'<sup>13</sup>

Gwede Mantashe, NUM general secretary, stated that '[T]he present day progressive labour movement has its roots in the 1973 Durban strikes'.<sup>14</sup> The trade unions' analyst, Sakhele Buhlungu, has written that 'Cosatu's history goes back to the early 1970s with the emergence of unions for black workers inspired by the strikes of 1973'. He refers to the 1970s as 'the heyday of the "worker-control tradition" (or democratic unionism)' and to 'the democratic union traditions that were developed in the 1970s and 1980s.' Buhlungu also argued that there has been an 'erosion of those notions of altruism and collective solidarity which had characterized the struggle era' in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> The *African Communist* frequently referred to the post-1973 unions as 'democratic' and in 1990 Joe Slovo admitted that his examination of the problems of the Soviet Union in his South African Communist

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12 Hemson and Legassick, 'Reply... to Ben Magubane's comments on the trade union chapter', 17/3/2005

13 Hemson and Legassick, 'Reply to Ben Magubane's comments', 17/3/2005.

14 G. Mantashe, 'Trade unions and social movements in South Africa', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol.27 (6), December 2003 33.

15 S. Buhlungu, 'The state of trade unionism in post-apartheid South Africa', J. Daniel, A. Habib and R. Southall, eds., *State of the Nation: South Africa 2003-4*, (HSCR, 2003), 184, 187, 189.

Party discussion paper, ‘Has socialism failed?’ owed its primary debt to the shift to *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and, ‘[C]loser to home, the democratic spirit which dominated in the re-emerged trade union movement from the early 1970s onwards also made its impact’.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly there is widespread agreement that FOSATU and pre-FOSATU unions were the core of COSATU and that FOSATU and pre-FOSATU unions were democratic unions – contrary to the views put forward by Magubane. In his second communication Magubane wrote: ‘Yes I did criticise the use of the word “democratic unions”. The fact that workers at Coronation and other factories refused to name their leaders suggest to me that there was no democracy for any organization opposed to apartheid! The point of this chapter is that despite all the draconian laws, the oppressed in South Africa by the late 1960s and early 1970s had lost fear of the regime and were willing to fight, no matter the consequences. If we use the designation “democratic unions” could we also speak of “democratic student” activities? “Democratic” here was not a condition, but a politics’.

In reply, we agreed (as we had mentioned in the chapter) that the workers in the Durban strikes in 1973 did not put forward leaders. We drew attention to the video footage of the founding congress of COSATU in 1985 where, in contrast to 1973, the workers not merely elected leaders, but carried them around the hall on their shoulders for all to see. This, we interpreted as reflecting the change in the confidence of the workers since 1973, a change brought about mainly by their democratic self-organisation. Moreover there was continuity from TUACC in 1974 to COSATU in 1985 – in democratic trade unionism. We were more doubtful regarding ‘democratic student’ activities. The universities were racially segregated, and so was student organisation in the 1970s – although both NUSAS and the South African Student Organisation (SASO) aspired to democratic goals. Black Consciousness (BC) organisations were not in the habit of calling themselves ‘democratic’. NUSAS self-consciously recognised that it represented only white students. The workplaces, however, were not segregated, and the democratic trade unions were non-racial.

On the question of parallel unions, we pointed out that, contrary to Magubane’s claim, FOSATU (together with its predecessor TUACC) was formed precisely in opposition to the TUCSA policy of promoting parallel unions. We indicated that the reactionary history and role of TUCSA was extensively dealt in the then draft chapter, including presenting entirely new information on TUCSA unions’ cooperation with the Security Police.<sup>17</sup> The intention of Magubane’s deliberate confusion of the independent democratic unions with TUCSA’s parallel unions was to associate the former with TUCSA and thereby damn them; hence the accusation that the chapter was ‘soft’ on TUCSA.

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16 See for example, L.N. Machlalela, ‘Dramatic growth of the democratic trade union movement’, *African Communist*, 101, 2nd quarter, 1985 and Interview with Joe Slovo: the crisis in the socialist world’, *Umsebenzi*, 1990.

17 See Hemson et al, ‘Revival’, SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 247, 249, 257, 264-5, 299, 306, 312. Some of the references were omitted from the shortened final version of the chapter.

As to the charge of unions being stooges, we pointed out that we had written a booklet, published by the British Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1977, on the pernicious influence of foreign labour organisations on South African democratic unions which included a critique of the TUC delegation's visit. This was quoted in the draft chapter.<sup>18</sup> The ANC also accepted money from foreign organisations, not only trade unions, including governments, both Stalinist and social-democratic. Would Magubane suggest that this compromised the standpoint of the ANC? It was an insult to workers in the democratic trade unions to suggest that they were compromised by accepting foreign money. Similarly, in regard to the worker service organizations, we pointed out that people were 'banned, house arrested, detained, and also assassinated (Mfeti, Turner) by the apartheid regime for being involved in building these unions'.<sup>19</sup>

Magubane provided no evidence for his claim that whites in the democratic trade union movement in the 1970s wanted to 'ignore' national oppression and 'liquidate' the national struggle. Even Buhlungu, who has written on the role of whites in the trade union movement, does not draw such an extreme conclusion.<sup>20</sup> Why would black workers have tolerated white students in the unions if those students had wanted to 'liquidate' the national question? Moreover, many of these students turned to the black working class under the personal influence of, and out of respect for, Steve Biko. It is hard to see how they could have wanted to 'liquidate the national struggle'.

We agreed with Baskin that the new democratic unions of the 1970s 'eschewed political action outside of production' – despite the fact, in Baskin's words, that '[m]ost of the key founders were politically committed individuals. Many were supporters of the banned ANC and SACP. Others were committed Marxists.' As Baskin continued, 'almost all the emerging unions accepted the argument, at that stage, that the major political task was to build union organization. Open, explicit politics would come later.'<sup>21</sup> Indeed, how there could have been open, above-ground trade unionism in the 1970s which immediately campaigned on the pass laws, the vote and so on? The evidence from trade union organizers – despite the upsurge of the Durban strikes – was that workers did not want to take the risks of 'political action'. It would have been asking infant trade unions to run before they could walk.

What ran like a thread through the statements of workers regarding unions in the 1970s, we maintained, was that they did not join them to get higher wages, but to assert their equal dignity as human beings – a *political*, and a democratic, assertion.<sup>22</sup> The new unions were also established *jointly* by SACTU activists and

18 D. Hemson and M. Legassick, *Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa* (Anti-Apartheid Movement: Foreign Investment in South Africa: Discussion series, September 1976), 2.

19 Legassick, 'A third reply...' 3/7/2005.

20 S. Buhlungu, 'Rebels without a cause of their own: the contradictory location of white officials in black unions, 1973-2000', paper presented on 15 March 2002, University of Witwatersrand, forthcoming in *Current Sociology*.

21 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 22.

22 See Hemson et al, 'Revival', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 294-6 for the final version. See also R. Lambert and E. Webster, 'The re-emergence of political unionism in contemporary South Africa' in W. Cobbett and R. Cohen, eds., *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1988); D. Hemson, 'Trade unionism and the struggle for liberation in South Africa', *Capital and Class*, 6, Autumn 1978; D. Davis, 'African unions at the crossroads', *African Communist*, 64, 1st quarter 1976.

NUSAS students, not by students alone, and were not ‘non-political unions’ because their very existence was a *political* challenge to the state’s dual system of ‘industrial relations’ – and participation in them increased the self-confidence of workers.

We could have added the explanation of the politics of the new unions provided by Dave Lewis, himself a participant in them, that:

the unions’ low political profile was dictated by a combination of prudence and strong desire for political autonomy.... Some leaders adhered strongly to the principle of independent working-class organization, viewing the subordination of a workers’ organization to a multiclass political front as politically unacceptable. Others who did not oppose the association of unions with political groupings in principle, opposed them on pragmatic grounds, given the time needed to build up union strength in an environment of hostility from the state.<sup>23</sup>

We also pointed out that if we had been writing on the 1980s, we would have criticized FOSATU (and the GWU and the FCWU, the Food and Canning Workers’ Union) for remaining outside the UDF (United Democratic Front) instead of joining to put the workers’ point of view – for maintaining a ‘non-political’ stance for too long, for which they were rightly criticized by the SAAWU ‘community-oriented’ unions.

Finally, we did *not* argue that SACTU’s involvement with the national liberation struggle led to its demise, but outlined this as a position put forward by Feit and followed by Bonner and Friedman and criticized that position along the lines taken by Lambert.<sup>24</sup> Magubane’s equation of the BLRRA to the Native Representative Council, Coloured Representative Council and bantustans ignored the fact that the ANC until 1946 *used* the Native Representative Council. Indeed Ray Alexander in her 1969 letter to the Morogoro Conference of the ANC wrote: ‘We must organise under any name – Mutual Benefit Societies, Co-ops. We may even have to consider utilising the [state-legislated] ‘Works Committee’. It was the Works Committee at Durban Docks that led the dockers’ strike this month’.<sup>25</sup> The use of the works committees was also endorsed in Cape Town in 1973-4 by another SACTU stalwart, Jenny Curtis.

Why then was there such hostility from the ANC and SACTU in exile to these unions as reflected still in the stance of Magubane? The answer lies in a key question of strategy. Ray Alexander’s letter to the 1969 Morogoro Conference had argued the importance of supporting workers’ organisations within South Africa

23 Lewis, in Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, 5, 207-8.

24 E. Feit, *Workers Without Weapons: SACTU and the Organization of African Workers* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1975); P. Bonner, ‘Black trade unions in South Africa since World War II’, in Price, RM and Rotberg, R., eds., *The Apartheid Regime*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980); Friedman, *Tomorrow*; Lambert, R. V. ‘Political unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965’, (Ph.D., University of the Witwatersrand, 1988).

25 See SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 248.

against the prevailing consensus favouring armed struggle from without in the form of rural guerilla warfare. The latter was the main strategy of the ANC from 1967 to the late 1970s, although not applicable to South Africa and more theorised about than practiced.<sup>26</sup> Callinicos's biography of Tambo explains the theory as follows:

The plan was to continue to infiltrate MK cadres into the most receptive *rural areas* adjacent to the borders of South Africa... Now here again was an opportunity to mobilise the peasantry. '*The rural areas are a priority*' wrote Tambo [in his 1977 notebook], summing up the feeling of the Revolutionary Council. With less policing in the countryside and the still coherent but disaffected communities there, it might be 'easier to reach the masses and more difficult for the enemy to have a presence'. By contrast, armed actions in the urban areas would have to be limited to 'basically armed propaganda; can't grow beyond doing protest actions.... 'Keep it going in the cities while you organize in the rural areas' had been Tambo's advice in his summing up of an RC discussion. 'Open up in the rural areas with rural men. Surround the cities. Urban struggle has never led to the seizure of power' – at least 'never of its own.'<sup>27</sup>

The ANC's fixation on rural guerrilla warfare and resultant indifference to the urban areas and the organised working class, had serious consequences for the independent trade unions. SACTU advocated what it called 'political trade unionism', by which it meant that 'the apartheid state is all-powerful and that the only form of struggle appropriate to the strength of the state apparatus is armed struggle'. Hence, 'Class-conscious workers ... should abandon the struggle to establish trade unions and acknowledge the primacy of political struggle by leaving the country to get professional military training. The issue of working class rights thus can only be solved through military struggle; in a national democratic state trade union rights will be granted to workers.'<sup>28</sup> This translated in practice in the 1970s into SACTU raiding the democratic trade unions inside the country and the withdrawal of cadres country for military training outside. To the extent that it was successful, SACTU thus depleted the trade unions of activists and weakened them in the name of a quite unrealistic mission of rural guerrilla warfare.

In SADET's first volume on the 1960s Jeremy Cronin was quoted as saying that

the ANC-SACP treated the trade union movement as a simple adjunct to the political struggle in the early 1960s and, when the arm[ed] struggle was launched, the trade union movement was seen simply as a

26 See also on this question M. Legassick, *Towards Socialist Democracy* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2007), 365-392, 413-428.

27 L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), 364-5. For further discussion of ANC armed struggle strategy from the 1960s to the 1980s see M. Legassick, *Armed Struggle and Democracy: The Case of South Africa*, Discussion Paper 20 (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002.)

28 D. Hemson, 'Trade unionism and the struggle for liberation in South Africa', *Capital and Class*, 6, Autumn 1968, 7.

recruitment terrain for guerrillas, and in this way the trade union movement and its cadreship had been recklessly exposed to security police action.<sup>29</sup>

The open trade unions were an integral part of the struggle for democracy. Through their activities, moreover, they succeeded, as the draft chapter showed, in opening up legal space, space which was crucial for providing the bedrock of organization out of which the revolutionary movement of the 1980s could spring. However, neither SACTU officials in exile at the time - nor Magubane today - are prepared to recognise this. An article on the dissolution of SACTU in 1990 claimed that '[f]rom the early 1970s SACTU encouraged the revival and development of progressive trade unions inside the country'.<sup>30</sup> Despite the involvement of SACTU activists in the launch of a number of these unions, this was simply not the case.

### **The Ndlovu-Sithole chapter on the revival of the workers movement**

It is now necessary to turn to the chapter in the second SADET volume written by Sifiso Ndlovu and Jabulani Sithole. Since the first draft, this chapter was re-titled 'The revival of the labour movement, 1970-1980' and has had several new sections added to it.<sup>31</sup> All these sections were semi-plagiarised from our chapter, although the topics are dealt with much more superficially. The aim, as already suggested, is to 'substitute' this chapter for our originally-commissioned chapter on the revival of the workers' movement and thereby to denigrate and demote the rebirth of the internal trade unions and hyperbolise and promote the activities of SACTU.

The main focus of the following critique is with what Ndlovu and Sithole claim about SACTU's activities inside South Africa in the 1970s, comprising about 10 of its 54 pages. It is not concerned with SACTU's solidarity activities in the international arena.<sup>32</sup> Ndlovu and Sithole's claims about SACTU activities in South Africa in the 1970s can be summarised as follows:

**1. SACTU established front unions in South Africa in the 1970s.** In their first draft Ndlovu and Sithole claimed that SACTU's 'underground operatives had been heavily involved in every major development of the decade' and that 'the revival of

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29 Interview with Jeremy Cronin MP by Dr Helena Sheehan, recorded on digital video on 17 April 2001 in All Africa House at University of Cape Town SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 1, 665-6

30 Renee Roux, 'SACTU: end of an era', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 14, 8, May 1990.

31 These include 'The 1973 strikes: chronology and context', 'Perspectives on the significance of the strikes and the revival of the unions', 'The Urban Training Project and the revival of trade unions, 1972 to 1976', 'The Black Consciousness Movement and the revival of trade unions, 1972 to 1976', 'NUSAS-aided initiatives and the revival of the labour movement, 1972 to 1976', 'Foreign funding and the intensification of conflict, 1974 to 1976', 'Strikes and state response, 1974 to 1976', 'FOSATU and the re-emergence of political unionism, 1977 to 1980'.

32 In his first set of comments Magubane criticised our failure to mention the campaign in the United States in 1971-2 which resulted in the Polaroid Corporation withdrawing from dealing with the apartheid regime. In his second set he quoted extensively from a article by Ray Alexander on SACTU's solidarity activities in 1971 and the submission of a memorandum to an academic conference at UCT to argue that SACTU officials 'were not all engaged in MK activities'. Indeed the campaign against Polaroid was an excellent example of solidarity with the struggle against apartheid. I had earlier worked with the *Africa Research Group* in Boston which was involved in the campaign. But this solidarity campaign had no bearing on the development of trade unions in South Africa which is what the chapter was required to deal with. Equally, discussion of SACTU's solidarity activities or submission of memoranda to academic conferences were not our focus which was *building unions inside South Africa*.

SACTU's structures within the country occurred in various phases', the first running from 1970 to 1976, and the second from 1977 to 1980. 'When deepening state repression, especially against SACTU underground operatives, stifled progress in the mid-1970s, SACTU began to work through front trade unions such as the South African Allied Workers' Union in Natal and the Border region of the Eastern Cape, the Motor Assemblies and Components Union of South Africa (MACWUSA) and the General Allied Workers' Union (GAWU), especially from the mid to the end of the 1970s' (my emphasis). These passages were moved from Ndlovu and Sithole's chapter to the introduction to the volume, claiming that this is what their chapter shows.<sup>33</sup> However, in their contribution Ndlovu and Sithole make the similar claim that the 'Natal strikes [of 1973] created an enabling environment for the revival of the political unionism that was first established by SACTU during the 1950s'.<sup>34</sup>

**2. SACTU opened offices in Durban in 1972.** Ndlovu and Sithole wrote that 'SACTU operatives established offices in Durban in 1972. They appointed organisers paid through funds received from the Swaziland-based SACTU machinery to recruit workers into a general workers union. They envisaged a situation in which they could form sector-based unions once workers in sufficient numbers had been recruited. Most workers were reluctant to take up SACTU membership, however, because they still remembered how SACTU members had suffered at the hands of the security police in the 1960s'.<sup>35</sup>

**3. Whites and the internally-formed democratic unions.** Ndlovu and Sithole conclude that 'during the first half of the 1970s, white student-supported initiatives received more attention in historical accounts of the revival of the labour movement, despite the fact that their performance in unionization was far outshone by that of the UTP [Urban Training Project]. Attempts to discredit the latter were successful and yet both initiatives were reformist in nature and *bordered on the reactionary*' (my emphasis).<sup>36</sup>

**4. The SACTU underground.** Ndlovu and Sithole's chapter mentions the names of some fifty SACTU activists inside South Africa in the 1970s, working in 'the SACTU underground machinery that operated in cells'.

**5. Trade union unity talks.** According to Ndlovu and Sithole: 'The disparate nature of unions, some political and others "workerist", some non-racial and others racially exclusive, necessitated the talks that began in 1977 to establish a single trade union federation. This was after a resolution calling for unity was unanimously adopted at the TUCSA Annual Conference in 1976. There were many differences to be ironed out and talks continued from 1977 to 1980. Prior to the commencement of the discussions Stephen Dlamini, on behalf of SACTU, had dis-

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33 'Preface', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol.2, xiii.

34 J. Sithole and S. Ndlovu, 'The revival of the workers' movement, 1970-1980', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 192.

35 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 217.

36 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, p 241.

missed internally based unions as “yellow or puppet trade unions” during his address at the ILO International Labour Orgainsation) Conference in 1976. Furthermore, the unity talks revealed multiple divergent views among the trade unions. Some of these were positions over registration, which the apartheid regime had imposed as a condition for the recognition of African trade unions. Other differences included political participation that was preferred by trade unions that were generally known as community based unions, and non-political involvement associated with FOSATU.<sup>37</sup>

None of these contentions stands the most elementary test of historical method, that of corroborating evidence, as will be shown, below.

**1. SACTU front unions.** Throughout the chapter Ndlovu and Sithole can mention only *one* factory in connection with SACTU activity in the 1970s: Ford in Port Elizabeth. They tie in only *one* strike during the decade with a SACTU ‘front union’: ‘In 1980 Mhlahlo became one of the first members of a new trade union, the Motor Assemblies and Components Union of South Africa (hereafter MAC-WUSA), that was formed at Ford and Volkswagen in Port Elizabeth following the failure to respond appropriately during a labour dispute at the plant.’<sup>38</sup> Yet despite being able to produce evidence of SACTU activities at only one factory and in only *one* strike, they make the claim that ‘underground operatives had been heavily involved in *every major labour development of the decade*.’

What about the 1972 PUTCO (Public Transport Corporation) strike? What about the strikes at Frame factories in Natal in January 1974? What about the strike wave in East London in 1974? What about the strikes at Smith and Nephew in Durban in 1973-4? What about the strikes of some 30-50,000 mineworkers on different mines between 1973 and 1975? What about the strikes by dockworkers, and at Nautilus Marine, Duens Bakery and Mastertreads in Cape Town in 1974? What about the general strikes called by the SSRC (Soweto Students Representative Council) in Soweto in 1976? What about the Fattis and Monis strike in Cape Town in 1979? In 1980, ‘almost every day’ wrote one activist at the time, ‘there was at least one strike in one of the major industrial centers of South Africa’.<sup>39</sup> Yet Ndlovu and Sithole are silent on the activities of SACTU’s ‘underground operatives’ in any of these strikes. What about the Cape Town meatworkers strike of 1980? What about the strikes at Frame textile factories in Natal in 1980? What about the motor industry strikes in Uitenhage in 1980? What about the PUTCO

37 Sithole and Ndlovu, ‘Labour movement’, SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 232.

38 The strike (or rather, strikes) at Ford, from November 1979, were led initially by the in-house Ford Workers’ Committee (quite possibly with the SACTU involvement mentioned by Ndlovu and Sithole) and are dealt with in far more detail in the Hemson/Legassick/Ulrich chapter on the revival of the workers movement: ‘Here the UAW, was totally bypassed when workers struck initially in November 1979 under what became the leadership of an in-house Ford Workers’ Committee to protest the firing from Cortina of local community organization PEBCO leader Thozamile Botha, who had already led mass struggles in his township. They struck once, then they struck twice over work hours and then a third, and fourth and fifth time after white workers intervened against blacks with accusations of racism – and the conflict spread to a nearby General Tyre plant and a paper mill. Ford fired them, and they began to campaign for reinstatement’. Ndlovu and Sithole also, by the way, also fail to mention SAAWU’s involvement in at least ten strikes in the latter part of 1980 which are also dealt with in the Hemson et al, ‘Revival’, SADET, *Road to* , Vol.2, 307-309.

39 Morris, ‘Capital’s responses to African trade unions post-Wiehahn’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. VII, 1-2, 1981, 73.

strike, or the municipal workers strike in Johannesburg in 1980? What about the SASOL (South African Coal, Oil and Gas Corporation) strike at Secunda in 1980 of 18,000 migrant workers? Not a shred of evidence is presented by Ndlovu and Sithole to suggest that SACTU ‘underground operatives’ were involved in any of these strikes.

In their chapter they also wrote that ‘SACTU further resolved to launch campaigns for a minimum wage, for the release of political prisoners, for the right to work and for unfettered trade union rights. SACTU rejected all cosmetic changes the apartheid regime had introduced in the labour code.’ The document they refer to is undated but they presume it is from the 1970s. Ndlovu and Sithole provide no evidence that a single one of these campaigns was actually ‘launched’ in South Africa in the 1970s. Nor could they, because, for the bulk of the decade there were no ‘SACTU front unions’ to launch them. In fact, conditions for most of the 1970s did not allow the emergence of unions openly campaigning for political demands. Moreover, it does not seem that SACTU-in-exile was able to transmit any consistent line to its activists inside the country on how to build workers’ organisation. Thus SACTU activists in the Cape joined students in building workers’ committees, those in Natal joined students in building unions, and those in the Transvaal were divided between these two positions.<sup>40</sup>

In reality, the SACTU ‘front unions’ mentioned by Ndlovu and Sithole date not from the mid-1970s, but from 1979. These are (a) the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) formed according to them in August 1978, but according to most other sources, in March 1979, growing in East London, and in Durban; (b) MACWUSA (formed in Port Elizabeth in October 1980), and (c) the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU) in Johannesburg (formed also in 1980). Thus by the end of 1980 there were a mere three *regional* such unions – which hardly supports their mid-1970s claims. There is simply no evidence to support claims for SACTU front unions in the 1970s and the purpose of making such claims is to inflate the role of SACTU.

**2. SACTU in Durban 1972.** Ndlovu and Sithole fail to mention that the SACTU office was closed down shortly afterwards. The source they are citing reads as follows: ‘In 1972, SACTU quietly opened an office in Durban; since the labor federation was officially legal, organizers hoped to rebuild a labour organization, inviting workers to join a general union. Organizers from that office may have had links to the dockworkers strike. *The SACTU recruitment drive was closed down shortly afterward, however, apparently because its organizers decided to work within the less-risky overt unions rather than to set up an underground movement, which might invite arrests.*’<sup>41</sup> (my emphasis).

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40 See Hemson et al, ‘Revival’, SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 254, 257, 263-4, 273.

41 G.W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers’ Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 175.

Here Ndlovu and Sithole suppress the fact that SACTU organizers in Natal participated in the formation of the TUACC unions. One of these was Harold Nxasana. In their first draft they wrote the following concerning Nxasana:

In the greater Durban area they [SACTU activists] worked with Harold Nxasana, who was employed by the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund in the early 1970s. He was very instrumental in reviving trade unions such as the Metal Workers' Union in 1973 and the Textile Workers' Union for Durban and Pinetown in September of the same year. He then became the Assistant Principal for the Institute of Industrial Education and also served on the editorial board of the *South African Labour Bulletin*. Prior to this Nxasana was a member of SACTU and he was convicted for promoting the aims of a banned organisation in February 1967.

In their final version this has been altered to the following:

The IIE employed Harold Bhekisa Nxasana as an organizer in 1973. He was later made assistant principal at IIE and also served on the editorial board of the *South African Labour Bulletin*. During the 1970s he was drawn into the Gwala underground network, which he subsequently betrayed when he became the leading state witness, providing the most damaging evidence that led to a guilty verdict and life imprisonment imposed on five of the accused: Harry Gwala, Matthews Meyiwa, John Nene, Alphaeus Mdlalose and Anton Xaba.<sup>42</sup>

Thus Nxasana's previous role (for which he was imprisoned) as a SACTU organizer has been omitted, as has his role in building the new trade unions. Instead, the fact that he turned state witness in the 1976-77 Harry Gwala trial is inserted. He is turned from 'good guy' to 'bad guy' – but it is the same Nxasana.

Let us leave aside that, in their first version Ndlovu and Sithole tell us that Nxasana was *reviving* trade unions (as if they had existed previously, as SACTU unions). The source they cited for their information, Michael Lobban's *White Man's Justice*, wrote that Nxasana had 'been instrumental... in *forming* the Metal Workers' Union in 1973, and had *formed* the Textile Workers Union or Durban and Pinetown in September of that year'.<sup>43</sup> Ndlovu and Sithole, substituting the word 'revived' for the word 'formed', falsified the information. More germanely, in a subsequent 1993 interview with David Hemson, Nxasana elaborated on the abortive attempt to open a SACTU office:

We felt that the best area for reorganizing was to revive SACTU because it had not been banned in any case. We decided to form a committee with myself as acting secretary, Dlamini as the chairperson,

42 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 205.

43 M. Lobban, *White Man's Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 172.

Mdluli as the treasurer, with others as additional members. We decided to write a pamphlet informing the workers about their plight, and the rising cost of living, their having no unions and saying that SACTU was being revived. We were crazy, in fact [laughs ruefully], because workers started flocking into the offices and we didn't have any meaningful resources.<sup>44</sup>

So it appears, contrary to Ndlovu and Sithole's assertion, that workers were not initially afraid to join SACTU. They claim to have read Nxasana's evidence in the Harry Gwala trial, but they omit to mention from it that the SACTU office was closed down because the Security Police visited it and took Nxasana for a drive.<sup>45</sup> They warned him 'that although SACTU was not banned, the policy of the government was against African trade unions because they were propagating communism. Van Zyl ... advised us to stop operating. ... He said if we don't stop we would be banned'.<sup>46</sup> So the SACTU office was closed, and Nxasana went to work for the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund, and subsequently for the IIE and the *Labour Bulletin*. He would have been appointed the first general secretary of the NUTW, but the Security Police again refused to countenance this.<sup>47</sup> Michael Lobban in *White Man's Justice* refers to Gwala's evidence in the 1976-7 Pietermaritzburg trial when he claimed that he wanted again to revive SACTU in early 1975. This was opposed by Nxasana 'fearing that the police attention this would attract might kill off the fledgling [TUACC] unions now being set up' – and the revival did not take place.<sup>48</sup>

This is all relevant because it provides the context in which Nxasana was compelled to turn state's evidence in the Gwala trial. He had decided that the SACTU road would be suppressed, and turned to building the new trade unions as the alternative. In fact he became a widely written national spokesperson for the new trade unions.<sup>49</sup> Yet Gwala and others, because of his previous SACTU experience, kept up the pressure on him, not for the purpose of building trade unions but to act as a recruiter for MK. Given that he was already a target for the security police, this compromised him, and after he was arrested in 1975 and tortured in prison he, together with another former Robben Island prisoner and SACTU activist, turned state's evidence.

**3. The new unions.** Regarding membership of the unions associated with the UTP (Urban Training Project) the figures that Ndlovu and Sithole provide are not for

44 Nxasana interview with Hemson, 24/3/1993; CC 108/1976, evidence of B. H. Nxasana, 776-7, 953, 989.

45 For example, they cite PAR, RSC Natal, Box 1/1/1000, Volume 32 of Case No. C.C. 108/1976, 'State vs T.H. Gwala and 9 Others: Evidence of Harold B. Nxasana', 777.

46 Nxasana interview with Hemson, 24/3/1993.

47 See CC 108/1976. Evidence of H. Nxasana, 986-7, 989. Personal communication from D. Hemson.

48 Lobban, *White Man's Justice*, 172.

49 Ndlovu and Sithole mention H. Nxasana, 'The politics of migrant labour', *South African Labour Bulletin*, I, 8, January-February 1975; F. Fisher and H. Nxasana, 'The labour situation in South Africa', *South African Labour Bulletin*, II, 2, July 1975, but in his evidence at the trial the defence counsel led him through many other pieces: see CC 108/1976. Evidence of H. Nxasana, 953-980.

the 1970s but the 1980s.<sup>50</sup> At its founding conference in 1979 FOSATU had a paid-up, signed-up membership of 45,000 while when it was launched in September 1980 the UTP-associated Council of South African Trade Unions (CUSA) had a signed-up membership of only 20,000.<sup>51</sup> Ndlovu and Sithole also cite Lowry and Buhlungu on the positive contributions of the UTP towards the establishment of trade unions, but exactly the same claims are made for TUACC/FOSATU unions by many sources, which Ndlovu and Sithole simply ignore.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, if the UTP unions were so democratic, how do they explain, as our chapter makes clear, that in the unity talks in 1977-79 leading to the formation of FOSATU, members of UTP unions split from their general secretaries and went over to FOSATU because of complaints that union officials were failing to keep them informed about unity discussions, and because of a general lack of democratic structures and practices?<sup>53</sup>

The second claim - that the TUACC/FOSATU unions and the UTP unions both bordered 'on the reactionary' - is absurd. Indeed Ndlovu and Sithole, in the course of their chapter, admit that the UTP's 'economism' and hostility towards politics alienated the UTP from other groups that were involved in the revival of trade unions during this period.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, though Ndlovu and Sithole write within the ANC tradition, they fail to point out that the CUSA (Council of Unions of South Africa) unions descended from the UTP failed to join COSATU in 1985 and remained in sectarian isolation from it as NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions), save for the NUM, formed only in 1982, which broke from CUSA to join COSATU. Additionally, in contrast to the TUACC/FOSATU unions and the WP-GWU (Western Province General Workers' Union), the UTP unions were formed with no involvement whatsoever from SACTU activists.<sup>55</sup>

Let us take another instance in which Ndlovu and Sithole falsely inflate the role of SACTU at the expense of the independent democratic trade unions. They write that the process of reviving SACTU structures was 'further boosted by the release of trade unionists who had been incarcerated alongside their comrades during the 1960s.... Other trade unionists were released throughout the country during the early 1970s. In Natal Harry Gwala, who was credited with remoulding what was originally a predominantly Indian union, the Howick Rubber Workers Union, into an inclusive and very powerful union at BTR (British Tyre and Rubber) Sarmcol, was released in June 1972.' The reader might assume from this that Gwala 'remoulded' the Howick Rubber Workers Union into a 'very powerful union' *in the 1970s*. In reality Ndlovu and Sithole are referring here to Gwala's activities *in the 1950s and early 1960s* – after which the Howick Rubber Workers' Union was in fact crushed for decades. They cite an unpublished master's thesis by Bonnin.<sup>56</sup>

50 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 200.

51 Henson et al, 'Revival', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 248-9.

52 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 200.

53 Henson et al, 'Revival', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 301-2. See also Report on a meeting held on the 30/8/78 at Diakonia House Braamfontein to Discuss the Federation. 1. HP: AH1999 C1.1.1.; Friedman, *Tomorrow*, 183; Johan Maree, 'An analysis of the independent trade unions in South Africa in the 1970s', Ph.D thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986, 388-393, 402-4, 411-416, 441-2, 443-5, 454-7.

54 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 201.

55 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 202.

56 D.Bonnin, 'Class consciousness and conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940-1987: The case of BTRSarmcol workers', M. Soc. Sc Thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 125.

In the 1970s, however, the BTR Sarmcol workers joined the independent democratic union MAWU. This is discussed in some detail by Bonnin, who provides a sophisticated account both of continuity with the Rubber Workers' Union but also discontinuity. By 1974 MAWU had about 200 members and was holding public meetings and electing shop stewards (something that would have been impossible for SACTU at that time). In the 1980s, of course, it was through MAWU that the BTR workers launched their well-known struggle for recognition.<sup>57</sup> The fact that Gwala pointed the BTR workers to MAWU is not mentioned by Ndlovu and Sithole.

**4. The SACTU underground.** As we have seen, SACTU activists were not involved for the most part in organising or working within trade unions in the 1970s. For the most part, it would appear, they were attempting to recruit workers and youth to leave the country, where they would join MK (Umkhonto weSizwe). This was particularly the case as external ANC-SACTU activists, from Swaziland especially, began to link up with those inside.<sup>58</sup> Although Ndlovu and Sithole mention SACTU contacts with Barney Dladla when he visited Lusaka in 1970 it appears not to have been until about 1973 that the internal-external links began to be established. The 'SACTU underground machinery', as it became established, was in fact doing the work of MK and not of SACTU.

In their first draft Ndlovu and Sithole quoted Gwala at his trial as saying that 'recruits who were sent abroad had to undergo trade union training in institutes such as the Ruskin College in Oxford'. Indeed the whole defence in that trial was constituted around a claim that the accused had been reviving a (still legal) SACTU rather than recruiting for the ANC/MK. To unpack the evidence in this complicated trial would require deeper and more extended analysis. There is however scant evidence of recruits ending up at Ruskin College. It is significant, moreover, that Ndlovu and Sithole have dropped this claim by Gwala from the final version of their chapter.<sup>59</sup> We take this as recognition on their part that the defence was seeking to secure an acquittal rather than reporting facts.

At one point in their chapter Ndlovu and Sithole discuss the disputes which broke out in the IAS in Johannesburg in 1974-5, and maintain that Jeannette Schoon (Curtis) and Sipho Kubeka claimed these were due to the 'prevalent anti-SACTU standpoint among most IAS (Industrial Aid Society) members' and their 'anti-nationalist' approach.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, however, it was mainly after the 'pro-SACTU' faction had abandoned the IAS that that body succeeded in building trade unions, albeit with an emphasis away from politics. While some SACTU activists may have been involved in building the democratic trade unions inside the country, the whole pressure exerted by SACTU officials in exile was not towards building trade unions, but to act as a signpost to MK.

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57 D. Bonnin, 'Class consciousness', 171-184. See also Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance*, 175.

58 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', referring to the chapter on trade unions by Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, claim that it puts forward a view that 'SACTU leaders abroad were no longer members of the federation': SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 240. Anyone who reads our chapter will see there is no basis for this assertion.

59 It would have been in Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 229.

60 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 208-9.

**5. Unity talks.** Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the trade union history of the 1970s will recognise Ndlovu and Sithole's claims that unity talks started in 1977 were initiated by a 1976 TUCSA resolution, and involved 'community-based unions' (eg SAAWU and GAWU) and FOSATU as a complete fabrication. For a start, TUCSA had no interest whatever in 'unity' with or among the independent unions – it was hostile to all such unions. Had Ndlovu and Sithole consulted the readily available resolutions of TUCSA conferences, they would have discovered that there was no resolution regarding unification of trade unions at the 1976 TUCSA conference, nor for that matter at prior or subsequent conferences either.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, neither SAAWU nor GAWU nor FOSATU existed in 1977. Further, the question of registration arose only after the Wiehahn Commission had reported in May 1979.

In reality the talks that began in 1977 were initiated by NUMARWOSA and involved only the TUACC unions and the UTP unions (and no SACTU 'front unions'). In April 1979, as a result, FOSATU was launched. Thereafter the next unity talks – those which for the first time involved SACTU 'front unions' – took place in Langa in August 1981.<sup>62</sup> SACTU's publication, *Workers' Unity*, commented on the Langa meeting that 'its significance and importance... cannot be over-emphasised', because it was the 'most representative conference of independent unregistered and registered unions'.<sup>63</sup> At this meeting there were immediate divergences on the question of registration of unions. FOSATU came out for conditional registration. SAAWU etc, as well as the FCWU and the WPGWU came down against registration. These divisions remained for several years – delaying the formation of COSATU which was launched only in early December 1985.

Ndlovu and Sithole accord SACTU an entirely fictitious unifying role in entirely fictitious unity talks. In 1980 a furious debate was raging over registration between the FOSATU unions on the one hand and GWU on the other – and by 1981 SAAWU and GAWU had joined the GWU position. At the Langa talks in 1981 a unanimous resolution was passed: 'We resist and reject the present system of registration insofar as it is designed to control and interfere in the internal affairs of the unions'. However, as Baskin points out, 'The carefully-worded resolution aimed to accommodate both those opposed to registration and the large FOSATU and CUSA blocs which intended to register and use the space created by amendments to the law. It reflected opposition to registration under the new law but concealed deep divisions over the tactics of registration'.<sup>64</sup>

Even as regards the actual unity talks which took place between 1981 and 1985, Ndlovu and Sithole entirely distort the role of SACTU and its 'front unions'. They claim that SACTU activists worked 'for the achievement of a single trade

61 William Cullen library, Wits, AH 1426, Records of TUCSA: Ad2.24, 22nd Annual Conference, September 1976; Ad2.25, 23rd Annual Conference, September 1977; Ad2.26, Special 'mini' conference, April 1978; Ad2.27, 24th Annual Conference, September 1978. In reality the earliest references to any desire of TUCSA for talks with independent unions seems to come after the 1984 death of General Secretary Grobelaar in R.H Botha, President of TUCSA to C. Dlamini, President of FOSATU 7/11/1984 and other similarly dated letters in AH 1426, Records of TUCSA, Ca 7.2 FOSATU: letters. Earlier letters from TUCSA to FOSATU are hostile in tone.

62 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 34.

63 *Workers' Unity*, 27, September 1981.

64 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 35.

union organization'. and 'encouraged its members to remain at the table'. At the next unity talks in April 1982, MACWUSA and GWUSA walked out in protest at the fact that FOSATU and CUSA unions had chosen to register and called on other unregistered unions to join them, though none did. This decision by MACWUSA and GWUSA even alienated their previous allies the FCWU and GWU.<sup>65</sup> Ndlovu and Sithole claim that SACTU encouraged 'focusing on issues that promoted unity rather than divisive matters'. However the next unity talks, in Port Elizabeth in July 1982, 'turned into the most bitter of all the summits.... The seven community unions [i.e. the SACTU 'front unions'] declared their principles non-negotiable and said they could not work with unions which did not share all seven principles... after lengthy argument it became clear that the summit was deadlocked. The meeting ended with a terse press statement: 'It was decided that there is no basis for the formation of a federation of all unions represented at this stage. No further meeting is planned'. This was the result of the 'ultimatist' approach adopted by the SACTU 'front unions'. It was hardly 'focussing on issues that promoted unity', as Ndlovu and Sithole claim. In fact the SACTU 'front unions' delayed the formation of a new united trade union organization. As Baskin writes, 'The Port Elizabeth deadlock was a serious blow to the search for unity, and it was nine months before the unions met again'. Attempts at mediation between the community unions and the remainder failed: the SACTU 'front unions' 'were entirely unbending – they wouldn't make any compromises which might bring the two sides closer together'.<sup>66</sup>

The next meeting took place in Athlone in April 1983, and was made possible only because the 'SACTU front unions' retreated from their hard-line stance and 'accepted a proposal to form a federation including unions with different policies'. This meeting succeeded in establishing a feasibility committee to discuss practical proposals for a new federation, which met in Athlone in July 1983 and again in Johannesburg in October. The SACTU 'front unions' again delayed matters at the October meeting by failing to provide the membership information needed to hold demarcation discussions. 'The atmosphere grew sour and suspicious, and allegations of poaching flowed thick and fast.... The unity talks nearly broke down'.<sup>67</sup> Thereafter FOSATU and other unions believed that the SACTU 'front unions' were not really committed to a new federation. When there were renewed unity talks in March 1984 in Johannesburg, the SACTU 'front unions' again walked out, because they refused to accept the conditions (a) that they had firmly decided to join a new trade union federation (b) that they had decided to disband existing federations; and (c) that general unions agreed to form industrial unions.<sup>68</sup> It was only pressure from workers on the ground – in the form of the uprisings in the Vaal Triangle which precipitated the two-day stayaway in November 1984, involving FOSATU, CUSA and SACTU 'front unions' – that finally compelled the SACTU 'front unions' to rejoin the process of creating the new federation of COSATU. In

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65 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 37.

66 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 39.

67 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 41.

68 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 42.

fact they had to be nudged by SACTU-in-exile which had changed its position – in particular it urged the ‘front unions’ to agree to create industrial unions. Equally FOSATU had modified its position to accommodate the ‘front unions’.<sup>69</sup>

Thus the actual record of the real unity talks does not support Ndlovu and Sithole’s account of SACTU’s role. In fact, they have once again inflated and fabricated the latter and elided the role of the non-SACTU independent trade unions. It would seem that they are consciously creating a fictitious account. Historians want to have careers, and have sensitive antennae for the power relations that are conducive to that. In this case the ANC has ‘won’ the liberation struggle and is in government, exercising a powerful influence in society. The party favours interpretations of the past that conform to its official history. Ndlovu and Sithole’s chapter seems to us to be a product of those power relations, consciously fabricating a version of past events to lend academic credibility to and so authenticate the dominant party mythology. To this end they distort quotations, make assertions that are contradicted by the evidence and suppress contrary evidence in the public record. Perhaps it is not a matter of conscious deceit, but of passive submission to the prevailing power relations. In any event, Ndlovu and Sithole, along with Magubane, have become historical spin doctors on behalf of SACTU and the ANC.

### **History and propaganda**

A further critique, especially by Ben Magubane, of our draft trade union chapter was that it was used to ‘settle ideological scores’. He also accused Hemson and Legassick of wanting ‘to fault the efforts of SACTU in order to salvage one’s disruptive activities’, and of putting ‘propaganda for the position of the Marxist tendency of the ANC.’ We rejected these accusations. Magubane’s accusations were an attempt to divert attention from the real struggle over practical questions – direct links, depleting the trade unions of experienced workers – that we had brought up in the chapter.

We had also written in the first draft of the chapter: ‘One consequence [of the position of SACTU officials] was the emergence of a tendency in the ANC supporting the building of independent democratic trade unions and advocating armed workers’ self-defence *rather than* guerrilla warfare: several supporters of these ideas were unconstitutionally and undemocratically suspended from the ANC in 1979.’ Magubane’s comments were also intended to discredit the policies of the Marxist Workers’ Tendency (MWT) of the ANC, which emerged from these suspensions, and implicitly to endorse the suspensions themselves.

Let me trace the background to these suspensions – of Paula Ensor, Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Rob Petersen. Hemson and Ensor had been NU-SAS students involved in the Wages Commissions, and Petersen joined Ensor in organising workers once the WPWAB (Western Province Workers’ Advice Bureau was formed in Cape Town. Hemson, banned and involved in trade union work in

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69 Baskin, *Striking Back*, 45-6.

Natal, left South Africa illegally, via Swaziland, in late 1975 and Ensor (banned) and Petersen, left illegally via Botswana in 1976. All three linked up with the ANC and with SACTU in London. Very soon Ensor was employed as secretary by John Gaetsewe (who had replaced Mark Shope as General Secretary of SACTU in 1975 and had moved from Lusaka to London). Before long Robert Petersen was appointed editor of the revived SACTU newspaper, *Workers' Unity*. Meanwhile Hemson had registered for a Ph.D at Warwick University, supervised by Martin Legassick, who had worked with the ANC since the early 1960s. Together with others, Hemson and Legassick soon formed a branch of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Coventry, as well as working with SACTU and the ANC youth.

As Ensor, Hemson, Legassick and Petersen worked in SACTU they became convinced that it had no clear position on building the workers' movement in South Africa. They believed that the need was to build independent democratic trade unions above-ground and SACTU underground to guide the work of the open trade unions. For the above-ground unions to have taken up all the political questions in the 1970s would have been suicidal, and the need was to group interested workers from the open unions clandestinely to discuss and take forward such questions. This position, however, was cut across by those in SACTU-in-exile who denounced the open trade unions as 'yellow' and reactionary.

Matters came to a head in relation to *Workers' Unity*. Though this need to build open trade unions won the approval of the SACTU NEC during its first year, thereafter those opposed to the open unions began to mount resistance to the standpoint the newspaper was putting forward – revealing the confusion in SACTU. In April 1979 Petersen presented a memorandum to the SACTU NEC maintaining that this confusion was hampering SACTU's development. As a result of the developments which flowed from this, Petersen and Ensor, along with Hemson and Legassick, were unconstitutionally and undemocratically suspended from the ANC in October 1979.<sup>70</sup>

All four of those suspended regarded themselves as socialists and Marxists. Legassick was already known as a 'revisionist' (Marxist) historian of South Africa. Ensor and Petersen had been in touch with *Militant*, the Marxist newspaper in the British Labour Party, and before the end of the decade Hemson and Legassick were in touch with *Militant* as well. The Marxist position, we all came to believe, was that a class approach by the workers was needed even to end national oppression in South Africa.

In their chapter, Ndlovu and Sithole attempt to follow Magubane in asserting that the MWT of the ANC ignored the national question. They also claim that the MWT of the ANC 'espoused a thesis that ran contrary to that articulated by the Congress Alliance and argued in line with Alex Callinicos and John Rogers that South Africa was a capitalist country like any other in Western Europe and,

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70 Hemson et al, 'Revival', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, VOL 2, 298. Sithole interview with Petersen, 5/9/2003; *South Africa: The Workers' Movement, SACTU and the ANC: A Struggle for Marxist Policies* (London: Cambridgeheath Press, 1980).

therefore, some eternal verities of political theory as described by Marx applied'.<sup>71</sup> They had not understood the position of the MWT of the ANC, which believed that the theory of permanent revolution was 'amply borne out in the fate of the "Third World" in the twentieth century, including South Africa'.<sup>72</sup> Like Magubane, they had failed to grasp this theory of permanent revolution which applies to all 'Third World' countries. Because of the incapacity of the capitalist class to carry out bourgeois democratic tasks, the national democratic and socialist tasks become combined as tasks for working class revolution. The national democratic revolution can be consummated only by the working class taking power. The MWT of the ANC did not reject CST (Colonialism of a Special Type), as Ndlovu and Sithole maintain, but rejected the idea which the SACP deduced from it, that a 'national democratic revolution' was required as a 'stage' preceding a proletarian, socialist revolution.

Perhaps the most incredible assertion by Ndlovu and Sithole is when they wrote: '[d]iscussions [on trade union unity] were almost derailed by the problems within SACTU in London between 1978 and 1980, which threatened to undermine its unity and ability to work internationally and within South Africa'. Later the point is repeated and added to: 'It [the dispute in London] almost distracted SACTU from its more pressing tasks of providing constructive inputs at the unity talks. Although there were walkouts and the eventual suspension of talks until the next round which began at Langa in 1981, SACTU continued to make constructive contributions at the talks through its operatives working in disguise in front trade unions'.<sup>73</sup>

Both these allegations are unreferenced. It has already been shown, above, that Ndlovu and Sithole's claims of the existence of 'unity talks' between 1977 and 1981 involving SACTU 'front unions' is totally false. Hence it is also clearly an invention that any 'problems' in SACTU in London during that time could have caused 'talks' to be 'almost disrupted' or temporarily postponed. Indeed the 'walk-outs' were created *after 1981* by the SACTU front unions themselves, as I have outlined above.<sup>74</sup>

The main differences, moreover, between the SACTU front unions and others after 1981 were over registration and over the political involvement of unions. The suspended comrades, and the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC were on the side of the SACTU 'front unions' on *both these issues* (without necessarily agreeing with their tactics in trying to press for them). Therefore, even if these fictitious 'unity talks' had been taking place during the period of the suspensions (1979), how could the dispute within SACTU have affected those talks?

Moreover Sithole had been provided with a full set of *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*. In issue No 4, October 1981 there is an article by J. Wilson [D. Hemson] and

71 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 195.

72 Legassick, 'Past, present and future of the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC', in I. Liebenberg et al, eds., *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1994), 178.

73 Sithole and Ndlovu, 'Labour movement', SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. 2, 233, 240.

74 To its credit, *Workers' Unity*, now under Stalinist editorship in London, rapped its 'front unions' on the knuckles: 'The struggle for the overthrow of apartheid and the ending of exploitation is more important than the issues that divide us' – 32, August 1982.

Rocco Malgas, titled ‘Build the trade union united front!’ It criticizes the Bill on trade unions then before parliament as an anti-union measure, and hails the trade union unity talks in Langa in August 1981: ‘Despite the limited programme (unfortunately, for example, not every aspect of the new Bill was rejected), the meeting marks one of the most important steps forward in the history of the workers’ movement in South Africa’. It continued by warning that the defensive pact agreed at the Langa meeting was not sufficient and called for a united front of trade unions to organize the mass of unorganized workers – with an initial programme of a national minimum wage and defiance of the laws controlling the trade unions. ‘Steps towards the amalgamation of different trade unions, or towards the creation of a single trade union federation must be supported; this organizational unity will be the stronger, the fuller the agreement on the fundamental questions of programme, strategy and tactics on which it is based.... A target of 1 million members by the end of 1982 would be entirely possible’, this article maintained. ‘The independent union movement would be on granite foundations. It would then become possible to go further, to take up campaigns against the pass laws, defiance of the migrant labour system, support for “squatters” against the police, etc....*In this way the trade unions will become a key force in the struggle for power by the working class. On these foundations also, the ANC can be built as a mass organization with a socialist programme.*’

Regarding myself, Ndlovu and Sithole wrote: ‘Legassick had left the country as a student during the 1960s. In 1964 he was elected NUSAS international representative. He became estranged from NUSAS as a result of ideological differences with its internal leadership. After completing his PhD at UCLA he moved to Britain where he featured prominently in the race-class debate on South Africa. Legassick was also a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Warwick.’ A footnote adds ‘Sifiso Ndlovu regards Legassick’s role in the liberation struggle as ambiguous’ and refers to ‘Legassick’s trip to Sweden with Tambo and Kunene on a fund raising mission for the ANC’<sup>75</sup> and to Ndlovu’s chapter in SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol. I, p. 557 which mentions that in Los Angeles in the 1960s Legassick together with Bernard Magubane and Anthony Ngubo established the South African Freedom Action Committee and that Legassick engaged in a hunger strike to publicise the call to release political prisoners in South Africa.

On what evidence does Ndlovu regard Legassick’s role in the struggle as ‘ambiguous’? From before the time he went to Los Angeles, in fact from 1962 when he met Mazisi Kunene, representative of the ANC in Europe, based in Britain, Legassick had supported the ANC – and continued to do so, even after his suspension from it in 1979, up to voting for it in the first democratic election in 1994! In 1973 ANC President O. R. Tambo had enough confidence in him to take him (together with Mazisi Kunene, then a fund-raiser for the ANC) to Scandinavia as Ndlovu and Sithole mention – in fact to Norway and Denmark as well as Sweden. We were

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75 Mentioned in T. Sellström, ed., *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa; Volume II: Solidarity and Assistance, 1970–1992* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999), 398, 402, 581; T.L. Eriksen, ed., *Norway and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainsitutet, 2000), 39, 140–41. The title and page numbers are given wrongly in SADET, *Road to Democracy*, Vol.2, 233.

raising funds for the Vocational Training Programme, which was a programme for sustaining MK fighters in the camps in Tanzania when they were almost starving. Are Ndlovu and Sithole also claiming that Kunene's and O.R. Tambo's role in the struggle was 'ambiguous'?

After the trip to Scandinavia, Kunene and Legassick stayed on in Europe while Tambo returned to Britain, and, wanting a period of quiet, asked if he could stay in Legassick's flat in Brighton. When Legassick returned to his flat, propped up on a paper on race and class he was writing on my typewriter, was the following note from Tambo: 'Martin, In case you return here and have to proceed to Geneva, would you bring some of this material – articles, etc. Most interesting and your stuff *very* good. As it happens the matter of 'race' and 'class' in South Africa is very much with us this moment. We have to clear it up once and for all – and I'm working on it. Without any reference works. Maybe *you* are the reference authority. So, I'll use you.'<sup>76</sup> So at least President Tambo saw nothing 'ambiguous' in Legassick's role in the liberation struggle at that point!

### **Post-apartheid patriotic history**

Ben Magubane in allegiance to the ANC-SACTU line is hostile to the independent democratic trade unions that arose in the 1970s. Despite COSATU, he does not believe that democratic trade unions could exist in apartheid society. To this end he categorised them as 'parallel unions' and 'service organisations'. He slandered them as possible 'friends of the regime' and 'upholders of the status quo of apartheid'. He wrongly alleged that their organisers wanted to 'liquidate the national struggle'. Refusing to recognise their political challenge to the apartheid regime, he dismissed them as 'economistic'. Ndlovu and Sithole supplemented this argument by deflating the role played by the democratic trade unions in the 1970s, and by exaggerating and misrepresenting the role of SACTU inside South Africa in the same period – portraying its activists as building trade unions when for most of the decade they were recruiting for MK. They invented a totally false chronology for the process of trade union unity, and transposed back to the 1970s debates of the 1980s.

The practice of good historical method, in our view, is to try and avoid passively succumbing to the prevailing power relations – rather to try to combat the influence of those power relations in order to find out how events occurred. Magubane, Ndlovu and Sithole have all three sacrificed balanced historical method and presentation of evidence on the altar of defending the ANC. Responding to a letter from me in which I criticised their draft chapter, Ndlovu quoted a passage from the conservative British historian Arthur Marwick. 'All each individual historian produces is a contribution to knowledge, tentative and fallible, which will be attacked, debated, qualified and amplified.'<sup>77</sup> Ndlovu's response totally ignored the main points I was making: that an 'individual historian' has an obligation not to be

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76 Note in possession of Martin Legassick.  
77 Sifiso Ndlovu email to Martin Legassick 15/6/2005.

careless in her or his historical method, and also to be aware of previous historical writing on the subject. Ndlovu and Sithole's chapter is not a 'tentative' and 'fallow' step forward, but an ahistorical step backwards, that ignores the evidence and work of previous historians of the trade unions.

Curiously, they begin their chapter with the following quotation from Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shame*:

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking the last cigarette. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated, leave few marks: field-patterns, acts – heads, folk-tales, broken pitchers, burial mounds, fading memory of their youthful beauty. History loves only those who dominate her. It is a relationship of mutual enslavement.

In Rushdie's novel these are the thoughts of a politician's mistress attributed to him as he leaves her to take up the challenge of attaining power because he is feeling threatened by competition. He is an obnoxious dissolute character who gives up his previous corrupt practices such as gambling, horse racketeering and whoring. He comes to power and is subsequently executed. In Rushdie's bitterly sardonic writing style, of course these thoughts are not celebrated, but regarded as unfortunate truths. Ndlovu and Sithole, however, can only be using the words as an epigraph for their chapter because they are celebrating the fact that '[H]istory loves only those who dominate her' – by which, presumably, they mean the ANC and SACTU! Unconsciously, they thus assume the mantle of the dissolute politician.

I say these things because what the debate has revealed is the class forces at work. Magubane, Ndlovu and Sithole, in my view, are under pressure to be 'organic intellectuals' for the ANC leadership of the 2000s. This is an ANC leadership which has compromised with capitalism, which has promoted the rich and neglected the poor. As such they hate and fear any expression of the political independence of the working class, which began to be manifest in the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. Hence their opposition to the democratic trade unions of that time. What is reflected in a small way in the debate over this chapter is the much bigger *class* struggle now taking place within the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC leadership on the one hand and the working class organised in COSATU on the other (with the SACP increasingly divided and caught between them). There is much to be learnt from the history of the struggle for liberation which remains relevant today.