

Valuable trade union history fails its potential reading public

Kally Forrest, *Metal That Will Not Bend: The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980–1995*

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This book is an addition to the growing number of contemporary South African trade union histories published since the 1980s.¹⁵ Within the space of 22 chapters the author traces the rise of NUMSA through its predecessors MAWU and NAAWU and examines how it built and used workers' power. The huge influence that NUMSA exercises as the largest affiliate (it had 235 000 members by 1989) in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is confirmed by its many leaders who became part of the post-apartheid South African

15. See for example K. Luckhardt and B. Wall, *Organize or Starve: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1980); J. Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924–55: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984); D. MacShane *et al.*, *Power! Black Workers, their Unions and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Spokesman, Nottingham, 1984); D. Ncube, *The Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa* (Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1985); E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1985); S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970–1984* (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1987); J. Maree, *The Independent Trade Unions 1974–1984: Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin* (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1987); J. Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of Cosatu* (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1991); R. Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity: International Labour and South African Trade Unions* (UCT Press, Cape Town, 1995); G. Adler and E. Webster, *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985–1997* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2000); K. von Holdt, *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (University of Natal Press, Scottsville, 2003); and M. Friedman, "The Future is in the Hands of the Workers": *A History of FOSATU* (Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust, Houghton, 2011).

political and labour elite, including names such as Bernie Fanaroff, Alec Erwin, Moses Mayekiso, John Gomomo, Tony Ehrenreich, Enoch Godongwana, Danny Oliphant and Willys Mchunu, to name but a few.

Chapters 1 to 5 (1980–1984) deal mainly with NUMSA and its predecessors building local power through various organising strategies which include its early focus on organising the workplace and developing and educating shop stewards, committees and organisers. These chapters also spotlight strategies to increase membership aided by the Wichahn recommendations which brought Africans into the industrial relations system, and by union mergers in different parts of the metal sector which aimed to organise workers nationally.

Chapters 6 to 8 (1983–1989) trace NUMSA's building of national bureaucratic bargaining and organisational power. The union streamlined its internal systems, enabling it to operate more efficiently and to stabilise its income. It entered the national metal industrial council controversially, and through major industrial action became the most important bargaining partner in both the engineering and automobile sectors. This allowed it to consider how to reshape its industries.

Chapters 9 to 15 (1989–1995) reveal a now powerful NUMSA taking on employers and winning substantial gains in both wage and non-wage areas. However, in a recessionary climate where its industries are declining and bleeding jobs, and after a disastrous national engineering strike, the union turns to developing and implementing an alternative vision. It now aims to create stable and predictable conditions to bolster the rebuilding of South Africa's embattled metal sectors while attempting to raise pay and the social wage. This programme is flawed by tensions between national leaders and the factory floor and other faulty assumptions which some believed were an ideological cover for retrenchments. Chapters 16 to 22 (1980–1995) deal with NUMSA's socialist politics, tracing its different political strands with an emphasis on its fierce independence and how this is compromised by political conditions in South Africa,

including the outbreak of severe violence, and the nature of the alliances it forged.

The author, Kally Forrest, also published other trade union histories and is a former editor of *The South African Labour Bulletin*. This position gave her excellent access to all the prominent role players in the metal union sector: metal workers; organisers; shop stewards; strike leaders and activists; union educational officers and administrators; as well as union secretaries and presidents. The text is interspersed with various interviews held with these personalities. The large variety of unique photos of workers, union leaders, strike actions, union councils, etc. augments the value of the book. Chapters 18 and 19, which describe the violent clashes and bloodshed between the COSATU-backed NUMSA and the IFP-backed UWUSA in the late 1980s and early 1990s for domination and control of the African metal labour force, are of special significance. Although these events are not unknown to the public at large, the author presents important perspectives on the dynamics of the power relationships between these two trade union entities – e.g., NUMSA and COSATU’s strategies to defend their members from the escalating and unbridled violence as well as the decisive role that cultural traditions and tribalism played during the internecine strife.

The book is an adaptation of the author’s PhD thesis and that is the problem with this publication. Instead of reducing the narrative into a more concise version, say a manageable 250-odd pages to make it more reader friendly, this publication entails a mammoth 486 pages of contents even after admitting (p v) that the study was reduced from an “overtly long PhD”. Engaging with the book requires long and tedious reading. Page after page, the narrative follows the procrastinated process of the rise of NUMSA literally from shop floor to shop floor; factory to factory; industry to industry; and strike to strike. Too many quotes from interviewees, too many discussions on socialist and labourist theories and Gramscian concepts interspersed into the text, as well as long explanations of the ideological and administrative battles fought to build up the union, inhibits the successful transformation of a PhD text into a more palatable

narrative for a wider readership in book format.

Structurally the book could also be improved. Until chapter 15 it follows a more or less logical sequence of events, but thereafter it becomes chronologically disjointed. A better structural approach would have been to separate trade union development and political engagement, the first concentrating on the founding processes of NUMSA and the second on its involvement in the South African political scene.

Forrest's book provides valuable insights and information on the history and dynamics of contemporary African trade union development in South Africa and as such is a valuable reference for academic scholars in the field of labour history, industrial sociology, etc. Unfortunately however, its shortcomings probably put the book beyond the reach of rank-and-file trade unionists, the actual potential reading public whose history was written. Academic authors aspiring to involve a wider reading public than a mere small atomic group of intellectuals, should perhaps heed the words of the renowned and celebrated social historian Charles van Onselen, who said that historians should guard against impenetrable prose if they wish to reach beyond the domain of theoreticians.

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