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# Democracy and Oligarchy in the Independent Trade Unions in Transvaal and the Western Province General Workers' Union in the 1970s.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Aim and Contents of Paper

The aim of this paper is to examine democracy and oligarchy in the independent trade unions in Transvaal and the Western Province General Workers Union in the 1970s. The unions considered in the Transvaal comprise the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions. The Consultative unions consisted of the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers' Union (CCAWUSA) and a large proportion of the present Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). The period this paper covers commences from the foundation of the unions in the early 1970s up to the second half of 1979 for the Transvaal unions and up to the end of 1980 for the Western Province General Workers' Union.

The paper is divided into two major sections. The first section deals with theories of democracy and oligarchy in trade unions and starts off by considering Michels' iron law of oligarchy. His iron law is evaluated in the light of two centuries of experience in the British trade unions as analysed mainly by the Webbs, Clegg and Hyman. After deriving a theory of democracy and oligarchy in trade unions based on the historical material, the paper moves on to the second section which examines democracy and oligarchy in the independent trade unions in the 1970s. The stage the unions reached at the end of the period is evaluated and some conclusions are finally drawn.

However, before commencing on theories of trade union democracy and oligarchy it is necessary to clarify some key concepts first and consider the role of democracy in trade unions. In order to keep this paper within the required length this will be done very briefly. This means that I shall often simply state my own position on a number of issues without drawing on authorities to support me.

### 1.2 Trade Union Democracy

Trade unions are organisations of wage-earners that exist primarily to defend and advance their members' rights at the workplace. Not all wage-earners are working class, but since this is the case for the unions under consideration in this paper, it will be assumed throughout this paper that trade union members are proletarian workers.

In order to achieve their basic objective of defending and advancing workers rights at the workplace, trade unions have three requirements: power to force concessions from management in negotiations, democracy to ensure that they reflect the interests

of the workers, and dynamism to sustain worker support and grow stronger. The dynamism inherent in trade unions means that they have come to be considered as a movement as well. Flanders has captured the requirements of trade unions as 'a mixture of movement and organisation':

> One problem which has always confronted trade unions is how to convert temporary movement into permanent organization... Trade unions need organization for their power and movement for their vitality, but they need both power and vitality to advance their social purpose. (1)

The need for 'power and vitality' on the part of trade unions indicate that democracy is not the only requirement of unions. There are also times when democracy is in conflict with the need for power or movement on the part of unions. It is therefore important not to consider democracy as the only objective of trade unions, but only as one of three means towards the end of advancing workers' rights.

Many external and internal pressures exist to deflect trade unions from their objective of advancing workers' rights.(2) It is therefore necessary for unions to ensure that they represent their worker members' interests. The best way of ensuring it is to have internal democracy. But what is trade union democracy?

A number of approaches have been adopted towards trade union democracy. (3) The approach to trade union democracy that is adopted in this paper is as follows. Trade union democracy rests on the ultimate control of workers of their organisation. This requires that they play a part in decision-making on policy and strategic matters affecting the union, and that union representatives and officials remain accountable to the rank and file members. The criteria specified in the definition will be used to assess whether unions are democratic or not. They will however have to be applied judiciously since the other needs of trade unions, namely power and dynamism, could at times have conflicted with trade union democracy and necessitated compromise actions.

## 2. Theory of Democracy and Oligarchy in Trade Unions

### 2.1 Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

One of the best known theories on trade union democracy and oligarchy is that of Michels that was first published in 1911. (4) In it he is particularly concerned with the problems of attaining democracy in socialist organisations of the working class. He examines the trends in both political parties and trade unions and comes up with the 'law' that 'democracy leads to oligarchy, and necessarily contains an oligarchic nucleus'. (5) By oligarchy in an organisation is meant control thereof by a few officials in the top hierarchy of that organisation.

Michels' argument is that democracy is a self-defeating goal.

This is the case because 'democracy is inconceivable without organisation' (6) and that organisation is vital for the political struggle of the working class. (7) However, there is an inevitable tendency towards oligarchy in every organisation, no matter how hard it strives to be democratic. Therefore democracy is an unattainable goal for all organisations in the labour movement.

'In the early days of the labour movement', while it is in its 'infancy' (8) and is still very small, Michels maintains that its members attempt to practice a 'pure democracy' which enables them all to participate in its organisations. However, as organisations grow in size they become more complex and start requiring leaders with special expertise to run them. (9) In order to meet these requirements the labour movement starts training their own leadership and establishing educational institutions such as Ruskin College in Oxford for that purpose. (10)

The increased complexity of the organisations, according to Michels, places a full knowledge of their administrative and other requirements beyond the capacity of the worker members. A division of labour therefore becomes necessary and suitably qualified leaders have to take over the running of the organisation. As this happens, the rank and file lose control of their organisation.

> Nominally, and according to the letter of the rules, all the acts of the leaders are subject to the ever vigilant criticims of the rank and file. In theory the leader is merely an employee bound by the instructions he receives... But in actual fact, as the organisation increases in size, this control becomes purely fictitious. The members have to give up the idea of themselves conducting or even supervising the whole administration, and are compelled to hand these tasks over to... salaried officials. The rank and file must content themselves with summary reports, and with the appointment of occasional special committees of inquiry... It is obvious that democratic control thus undergoes a progressive diminution, and is ultimately reduced to an infitesimal minimum. (11)

What is more, Michels maintains that, in working class organisations, as in the state, officials need to remain in office for a considerable time in order to acquire the necessary expertise to do the work efficiently and to develop a sense of loyalty and responsibility. (12) Michels thus contends that democratic organisations become oligarchic due to a division of labour.

> Every democratic organisation rests, by its very nature, upon a division of labour. But wherever division of labour prevails, there is necessarily specialisation, and the specialists become indispensable. (13)

There are also other factors that serve to reinforce the tendency towards oligarchy in socialist working class organisations, according to Michels. The leaders of the organisations, whether of 'proletarian' or of 'bourgeois' origin, tenaciously cling to office once they have acquired it.

Firstly there is the allure of power. Once it has been acquired, the leaders are not only unwilling to relinquish it, but endeavour to extend it. (14) Secondly, leaders of proletarian origin become attached to their positions because of the improvement in their living standard which would make it 'altogether impossible for them to return to their old way of life'. (15)

Leaders who are 'refugees from the bourgeoisie' are also unable or unwilling to relinquish their posts. This is either because they have 'crossed the Rubicon' and have become 'enchained by their own past', or because they have become 'estranged from their original profession'. While this will not be a problem for lawyers because the political struggle and law have many points of contact, 'it is very different with men of science' because they 'find that their scientific faculties undergo a slow but progressive atrophy' and 'they are dead for their discipline'.(16)

The last reinforcing tendency of oligarcy to mention in this exposition of Michels, is the autocratic tendencies of leaders which, according to him, is more pronounced amongst trade unions leaders than in politicians. (17) Michels maintains that the executive committees of the trade union federations 'have endeavoured to usurp the exclusive right to decide on behalf of the rank and file the rhythm of the movement for better wages', (18) and consequently on whether a strike is justified and whether to subsidise it or not. Thereby

> the leaders have openly converted themselves into an oligarchy, leaving the masses who provide the funds no more than the duty of accepting the decisions of that oligarchy. (19)

Michels' argument can thus be briefly summarised by his famous maxim, 'who says organisation, says oligarchy'. (20)

**Gouldner's Iron Law of Democracy**

Numerous criticisms have been made of Michels. Richard Hyman has pointed out that Michels has not given adequate attention to countervailing tendencies in trade unions. (21) Gouldner went as far as postulating a countervailing iron law of democracy:

> Even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly rebuild them after each inundation. Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side. There cannot be an iron law

> of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy. (22)

The theories on democracy and oligarchy presented by Michels and Gouldner are both one-sided. The Webbs offered a more balanced view in their consideration of British trade unions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their findings are therefore considered next.

## 2.3 Early British Trade Union Democracy and Oligarchy

### Participatory Democracy and its Oligarchic Consequence

In their acclaimed account of British trade union history first published in 1897 the Webbs demonstrated that the trade unions went through different stages of development. In certain stages democracy was in the ascendency while oligarchy and centralisation were paramount in other stages. The circumstances and forces that determined which of these tendencies dominated were closely linked with their histories.

The first stage was one the Webbs termed 'primitive democracy' and was a pure form of participatory democracy. In the 'local trade clubs' of the eighteenth century the members strove to conduct all the business at the general meetings and were imbued with the principle that 'what concerns all should be decided by all'. (23)

However, when the local unions started federating into national unions between 1824 and 1840, it became necessary to depart from their practice of participatory democracy. They dropped the custom of rotating the officials as it became necessary for the national unions to elect full-time secretaries. They still tried to continue vesting supreme authority in the members by means of the Referendum. (24)

These constitutional arrangements were however a recipe for oligarchy. The appointment of a full-time general secretary soon turned him into a powerful official by virtue of the expertise he developed.

> Spending all day at office work, he soon acquired a professional expertness quite out of the reach of his fellow-members at the bench or the forge... The work could no longer be efficiently performed by an ordinary artisan, and some preliminary office training became almost indispensable. (25)

In order to try and restrict the growing power of the full-time salaried officials the unions resorted to laying down strict rules in their consitutions and the amendment of these rules by banch delegates who were granted no discretion and merely had to convey the votes of their branches 'mechanically'. (26) Over time the meetings of delegates were replaced by the Referendum, but none of these measures proved to be successful. The

Referendum however had the opposite effect of what was intended: instead of the members retaining a real say in the affairs of the union, control was centralised and enabled the development of oligarchic rule by the officials and executive. This happened because

> the right of putting questions to the vote came practically to be confined to the executive... Any change which the executive desired could be stated in the most plausible terms and supported by convincing arguements, which almost invariably secured its adoption by a large majority. (27)

Thus, after about a century of organisational experience, the oligarchic tendency was dominant in the British trade union movement towards the last decade of the nineteenth century. This, the Webbs maintained, was because of the attempt to retain participatory democracy in the national organisations. (28)

But 'after a whole century of experiment' trade union constitutions were undergoing a 'silent revolution' and trade unions with a new form of democracy emerged after 1889. (29) The form was representative democracy which, in the Webbs opinion, was successful in solving

> the fundamental problem of democracy, the combination of administrative efficiency and popular control. (30)

**Representative Democracy as a Countervailing Tendency**

The two unions that best embodied the principle of representative democracy at the time the Webbs conducted their research, were the Coalminers and Cotton Operatives although other unions had also followed suit. At that stage the membership of the Coalminers union was 200 000. (31) The central feature of the system of representative democracy was the election of an assembly of representatives as the supreme body in the union. Not only was the representative assembly the supreme policy-making body of the union, but it also appointed an executive committee which governed the union between conferences of the assemblies. (32)

The unions with representative democracy had undergone considerable evolution from the early forms of 'primitive democracy'. No provision was made for the Referendum and the 'Rotation of Office' was dropped. Of particular significance was the fact that the unions found it necessary to completely abandon the use of delegates and to replace them with representatives. (33) The distinction between a delegate and a representative was that, although both had to put forward the mind of their constituency, the representative, unlike the delegate, was 'not a mechanical vehicle of votes on particular subjects'. (34) According to the Webbs, the trade unions had gradually come to realise the need for representatives as a method of restoring a balance between democracy and efficiency in their organisations. The reasons for that as well as the way in which the unions incorporated representatives into their

structures, were well explained by the Webbs. Their exposition is worth quoting at some length.

> The ordinary Trade Unionist has but little facility in expressing his desires... But for this particular task the professional administrator is no more competent than the ordinary man, though for a different reason. The very apartness of his life from that of the average workman deprives him of close acquaintance with the actual grievances of the mass of the people... To act as an interpreter between the people and their servants is, therefore, the first function of the representative. (35)
>
> But this is only half of his duty. To him is entrusted also the difficult and delicate task of controlling the professional experts... (36) In all these respects the manual workers stand at a grave disadvantage... Before he can place himself on a level with the trained official whom he has to control he must devote his whole time and thought to his new duties, and must therefore give up his old trade. This unfortunately tends to alter his manner of life, his habit of mind, and usually also his intellectual atmosphere to such an extent that he gradually loses that vivid appreciation of the feelings of the man at the bench or the forge, which it is his function to express... Directly the working-man representative becomes becomes properly equipped for one-half of his duties, he ceases to be specially qualified for the other. If he remains essentially a manual worker, he fails to cope with the brain-working officials; if he takes on the character of the brain-worker, he is apt to get out of touch with the constituents whose desires he has to interpret... (37)
>
> In the parliaments (conferences of representative assemblies - JM) of the Cotton-spinners and Coalminers we find habitually two classes of members, salaried officials of the several districts, and representative wage-earners still working at the mule or in the mine. It would almost seem as if these modern organisations had consciously recognised the impossibility of combining in any individual representative both of the requirements that we have specified. As it is, the presence in their assemblies of a large proportion of men who are still following their trade imports into their deliberations the full flavor of working-class sentiment. And the association...of the salaried officers from each county, secures that combination of knowledge, ability and practical experience in administration, which is... absolutely indispensible for the exercise of control over the professional experts. (38)

The unions thus made provision for representation of mental and

manual labourers on their assemblies and executive committees. The executive of the Cotton Operatives, for instance, existed of three office bearers as well as thirteen additional members, seven of whom had to be working spinners while the remaining six were permanent officials. (39) This had the effect of restoring some popular control in the unions. Although the officials still tended to dominate at the assembly conferences the worker representatives frequently intervened 'with effect' in the procedures. (40)

Thus contrary to Michels, the Webbs perceived a countervailing democratic tendency within the trade union movement. Oligarchic rule did not establish itself permanently in the unions, but was challenged by worker representatives who endeavoured to restore popular control to the unions.

It is however not clear from the Webbs exposition how worker representatives, who spent a full working day at the bench or the mule, were to acquire the time, energy, skill and necessary resources to become an effective counterweight to the full-time officials. Even though they made reference to the 'professional representative' who was 'to balance the professional civil servant' (41), they did not clarify how a full-time worker was to acquire this status and ability. If they meant that the worker was to leave his employment in order to become a professional representative, he would soon be indistinguishable from union officials for reasons the Webbs themselves explained with such clarity. This unresolved problem eventually resulted in the reassertion of oligarchy in the British unions.

## 2.4 Trends in British Trade Unions in the Twentieth Century.

### Oligarchy Re-asserts Itself

The Webbs completed the first draft of their British trade union history in 1897 shortly after the rise of the 'new unionism' that commenced in 1889. The 'new unionism' which entailed the first wave of mass organisation of semi-skilled and unskilled workers has been characterised as 'popular bossdoms'. (42) These unions were largely organised 'from above' by existing leaders and enabled an oligarchic tendency to become dominant again. (43) From the nineteen thirties to fifties the British unions were undeniably oligarchic in character. (44)

Most of the union executives, and all of the union conferences, regional and district committees were composed mainly or entirely of lay members, i.e. members of the unions who were not full-time officers or staff employees. Instead of representatives from the workplace being elected to these posts, as the Webbs had found and fondly hoped would continue, branch officers eventually took over most of the posts. These branch officers undertook 'many tedious hours of paperwork' as well as union administration and had no contact with the workplace. They bolstered the strength of the full-time officials by providing 'solid support' for their policies. (45)

The dominance of union officials and branch officers in the unions could happen because 'there were no powerful traditions of of rank and file autonomy from below'. (46) This situation was to change drastically after the fifties in Britain.

**The Assertion of Workplace Bargaining: Trade Union Democracy Rises from the Ranks**

In the same year that the Webbs completed their first history of British trade unionism, a major industrial dispute took place in the engineering industry that resulted in 'a widening of the scope for shop steward action'. The result was that shop stewards became workplace negotiators in addition to their traditional task of guarding craft rules. (47)

There was a short-lived upsurge in the shop stewards movement during the First World War, but the economic depression in the interwar years caused workshop organisation to fall back. (48) It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that shop stewards came to the fore in industrial relations by shifting the emphasis to workplace bargaining. The impulsion to this was provided by the rise in rank-and-file strength and militancy generated by the establishment of near full employment and frustration with managerial and trade union practices and policies.

This 'great upsurge of union activity' (49) constituted, in the words of Flanders, 'a challenge from below'. Goldthorpe characterised the change in post-war Britain as an increase in 'the economic and organisational strength of the workers on the shopfloor - in consequence of which, the degree of effective control that can be exercised over them by either managements or unions has been significantly diminished'. (50)

In opposition to many liberal-pluralist commentators who were concerned about the 'challenge from below' Richard Hyman, writing in 1975, enthusiastically perceived it as

> the reassertion, far beyond their original craft context, of prior traditions of autonomous worker control. (51)

Shop stewards played a central part in the upsurge of workplace bargaining in post-war Britain. Their role was no longer one of protecting a craft, but negotiating directly with management on the shopfloor over wages and a wide range of working conditions. A survey conducted in 1973 established that, besides wages, shop stewards negotiated most frequently with management over general conditions in the workplace including safety and health, dismissals and other disciplinary actions, overtime, the introduction of new machinery or jobs, and transfers from one job to another. (52)

The upsurge in autonomous workplace bargaining under the leadership of shop stewards made its impact felt on trade union

organisation as well. The most significant change was the incorporation of shop stewards into the union structures. This resulted not only from the unions' desire to restore the control over industrial relations they had lost by the 1960s, but also from the power shopfloor representatives had acquired in the workplace. By impelling themselves onto the various bodies of the unions, shop stewards did much to restore democratic practices in the unions once again.

**The Cycle Continues: Oligarchy on the Shopfloor**

But even at the grass-roots level of workplace organisation, an oligarchic tendency started to assert itself in the 1970s. Writing in 1979, Hyman cast doubt on whether shop floor representation was truly democratic:

> A central feature of the past ten years has been the consolidation of a hierarchy within shop steward organisation... Workplace negotiation has become a far more centralised process... The introduction and operation of centralised bargaining arrangements has been the responsibility of a new layer of full-time convenors and shop stewards... The small cadre of full-time or almost full-time stewards within a committee often possess the authority and the informational and organisational resources to ensure that their own recommendations will be accepted as policy by the stewards' body. (53)

Enough exposition on the history of trade union democracy and oligarchy has been presented to put forward a theory. The experiences of the British trade unions over two centuries deny Michels' iron law of oligarchy, but rather confirm that tendencies towards democracy and oligarchy are both present in trade unions. The tendency towards democracy arises from the members' conviction that their trade unions have to represent their interests and aspirations. To this end they desire to have a say over union policy as well as hold officials and representatives accountable to them. The say over union policy and accountability of officials have been remote at times, but remained the driving forces of democracy in the unions. Democracy was thus usually impelled into the unions by the workers.

On the other hand the tendency towards oligarchy in trade unions arises from their need for leadership and efficient administration and co-ordination in the organisation. The tendency is inextricably linked with the establishment of full-time officials in a mass worker organisation where the rank and file are employed in wage-labour that demands much of their time and energy.

The relationship between the tendencies towards democracy and oligarchy in trade unions unfolds in a historical context. Neither democracy nor oligarchy establishes a permanent or decisive hegemony although the one or the other can dominate for

a considerable time. The forces that determine the dominance of oligarchic or democratic tendencies may be either internal or external to the unions.

Informed with this theory, it is now appropriate to consider the democracy and oligarchy in some of the independent trade unions during the 1970s.

## 3.Democracy and Oligarchy in the Independent Trade Unions

### 3.1 Oligarchy and the Development of Democracy

#### Initial Oligarchy

The independent trade unions under consideration in this paper all owed their existence to organisations other than trade unions that were started in the early 1970s and were oligarchic in character in so far as their relationship with African workers was concerned. The General Workers' Union (GWU) commenced as the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB), while FOSATU in Transvaal had its roots in the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) and the unions of the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions owed theirs mainly to the Urban Training Project (UTP).

There were two reasons why this was the case. In the first place these organisations were founded during the 'survival era' (54) when there was a great need for caution in the wake of state repression of SACTU in the 1960s and continued state hostility towards African trade unions. There was also a fear prevalent among many African workers that belonging to trade unions could lead to state harassment. The founders therefore deliberately started organisations that were deemed to be safer than trade unions.

Secondly the initiative for the formation of these organisations came from small groups of intellectuals and experienced trade unionists. (55) In the absence of any pre-existing mass African worker organisations other than the TUCSA African unions, they had to set up small organisations with themselves in control as leaders, but with the intention of organising a broad mass of workers into democratic organisations. They all initially created structures that either incorporated African workers or related to them in an oligarchic manner in that the leadership was self-appointed, unrepresentative of the workers as well as unaccountable to them.

#### Creating Democratic Structures

Therefore the first challenge that faced all the organisations in their quest for democratisation was to create structures and organisations that were in fact democratic. The task was by no means an easy one and took many years to achieve. Each of the organisations also set about the process in a different way and it is therefore necessary to consider each in turn.

**Western Province Workers Advice Bureau**

The Advice Bureau was founded in March 1973 by members of the University of Cape Town Wages Commission in conjunction with NUSAS officials and former SACTU trade unionists. Although the constitution made allowance for the election of an Executive Committee elected annually at the AGM, real control of the organisation was in the hands of a small group of White intellectuals drawn from the university and legal profession which became known as the Workers Advisory Project. (WAP) The Advice Bureau's African secretary, a former trade unionist, also formed part of this strategic planning group. In order to provide the Advice Bureau with respectability in the eyes of donors and a protective umbrella against the state, a Board of Trustees was also set up. Its membership was determined by WAP and composed mainly of WAP members as well as registered trade unionists who were considered to be sympathetic. Constitutionally, the Board of Trustees controlled appointments, finances and decisions taken by the Executive Committee.

The Advice Bureau placed an emphasis on workplace organisation and adopted the strategy of setting up registered works committees. The number of organised works committees increased rapidly and after almost two years of existence the intellectuals in WAP felt that the time had come to transform the Advice Bureau into a democratic organisation. The need for the transformation arose out of the organisational developments in the Advice Bureau. Active organisation at the workplace was taking place at a number of factories and finding expression through works committees. The Executive Committee, which was elected at an AGM and chaired by a rather conservative township leader, was unrepresentative of the works committees and out of touch with issues at most factories.

After extensive discussions in WAP it was decided that a Workers' Council should be established. It would consist of factory committees elected by the workers at each factory and control of the whole organisation as well as intellectuals in the movement would be vested in the hands of the Workers' Council. The achievement of this objective proved to be considerably more difficult than was envisaged by the intellectuals. The first Works Council which was established in April 1975 was stillborn because it was premature. The workers in the Advice Bureau lacked the expertise and organisational experience to take command of the Council and it simply failed to come to life. It was only on the third attempt after two more years of endeavour that success was achieved. By that stage it was decided to set up a Controlling Committee comprising two representatives from each factory in the Advice Bureau and to abolish the Executive Committee.

The Controlling Committee finally came into existence and started functioning in the first half of 1977. The functions of the Committee were to control the organisation. All policy decisions were to be taken by the Committee and organisers as well as the White intellectuals in the movement were to be

appointed by the Committee and be accountable to it. It thus took the Advice Bureau four years from the time of its foundation to transform its own structure into that of a democratic worker organisation. The following year it changed its name to the Western Province General Workers' Union and in 1981 to simply the General Workers' Union which reflected the fact that it had become a national union organising stevedores in the other major harbour cities.

IAS

Similar to the Advice Bureau, the IAS in Johannesburg was also founded by Wages Commission students and former NUSAS officials in co-operation with former SACTU trade unionists. Its members were also committed to the establishment of a democratic workers' organisation, but the organisation went through considerable turmoil in the process of transforming itself. The IAS was founded in December 1973 and was initially headed by a Steering Committee. It commenced organising African workers as well as embarking on three projects including worker education. Due to a lack of organisational progress after more than a year of operation and anomalies in the organisation, the IAS restructured itself in March 1975. An Executive Committee was put in control of the IAS. It was a self-elected Committee and consisted predominantly of White university-trained intellectuals, but also included a couple of influential African leaders. It was decided in principle that the Executive Committee would not have worker representatives serving on it as it was explicitly acknowledged that the Committee was not a representative body. It was also decided that worker representatives would be elected onto a separate executive committee of a worker organisation that the IAS would found and that powers would gradually be transferred to that executive when they requested it.

After considerable debate and conflict on the Executive Committee over whether to start a general or industrial union, it was finally decided to start organising workers in the metal industry. After six months of organisational efforts a Branch Executive Committee (BEC) of the Transvaal branch of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) was finally established in September 1975.

The transfer of power to the union's BEC did however not take place as smoothly as was initially envisaged. Instead, a power struggle developed between intellectuals in MAWU on the one side and the IAS on the other for control over the union and its policy. However a compromise was reached by the formation of a new over-arching organisation with representation on it from both the IAS and MAWU. The new bridging organisation, the Council of Workers of the Witwatersrand (CIWW), was established in September 1976 with majority representation of the union on both the Council and its executive arm, the Secretariat. CIWW took over most of the functions previously performed by the IAS. These included fund raising, administration and education.

The formation of CIWW was both a step backward and a step forward in the democratisation process to which the intellectuals and

other founders of the IAS was committed. It was a step backward in that CIWW constituted a structure that was superimposed onto MAWU and the IAS. In particular the Secretariat tended to operate as the executive of the union thereby stifling the development of the union's BEC. On the other hand the formation of CIWW was a step forward in that it was a semi-representative body which took over the key functions previously performed by the unrepresentative IAS.

The democratisation of the structures was considerably advanced in July 1978 when CIWW reconstituted itself as the Transvaal region of the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC). The representation of IAS on the TUACC Council was reduced to a minimal two members whereas the full BEC of MAWU was represented on the Council. The establishment of the Transport and General Workers' Union late in 1978 added yet further weight to worker representatives on the Council and Secretariat.

The principles existent in TUACC were embodied in the structures of FUSATU which was founded in April 1979. Majorities of worker representatives were constitutionally ensured on bodies at all hierarchical levels with only one exception, the Executive Committee. Even so the first Executive Committee did have a 4-3 majority of worker representatives.

From the time of its inception, it thus took the IAS almost five years to transform itself and the relationship between the organisations it was instrumental in creating into democratic structures.

**Urban Training Project**

The UTP was founded in Johannesburg in 1971 by former TUCSA trade unionist with two Whites as the driving force in the organisation. The UTP soon assisted in reviving African unions and founding new ones at the request of the workers they were training. The UTP experienced none of the agonising problems the Advice Bureau and IAS went through in establishing trade unions with democratic structures. This was probably due to the fact that the UTP founders were experienced trade unionists. Within the first two years of its existence the UTP had already revived two African unions and helped establish two new unions. It was also providing educational and other services for the long-established Engineering and Allied Workers' Union (EAWU). It successfully continued its activities and by the end of 1975 it had helped to establish seven new African unions, revived two, and was providing a wide range of services to all of them. The services were basic infrastructural ones and included fund raising, employing union organisers, education as well as admininstrative and accounting assistance. It also rented office space for many of the unions.

There was however no attempt on the side of the UTP to transform itself into an organisation that was structurally accountable to the unions it was servicing. It carried on as a relatively autonomous organisation with control and direction in the hands

the time of the unions' inception.

Probably the most important training received by workers was experiential as they engaged in their struggles to collectively defend and advance their rights at the workplace. In addition to that all the organisations also undertook formal and informal training of workers. Although all the organisations commenced by placing great emphasis on worker training and education, their experiences diverged widely as time went on.

The Advice Bureau initially laid stress on the political and ideological education of workers although it also taught workers their rights under industrial laws and how to set about forming registered works committees. But much of the training was inappropriate in that it was too remote from the workers' experiences and workplace concerns. The organisational demands on intellectuals worked to the detriment of formal training as less and less time and resources were allocated to it. Separate training sessions were eventually no longer held so that by 1980 the GWU had completely abandoned formal training.

In the IAS formal training was also initially inappropriate for similar reasons. It also became less prominent, but it never dwindled away completely as a continuity was maintained by a university lecturer who did not become embroiled in worker organisation. Up to 1979 education therefore continued at a low level for the union BECs and advanced shop stewards. It also became more closely linked with organisational issues. Formal training was therefore sustained at a low level for the more advanced worker representatives because the unions could draw on outside resources.

Experiences with formal education in the UTP took a very different path. From the outset their courses were practically linked with the workers' situation and organisational needs. Since the UTP retained its relative autonomy and set store by its educational service to the unions, formal training was continued throughout the period. By contrast to the other organisations, the UTP was able to sustain worker education by allocating sufficient resources to it and not being subject to the same pressures from organisational demands as the unions were.

The workers' capacity to take democratic control of their organisations was however not primarily determined by the extent of their formal training. Experiential and informal training as well as the policies and organisational practices instilled in the workers were also key determinants in the democratisation process. The progress made by unions during the period under consideration will be considered next.

### 3.2 Evaluation of Democratisation Process

**General Workers' Union**

The democratisation process in the GWU up to the end of 1980 was quite advanced in workplace organisation. The union's recognition policy was that workers' committees had to negotiate with management by themselves without union officials present. In practice this policy was by and large adhered to by the union officials. The worker representatives received considerable informal and experiential training in workplace democracy by instituting regular general worker meetings of the company.

From about 1978 the Controlling Committee of the GWU was not afraid to criticise the union officials and try to hold them accountable. It only met once a month however which made it impossible for the Committee to exercise effective control over the officials. (56) Thus leadership of the union had effectively remained in the hands of the officials thereby still making it an oligarchic organisation.

> We found that the problem is a difficulty finding a balance between democracy and leadership. In enforcing this democracy the real leadership in fact remains in the hands of the staff because one doesn't have the workers with enough ongoing knowledge on the day to day activities in order to really take over leadership. (57)

This problem was more or less resolved in 1980 when it was decided that the Controlling Committee would elect an Executive Committee of seven members who would meet weekly with union officials. The Executive Committee had administrative powers and controlled union finances, but could not take decisions on union policy. However the Controlling Committee was still heavily reliant on the information and advice provided by the White intellectuals in certain key areas such as evaluating what the consequences would be for the union if it were to register.

Up to the end of 1980 the intellectuals were also responsible for overseeing the general administration and co-ordination of the union's affairs. This was most clearly demonstrated in the meat strike of 1980. The detention of four White intellectuals and a Black organiser during the strike seriously hampered the efficient functioning of the union.

Thus towards the end of 1980 democratic practices had gained a considerable foothold in the GWU although White intellectuals were still influential and played an important co-ordinating role in the union.

**FOSATU (Transvaal)**

Within FOSATU in the Transvaal region there was a differential development of democracy in the unions that was closely related to their origins. The unions that grew up in the TUACC

tradition, in particular MAWU, had the most advanced workplace democracy and leadership accountability built into them with the unions formerly serviced by the UTP displaying least shopfloor democracy.

In MAWU a strong emphasis was placed on the role of shop stewards and their committees. The union's BEC members who were shop steward representatives from each of the organised factories, were involved in decision-making on general union issues and commenced taking strong stands on them by 1978. Worker leaders who wielded influence within and beyond the union, started emerging from the ranks of the union. BEC members did however not raise general union issues at shop stewards committees' meetings with the results that they did not bring the shop stewards' views on these issues to the BEC.

At the regional level FOSATU in Transvaal faced a number of formidable challenges in democratising the structures that were created by its formation. The overnight expansion from two unions in TUACC to eight unions in FOSATU inevitably led to a burgeoning of bureaucracy in the organisation. As a result FOSATU in Transvaal was faced with the fundamental problem that it had created structures in advance of workers' capacities to take control of them. Consequently extra-constitutional staff committees emerged in a number of localities to cope with the organisational demands. They played an important role in co-ordination and administration, but in so doing they removed control of the organisation out of the hands of the workers and their representatives. The formation of FOSATU therefore led to a renewed strengthening of the oligarchic tendency at the regional level in the Transvaal.

Intellectuals still remained influential in FOSATU, but their power had been curtailed by the growth of trade unions with accountable structures and practices. Although the initiative for policies still came from intellectuals, they could only put the policies forward provided they had support from their constituents. According to the Regional Secretary of Transvaal, policy initiatives in FOSATU towards the end of 1979 came from five to six officials in the movement. Of the six only two were White officials, the other were two Coloured and two African secretaries of significant unions in Transvaal and the rest of the country.

The formation of FOSATU had thus reinforced an oligarchic tendency in the organisation in Transvaal at the regional level. Within some of the unions the process of democratisation had however been well established with considerable effort being placed on practising shopfloor democracy. There was thus also a countervailing democratic tendency at work in the organisation.

**UTP and the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions**

In the Consultative Committee unions workplace organisation

was unevenly developed: it was quite advanced in some of the unions while it was virtually non-existent in one of them. The Food Beverage Workers' Union appeared to have the most extensive shopfloor organisation. The unions did not place a very strong emphasis on shopfloor organisation although their shop stewards in some unions took up grievances with management where possible and works committees of the unions did negotiate with management.

The form of democracy that the Consultative unions strove after was where the Executive Committee of a union was accountable to the members of the union in general. When the unions serviced by the UTP were established in the early 1970s, the secretaries were in control of the unions. The first stage in the democratisation of the Consultative unions was reached more or less between 1977 and 1978 when the Executive members of the unions became aware of the powers vested in them by the unions' constitutions and as direct representatives of the workers. In the majority of Consultative unions the secretaries adjusted harmoniously to such sharing of control with the Executive Committees as did take place. In three of the unions however power struggles evolved as members of the Executive tried to wrest a share in the control of the unions from the secretaries.

Thus by 1979 the Consultative unions had more or less passed through a first stage of democratisation with the Executive Committees acquiring power within the unions. The unions were however still predominantly oligarchic in character because the union officials and Executive Committees were still not effectively accountable to workers in the factories. In the first place the election of an Executive Committee by an Annual General Meeting did not ensure that each organised factory was represented on the Executive. Secondly, the relatively low emphasis given to shopfloor organisation meant that there was a considerable gap between the activities of the Executive Committees of the unions and what the rank and file knew about these activities. Given the lack of knowledge by the rank and file members of the ongoing decisions being taken by the Executive and officials, they were not in a position to hold the hierarchy accountable.

The Consultative Committee unions had thus successfully gone through one stage in their democratisation by the elected Executive Committees asserting their right to exercise power in the unions on behalf of the members. This stage was however still oligarchic in that the rank and file members had no effective control over the Executive Committee.

**Summary and Conclusion:**
**Democratisation Process in Independent Unions**

The independent unions considered in this paper all owed their origins to oligarchic organisations in that they were controlled by their founders, who were mainly White intellectuals, and were not elected by, nor accountable to, the African workers they were endeavouring to organise. This was unavoidable in the

circumstances that prevailed at the time with the African working class virtually completely unmobilised. The intellectuals were however committed to creating democratic organisations and consequently set in motion a democratisation process.

The democratisation process had two phases that commenced at the same time. The first phase was the creation of democratic structures. This phase was more or less successfully carried out by all the groups at least in as far as the basic structure of the unions was concerned. The second phase in the democratisation process was the development of the capacity of workers in the unions to take control of the democratic structures. For democracy to exist in practice it was necessary for the workers to be able to force democratic practices into all the structures of the organisation. The unions under consideration had all succeeded in enabling some worker control at the executive level of the unions. This was however not sufficient to ensure that democracy existed throughout all the organisations. Oligarhic tendencies were thus still present in one form or other in all of them.

In all the unions and groups the workers had therefore not yet acquired the capacities necessary to seize democratic control of their organisations. There was however a distinct increase in their capacities over the period.

Contrary to Michels, the empirical findings do not portray an iron law of oligarchy operating in the independent trade unions. Instead of democratic organisations inevitably becoming oligarchic as Michels would predict, there was a contrary trend of oligarchic organisations becoming more democratic. The force behind the democratisation of the unions was the commitment of the intellectuals and other leaders to democracy rather than workers impelling democratic practices into the unions.

But nor was there an iron law of democracy at work in the independent unions. The tendencies towards democracy and oligarchy both remained present and circumstances determined which of these tendencies were dominant at any particular time. It was also found that democratic tendencies could be on the increase in one part of an organisation while oligarchy would be strengthened elsewhere at the same time.

Whereas in Britain the driving force behind the democratisation of the unions after the 1960s was the upsurge in worker action on the shopfloor, workers in the independent unions did not play a comparable role in South Africa in the 1970s. The difference was probably due to the very disadvantaged nature of the African working class in South Africa, particularly as far as formal school education was concerned. That was why the promotion of workers' capacities to seize hold of their own organisations was one of the crucial tasks that faced intellectuals and other leaders in the independent unions in the 1970s.

**Footnotes**

(1) A. Flanders, 'What are Trade Unions for?' in W. McCarthy, ed., Trade Unions (Harmondsworth 1972), 22-23.
(2) See R. Hyman and R. Fryer, 'Trade Unions: Sociology and Political Economy' in T. Clarke and L. Clements, ed., Trade Unions under Capitalism (Glasgow 1977), for a very good exposition on these pressures.
(3) See R. Hyman, Industrial Relations A Marxist Introduction (London 1975), ch.3; S. Lipset, M. Trow and J. Coleman, 'Democracy and Oligarchy in Trade Unions' and R.Martin, 'Union Democracy: An Explanatory Framework' in McCarthy, Trade Unions; and H. Clegg, The Changing System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain (Oxford 1979), 200-227.
(4) R. Michels, Political Parties (New York 1959).
(5) Ibid. vii.
(6) Ibid. 21.
(7) Ibid. 22.
(8) Ibid. 28.
(9) Ibid. 31.
(10) Ibid. 29-31.
(11) Ibid. 34.
(12) Ibid. 102.
(13) Ibid. 101.
(14) Ibid. 207.
(15) Ibid. 208.
(16) Ibid. 208-209.
(17) Ibid. 143.
(18) Ibid. 144.
(19) Ibid. 145.
(20) Ibid. 401.
(21) R. Hyman, Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism (London 1971), 29-32.
(22) Quoted in Hyman, Marxism and Trade Unionism, 33.
(23) S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (London 1911), 8.
(24) Ibid.21.
(25) Ibid. 15-16.
(26) Ibid. 19.
(27) Ibid. 26.
(28) Ibid. 28.
(29) Ibid. 37.
(30) Ibid. 38.
(31) Ibid. 46.
(32) Ibid. 38-39, 43-44.
(33) Ibid. 40.
(34) Ibid. 54.
(35) Ibid. 54-55.
(36) Ibid. 55.
(37) Ibid. 56.
(38) Ibid. 57.
(39) Ibid. 39.
(40) Ibid. 40.
(41) Ibid. 60.

(42) The term was coined by H. Turner. See J.Eldridge, 'Trade Unions and Bureaucratic Control' in Clarke and Clements, Trade Unions under Capitalism, 180-181.
(43) Hyman, Industrial Relations, 71.
(44) Clegg, The Changing System, 209.
(45) Ibid. 220.
(46) Hyman, Industrial Relations, 71.
(47) Clegg, The Changing System, 21.
(48) Ibid. 22-23.
(49) Flanders, 'What are Trade Unions for?', 24.
(50) J.Goldthorpe, 'Industrial Relations in Great Britain: A Critique of Reformism' in Clarke and Clements, Trade Unions under Capitalism, 215.
(51) Hyman, Industrial Relations, 158.
(52) Clegg, The Changing System, 24.
(53) R. Hyman, 'The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: recent Tendencies and some problems for Theory', Capital and Class, 8 (1979), 57.
(54) I obtained this expression from Eric Tyacke.
My findings on the independent unions are based on research conducted for a Ph.D. thesis where all the sources are properly footnoted. I am essentially drawing the conclusions of my research in this paper.
(55) My use of the concept 'intellectual' relies heavily on Gramsci's notion of new or organic intellectuals. They have been described by the editors of Selections from Prison Notebooks as 'the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong'. Sassoon's interpretation of the concept is also useful: 'The organic intellectual of the working class is a builder, an organiser, a permanent persuader so that he is able to engage in all aspects of the struggle. He is aware of the complexities of production, he is able to wage the cultural struggle for hegemony, and he is able to prepare the political struggle which will culminate in the seizure of power.' See Q. Hoare and G. Smith, ed., Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (London 1971), 3; and A. Sassoon, Gramsci's Politics (London 1980), 149.
(56) 'GWU's Dave Lewis talks to Saspu National about the Union', Saspu National, 2, 9 (1981), 21.
(57) Interview with J. Frankish, 16 October 1980.