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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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by: Steve Friedman

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POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INDUSTRIAL UNREST IN SOUTH AFRICA

by Steve Friedman

The past eighteen months have seen the emergence of labour organisation as arguably the most important focus of black mobilisation in South Africa.

While there have been other manifestations of black discontent - such as school boycotts - labour has moved to centre stage because it is the area in which black organisation has appeared to show the most concrete results for its participants.

Many strikes have resulted in gains for the workers who took part in them and an increasing number of employers have reacted to this upsurge in militancy by seeking an accommodation with the unions.

Worker militancy has prompted important shifts in employer responses to labour organisation, a development which has placed stresses on the Government's ability to control labour events.

There have, of course, been contrary trends - most importantly detentions of union leaders under security legislation and government attempts to increase control over the unions.

Nevertheless, there is a growing belief that a unique process of change is taking place on the factory floor and that this in time will have implications for political change.

This paper will attempt to analyse these developments.

It is traditional, and appropriate in this instance, to begin with an historical summary of unionism. I assume that readers of this paper are familiar with this history and will restrict myself to an overview.

FIFTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS: 1919/1973

It is trite to point out that the present wave of black unionism is not the first, or even the biggest, in South African labour history.

The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, the first mass black union to emerge, had at its height an estimated membership of a quarter of a million - and then disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

The union was certainly a power in its day - it achieved several concrete gains for its members and on occasions won some degree of recognition from the white authorities.

But a combination of state action and bitter internal dissent led to its crumbling.

The 1927 Native Administration Act, making it an offence to "incite racial hostility" was largely introduced to curb ICU leader Clements Kadalie. And in 1924, official attitudes to black unionism were made clear when "pass-bearing natives" were excluded from the definition of "employee" in the Industrial Conciliation Act.

There were signs, however, that the ICU was beginning to decline even before official action and internal squabbles brought matters to a head.

It has been argued since that the ICU was doomed to fail. It was always more of a mass movement, a political rallying point for its members, than it was a union, seeking to win gains in the factories.

This was to an extent inevitable. There were few factories in which gains in the 1920's and blacks had not become sufficiently established as an urban workforce to wield significant industrial power.

The ICU was followed in the Thirties by a small growth in industrial unions for Africans, chiefly organised by white left-wing unionists, who also attempted to organise unions on non-racial lines.

The Forties were to see significant growth in black unionism. 1942 saw both a wave of strike action and the formation of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) which in 1945 claimed a membership of 150 000 in 119 affiliated unions.

This was to be followed in the Fifties by the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and, briefly, the Federation of Free Trade Unions of SA (FOFATUSA), both federations of industrial unions.

SACTU, too, was to claim a membership of over 100 000 but, as in the past, membership was never stable, rising and falling sharply within relatively short periods.

Much of the impetus towards the formation of unions from the early Thirties onwards came from white intellectuals within the non-black, registered, industrial unions.

Where they could, they organised multiracial unions (black women were not "pass-bearing natives" and could join registered unions). This option was later to be closed by the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act, which largely closed the legal door to multiracial unionism.

Where they could not, they formed black "parallel" unions- separate black unions with links to their non-black counterparts.

Through this strategy, black workers were able to win negotiation rights. They participated indirectly in industry-wide industrial councils and in official conciliation boards.

Particularly during the war years, when the exodus of whites to the armed forces meant that African labour was at a premium, they won some say in the collective bargaining process.

And their ability to mobilise workers was illustrated perhaps most starkly by the 1946 miners' strike when 74 000 workers rallied behind the African Mineworkers Union.

But they did not attempt to entrench themselves in the individual factory. The unions saw themselves as mass movements, attempting to win as large a membership as possible in the shortest possible space of time.

Where they sought bargaining rights, these were sought at a broad industry level, rather than directly in the factories.

In the Fifties, this approach reached its purest form as SACTU progressively became a component of the Congress Alliance (FOFATUSA was to ally itself with the Pan-Africanist Congress).

It became a part of a mass movement, chiefly employing its energies on mass campaigns for general demands such as a national minimum wage.

Both SACTU and FOFATUSA were eventually crushed by State action. FOFATUSA was banned outright, while SACTU was decimated by repeated bannings of individual union leaders.

From the early Sixties to the early Seventies, black unionism largly ceased to exist.

Why did successive movements rise to prominence, only to disappear rapidly?

Official hostility obviously played a major part. The exclusion of blacks from the official bargaining system through the 1924 and 1956 Acts underlined the official view that black unions ought not to exist - that they should be "bled to death" as the then Minister of Labour, Ben Schoeman, put it in 1953.

This hostility was backed by an increasing arsenal of security legislation which restricted union activity and in individual actions against unionists.

Strikes, such as the 1946 miners strike, were put down by concerted police action, and the official attitude to strikes by African workers is illustrated by the Smuts Government's reaction to the 1942 strike wave.

It promulgated War Measure 145, which made all strikes by African workers illegal.

This, in its turn, gave employers far more latitude in which to resist black unionism.

But the unwillingness of the unions to establish themselves in the factories meant that they never developed an enduring power base.

Unless unions succeed in transforming mass mobilisation into an enduring organisational base, they remain ever vulnerable to sudden collapse.

The ICU had attempted to organise millions of workers without the resources to make that organisation last.

Although better organised, later unions were to repeat the practice of seeking great quantities of organisation, without concentrating overmuch on its quality.

This is not to suggest that the failure of these organisations was due simply to their getting their tactics wrong.

It is legitimate to ask whether an attempt to securely establish African workers in the factories would have succeeded had it been attempted.

In much of the period under discussion, the bargaining power of African workers was weak.

They occupied unskilled jobs as a result of legally-enforced job bars and were thus easy to replace - employers whose African workforce struck could almost literally go round to the local labour authorities and order another.

Influx control operated against black bargaining power and served to keep Africans as an easily replacable workforce - which could lose not only its right to work if it struck, but its right to live in the cities.

It is, of course, significant that the one period in which Africans had appreciable bargaining power - and in which a shop-floor strategy might have worked - were the war years in which an acute white manpower shortage increased the need for African workers, including skilled workers.

This was stopped dead in its tracks in the post-war years, but the truism that a more skilled black workforce would pose a much more formidable challenge to employers and the authorities was to become increasingly apparent three decades later.

"MAN IS DEAD, BUT HIS SPIRIT LIVES" : THE DURBAN STRIKES AND THEIR AFTERMATH

The union movement began to re-emerge in the early Nineteen Seventies.

In Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg, whites sympathetic to black unionism began to organise worker advice bureaus which were to become the nucleus of the new union movement.

But the real fillip to the re-emergence of the unions was provided by workers themselves.

Denied official bargaining rights by the 1924 and 1956 Acts, black workers at this time were expected to channel their grievances through plant-level works committees, which could not achieve a power base even approximating that of a union.

Strikes were illegal and strikers could face police action.

The result was relative docility in the African workforce, with the number of workers engaged in strikes during the Sixties not exceeding 2 000 per year.

But towards the end of 1971, about 13 000 Ovambo contract workers struck in SWA/Namibia, an event which was followed by an increase in strikes in South Africa itself during 1972.

The strike wave began in earnest on January 9, 1973, when 2 000 workers at the Coronation brick works outside Durban struck in support of wage demands, chanting "Man is dead, but his spirit still lives."

Their action sparked a wave of strikes in the Durban area which was to trigger strike action throughout the year. In 1973, 90 000 black workers were involved in strikes, compared to 9 224 the year before.

The strike wave continued into 1974, most notably at the textile factories owned by the Frame group.

Unions sprang into being and enrolled awesome numbers of workers in relatively short periods. In a survey among Durban workers, white students organising the new black unions ranked in popularity with men like Nelson Mandela.

But this initial wave of organisation was to prove as ephemeral as its predecessors. The banning of union leaders - all white intellectuals - began a decline which was to see paid-up union membership in the Durban area slump to something in the region of 2000 by the mid-1970's.

In retrospect, it seemed that the brief wave of unionism in the early Seventies was to be yet another chapter in the catalogue of the African union movement's failures.

But officialdom and, in particular, employers, did not seem so sure.

The Durban strikes, which prompted Prime Minister John Vorster to urge employers to realise that their workers were "human beings with souls", prompted agonised soul-seraching which was to go on for years - until, in fact, the 1976 Soweto unrest switched the focus to agonised soul-searching about township unrest.

The soul-searching tended to focus on two issues - wages and "communication" with workers.

On the first, the strikes were to bring in their wake a sharp increase in black real wages through the mid-1970's as employers acknowledged that wages of R9 a week were clearly a recipe for perpetual conflict.

Nevertheless, the 1973 strikes did mark a watershed in South African society - and the Wiehahn Commission recommendations which were to come six years later could well be seen as a delayed reaction to them.

The strikes were not crushed by state action. There were few arrests and, while police were ever-present, in the main they did not intervene directly.

An equally important point is that the reaction to the strikes was not increased repression, but a halting attempt at reform.

The reform was hardly far-reaching structural change. Indeed, the beefing up of committees was an attempt to extend control through reform.

But the strikes were the first occasion in which the authorities and employers saw reform - or, indeed, control-through-reform - as an option, rather than the repression which had met earlier strikes or waves of organisation.

While repression was to follow - the 1974 bannings were to be followed in late 1976 by the banning of some 30 people connected with the union movement - the trend towards control-through-reform was to be continued.

A 1976 amendment to the 1973 Act granted negotiating powers to the committees. This was once again an attempt to thwart unionism, but was the first official acknowledgement that black workers should be granted bargaining rights of any sort.

The control-through-reform option was to reappear again in more dramatic form with the release of the Wiehahn Commission report in 1979.

FACTORY BY FACTORY: THE UNIONS IN THE SEVENTIES.

Employer and Government moves were not, of course, taking place in a vacuum.

Official figures indicate that 1973 was followed by a relatively high strike year in 1974, in which 59 000 workers, almost all of them Africans, struck.

Although the figures declined sharply thereafter (to 23 000 workers in 1975), a trend which coincided with the decline of the union movement at the time, they were never again to drop as low as the figures in the mid-Sixties.

At its lowest point in the mid-Seventies, the strike figure was more than three times that in the Sixties.

Neither did the union movement disappear after the bannings of 1974. Although the period from 1974 to 1979 was undoubtedly a lean time for the unions, they continued to operate and slowly began to grow again.

The Durban unions formed themselves into the Trade Union Advisory and Co-Ordinating Council (TUACC), which was eventually to spread into the Transvaal.

In Johannesburg the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions was formed while in the Cape, a student-initiated advice bureau became the Western Province General Workers Union.

TUACC was later to form the nucleus of Fosatu and the Co-Ordinating Committee was later to become Cusa.

There were marked differences between these organisations. But, in varying degrees, they all adopted a strategy which was to explain in large measure their ability to survive.

The unions eschewed a mass strategy, preferring to concentrate on building up and consolidating support, factory by factory.

There were two important elements in this strategy. The first was a growing emphasis on worker education.

Through weekend seminars, training manuals and the like, the unions concentrated on training potential worker leaders, both in the goals of unionism and in the basic skills involved in running a union.

This in itself was hardly original. What made the education strategy important, however, was that the emphasis lay on building up union skills among grass-roots representatives in the factories.

They were not trained to become masters in the art of adressing great public meetings, but in organising at grass-roots level and in representing their members in negotiations.

This was followed by the importation of the shop steward system favoured by British unions in which workers elected by their colleagues in a particular department shoulder much of the organising - and ultimately negotiating - work in the factory.

This implied a new emphasis - on grass-roots democracy, on the building up of unionism from the bottom up. And it also increasingly implied that unions would consciously avoid the building up of large "paper" membership which they did not have the resources to organise thoroughly.

The emphasis moved from the quantity of organisation to its quality.

The immediate goal of the union movement also changed. Instead of seeking negotiating rights at industry-wide level, they sought to win recognition from the individual employer.

If it was achieved, this obviously meant that the union would have established itself in the factory, would have won a beechhead from which it could not easily be dislodged.

This was initially a matter of necessity rather than a conscious choice.

Because unions with African members could not win official industry-wide bargaining rights, and did not have the power to pressure employers into renouncing the official industry-wide bargaining fora, the only way the unions could win bargaining rights was if an individual employer decided to negotiate outside the official system by signing a recognition agreement with a black union.

But grass-roots, factory-level, bargaining, soon became seen as a desirable strategy in its own right, rather than as a matter of necessity.

This did not mean that employers rushed to sign such agreements, however.

Indeed, they strongly resisted any thought of negotiating with a black union. They either told unions who requested such rights that their in-house committees were working well enough, thank you very much, or cited the fact that black unions were not permitted to register with the Government.

One company took a different view. In 1974, the Pinetown management of British-based multinational Smith and Nephew, signed a recognition agreement with TUACC's National Union of Textile Workers - the first recognition agreement with a black union.

It was later followed by two East Cape companies, Ford and SKF, who agreed to bargain with the United Auto Workers - although this bargaining was channeled through the liaison committee system.

The three companies' decision probably had as much to do with the desire of multinational companies to answer anti-investment lobbies in their home countries as it did with the spectre of worker power. But the agreements did have an important effect - they illustrated that the recognition strategy could become viable.

This was emphasised in 1978 when Smith and Nephew announced that it would not renew its recognition agreement with the union but would use instead a multiracial liaison committee.

The union shop stewards committee resisted and managed to make a black boycott of the committee stick for over a year. Management attempts to introduce an alternative to the union were met with almost total worker resistance, backed up by appeals for support to British unions.

After the intervention of the parent company, Smith and Nephew eventually settled.

The dispute highlighted a pattern which was to recur over and over again and which is still recurring - a combination of management unwillingness to simply meet worker demands with repression and growing worker power in the factories.

Had Smith and Nephew merely decided to ignore worker demands and rely on firings of worker leaders and the like, it would probably have succeeded - although obviously not without great cost.

But had workers not demonstrated growing power and unity, the company would have experienced no great pressure to settle and the campaign urging it to do so would almost certainly have fizzled out.

There were to be many more Smith and Nephews in the next three years.

Despite the resistance of employers to recognition, the union movement continued to grow slowly. By 1977, official figures claimed, there were 27 unions with African members representing between 55 000 and 70 000 workers.

The existence of this movement, together with fears about the growing manpower shortage, was to prompt the Government in 1977 to appoint a commission of enquiry into labour legislation which was to grant blacks official union rights for the first time.

THE WHITE MAN'S BLACK UNIONS: PARALLEL UNIONISM IN THE SEVENTIES.

One other development in the Seventies is worth recording: the re-emergence of "parallel" unionism.

A "parallel" union is a separate union formed by an existing non-African union for African workers. Over the past few years, the term has usually been associated with unions in which the established non-African union keeps control of the "parallel" union by installing its general-secretary as general secretary of the "parallel".

In South Africa, founders of parallel unions argued that legislation made this step a necessity.

Because the established unions could not take in African workers, unionists who believed in multiracial unionism thus had no option but to form separate African unions and then ensure that the unions operated, as far as possible, as one union.

Many of the black unions formed by left-wing unionists from the thirties onwards were parallel unions.

While their founders were committed to African unionisation, they were unwilling to forego participation in the official bargaining system, which they would have had to do to become non-racial.

Indeed, they argued that by doing so they would lose important rights which they could use for the benefit of black workers.

The problem with such an arrangement is that it is inevitably paternalistic. The African worker representatives cannot do the bargaining and therefore become dependent on those who can.

However radical their founders may have been, there are some who argue that these unions, had they won state recognition, would have become progressively weaker and more removed from their rank-and-file.

Because they concentrated on industry-wide bargaining, their very structure militated against the development of shop-floor worker power, critics argue.

They add that bargaining would have been more likely to develop along the lines of the system used and known by the

white union leaders and that the established unionists, with their superior knowledge of the system, would have continued to hold disproportionate influence in the affairs of the union.

We shall never know. What we do know is that the parallel unions formed in the Seventies were not usually formed by unionists with great sympathy for black aspirations and that they were largely means of controlling black worker organisation.

The impetus for the formation of parallel unions came from Tucsa, the Trade Union Council of SA, a hitherto multiracial body which had expelled its few black unions in the late Sixties after the Government had threatened to act against it if it did not take this step.

In the early Seventies, pressure for Tucsa to readmit African unions began mounting in the organisation, culminating in a decision to readmit them and to advise registered Tucsa unions to organise parallel African unions.

Critics saw in this decision an attempt to control African unionisation. As Africans increasingly entered the urban economy, the established unions were becoming increasingly unrepresentative of the workforce.

This was not necessarily a problem if African workers remained unorganised, but a major blow to the influence of the established unions if African unionisation re-emerged.

Tucsa, critics argued, had shown little interest in African unionisation during the Sixties when no African union movement existed, but had reacted to the re-emergence of this movement outside its control by seeking to itself control the pace and form of unionisation.

Certainly, most parallel unions which were formed were pretty crude exercises in control.

In almost all cases, the secretaries of the established union simply installed themselves as head of the African union.

An investigation by the author into these unions in 1976, published in the Financial Mail, revealed that they made little effort to enroll workers, relying instead on contacts with employers who would agree to automatically deduct union dues on behalf of black workers - often without their consent.

As one black unionist put it : "They organise management, not workers."

It also revealed that the unions played virtually no role in negotiating for their members on the shop floor, and that most of them did not have democratic structures for the election of officials - general meetings were assigned this purpose and they happened rarely, if at all. When they did happen, they were attended by a handful of workers.

Where the African executive of the parallel union took decisions which threatened the position of their non-African counterparts, the general-secretary might simply instruct them to take another decision.

The general-secretary held the whip-hand because it was he who did the negotiating, he who arranged the deductions from employers.

And some workers feared that the contacts between these unionists and employers could well lead to the firing of workers who insisted over-loudly on union democracy.

Asked why she insisted on negotiating on behalf of an African union despite the fact that employers were prepared to bargain informally with it, one parallel unionist said: "They (the Africans) are not ready for it yet".

And another parallel unionist spelled out succinctly why he ran African unions: "We must protect them," he said, "from political unions which will start making demands about things like the pass laws."

Rivalry between these unions and the independent black or non-racial unions was intense through the Seventies and many observers saw the Wiehahn proposals as an attempt to allow parallel unionism legal recognition, and thus to thwart the growth of an independent black union movement.

NICOLAAS WIEHAHN AND THE END OF CLASSICAL LABOUR IDEOLOGY : THE COMMISSION AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Wiehahn Commission was not the first Government enquiry into labour legislation. Indeed, it was not even the first to recommend that black unions be granted official registration.

Shortly after it came to power in 1948, the National Party appointed the Botha Commission to examine, among other issues, the exclusion of African unions from official bargaining rights.

To the displeasure of the Government, the commission recommended the official recognition of African unions - including those with migrant worker membership - arguing among other points that Africans were becoming permanently urbanised and that their economic aspirations could not be met through the rural black homelands.

The commission's report was no worker's charter. It was critical of the black union movement, recommended a highly circumscribed right to strike, and in an interesting foretaste of what was to come, urged employers to make use of a system of works councils at the individual factory level.

But its recommendations were sufficiently liberal to be rejected by the Government who instead introduced the 1953 Act establishing the works committees which were designed to "bleed the unions to death".

The Wiehahn Commission was to have better luck with its recommendations.

Although African unions have never been illegal, at the time the commission began its work they had been barred from official bargaining rights by successive pieces of legislation.

Since the 1924 Act, a system of union registration had been in force. By registering, unions submitted themselves to official controls.

Chief among these was that they could not have links with a political party - a term which was broadly defined - that their records were subject to inspection by officials, their constitutions had to be approved by the authorities and a Government registrar could decide which workers they could represent in the official bargaining system the Act set up.

By registering, unions gained access to official bargaining machinery created by law. Chief among these were industrial councils, which comprised employer association and union representatives and which negotiated minimum wage and work condition standards.

Agreements reached at the councils carried the force of law once they were approved by the Government, which could reject the agreements but hardly ever did.

And registered unions could bring a recalcitrant employer to the bargaining table by requesting the authorities to convene a conciliation board, the prelude to a legal strike.

Registered unions also had much greater power to win stop order facilities - automatic deduction of union dues, which are regarded by some as a prime source of financial stability - from employers.

The legislation also made all strikes which were not routed through the official disputes-settling machinery illegal. As only registered unions could make use of this machinery, only they could call a legal strike.

However, the law laid down that only an 'employee' could belong to a registered union and Africans were specifically excluded from the definition of employee in the law and no union with African members could register.

African workers were expected to exercise their rights through the factory level committees and could not strike unless they followed the procedures laid down in the 1973 Act - which were even more circumscribed than those in the legislation affecting other races.

The only access Africans might have to the official system was indirectly through parallel unions or by a system introduced in the late Seventies in which African liaison committee representatives were permitted to attend industrial council negotiations as observers.

Shortly after the Wiehahn Commission began sitting, it became apparent that it was to recommend the registration of black unions, albeit within a highly controlled system, as well as the repeal of statutory curbs on the use of blacks in skilled work.

When its report was released, in a bizarre piece of symbolism, on Mayday, 1979, the commission did just that.

If this was done "at an early stage" , the chances of these unions being initiated into the system by their registered counterparts, rather than setting their own barbaining terms, would be enhanced.

Registration imposed "responsibilities" which could curb black worker militancy and it was thus best to register black unions.

The commission's report contained an elaborate blueprint for a new labour relations system which critics saw as a formula for control.

It suggested that unregistered unions be denied "stop order" facilities and be prohibited from negotiating agreements with employers.

A system of "provisional registration", whereby unions would be subjected to many of the controls which go with registration without receiving the benefits, was suggested.

A new industrial court was proposed which many saw as the body which would supervise the system, as well as offering protection to whites who feared their job security was threatened by the scrapping of statutory job bars.

A new National Manpower Commission was proposed with wide powers of "surveillance" over union activities -- one of the issues it was supposed to "surveill" was the question of who was elected to union leadership positions.

And the commission also recommended the establishment of a multiracial works council system -- the old liaison committees, but open to all races -- and suggested that the NMC examine whether councils should have bargaining rights.

In an attempt to allay non-African union fears, it proposed that unions have equal voting strength on industrial councils, regardless of their membership, and that no union be admitted to a council unless all the parties already on it agreed -- both moves which would weight the balance of power in favour of smaller, non-African, unions.

Many believed that the commission had come up with an ingenious formula for control-through-reform.

It had opened the way to black unionism, thus answering one of the key criticisms of Government policy, but had done so in a manner which ensured that the unions would remain "tame."

Unions who registered would be effectively controlled, while those which refused would be "bled to death" by the restrictions on unregistered unions.

As a foreign observer put it: "They are allowing blacks to organise without allowing them to do anything with that organisation."

Some saw it as a manifestation of the Government's total strategy, in which reform moves were disguised attempts to extend official control over all areas of society -- in this case over black worker organisation.

That may well have been the commission's intention. It might even have succeeded if its suggested blueprint had been introduced immediately (although even that is not certain).

The industrial court was set up with powers which would have excited a Spanish Inquisitor -- it could pronounce on all matters affecting "unfair labour practices" which were, according to the law, "any practice which, in the opinion of the industrial court, is an unfair labour practice."

Some of these provisions were watered down before the Bill became law -- the R500 fine was dropped, the Minister was given discretion to decide whether a union could apply for registration on a non-racial basis and a right of appeal to the court for unions excluded from the councils was introduced.

Nevertheless, although the new dispensation officially came into effect on October 1, 1979, there were no indications that any but the "tamest" of unions were considering entering the official system.

For the Government, the situation was clearly untenable and, later in October, the Minister of Manpower, Fanie Botha, issued a proclamation extending registered union rights to migrants (but not to foreign blacks.)

To some extent, this had the desired effect. Parallel unions and those in the Consultative Committee decided to apply for registration (although the latter expressed reservations about the extension of union rights through proclamation rather than law).

Those affiliated to Fosatu (TUACC, in alliance with a major registered motor union and some ex-Consultative unions, had formed Fosatu earlier that year) appeared undecided, however, and two Cape-based unions, the WPGWU and the African Food and Canning Workers Union, said they would refuse to register.

Some weeks after the proclamation, these union groupings came together for a meeting to discuss registration. While they agreed on a statement sharply criticising the new law, they parted ways on the registration issue.

The Cape unions reaffirmed their anti-registration stance, while Fosatu said it would apply for registration under certain conditions.

The Fosatu unions would apply, they said, but demand at the same time that they be granted non-racial registration, that they not be subjected to provisional registration and that the registrar not register them in such a way that they would be forced by law to shed any of their existing membership.

With only one section of the union movement committed to rejecting registration the proclamation appeared to be having its desired effect.

That was not to be.

The first indication of a resurgence of the union movement had come earlier in the year when members of the Food and Canning Workers Union and African Food and Canning Workers Union at Fattis and Monis' Cape plant were fired after a strike.

The union announced that the strikers would fight on for reinstatement and it proceeded to attempt to mobilise community organisations in a consumer boycott of the company's products as well as to raise money for the strikers.

Few believed the strikers' decision to hold out would mean terribly much.

Because African workers do not usually earn enough to save and because unions do not have strike funds, the ability of workers to stay out on strike is sorely limited. This obviously eroded black bargaining power.

As one employer told the 1973 strikers: "You people can only strike for a few days. If you could strike for a month, you would be allright."

When African workers embarked on their only legal strike -- in Springs in 1976 -- they lasted nine weeks. This was heralded as a major departure, despite the fact that the strike ended in defeat for the workers who could hold out no longer.

The Fattis and Monis workers were to last seven months -- and win.

Supported to some extent by money raised for strike pay -- strikers were given R15 a week -- they showed unprecedented resolution, which at times bordered on the grotesque.

One striker's child died after her father had refused to collect his accumulated money from the company to pay for medical treatment. To do so, he said, would be to concede that he had been fired.

Eventually, the company, increasingly subject to a community boycott and campaign, settled and was later to grant the unions full recognition.

The first strike after the legislation to give a clear indication of things to come was that at Ford's Port Elizabeth Cortina plant in November.

Workers struck initially over the resignation or dismissal (depending on which side you believe) of a black community leader, Thozamile Botha.

There were to be several short strikes in rapid succession until Ford fired the strikers.

This action was not an unqualified success. The fired men were skilled workers and there was community pressure on workers not to take fired strikers' jobs. The company's efforts to recruit new workers -- or to rehire fired strikers -- met with little response.

Pressure on Ford from anti-apartheid activists in the US served to increase the company's desire for a settlement.

In January, 1980, the company negotiated a settlement with worker leaders.

The strike was the first in which workers downed tools in support of a community leader, thus providing a foretaste of the "community-based" unionism which was then beginning to emerge.

The strikers were young, skilled , and better educated than their colleagues in the neighbouring Ford engine plant, who did not strike. This was a serious blow to the view that better educated, more skilled workers were a bulwark against worker militancy.

And the strikers once again illustrated the ability of some groups of black workers to hold out for relatively long periods -- and then win.

Finally, Ford had taken what was seen at the time as a major step by recognising a Fosatu-affiliated black union. The union was contrasted by most employers with the tamer variety organised into parallel unions and the company's step was seen as dangerously avante garde.

But the strike was to become a catalyst to a break-away from the union as more militant workers rejected it as "pro-management". This was to lead to the formation of Macwusa, one of the new "militant" community-based unions.

This illustrated, as one employer put it, a trend in which "what seems militant today, will look moderate tomorrow."

It also illustrated the danger of granting unions a form of recognition, while channeling this through weak shop-floor structures like liaison committees, as Ford had done.

The lesson that agreements with unions would have to be made to "stick" through direct worker participation was to become vital to many employers.

The Ford strike was to be followed in December and January by a mini-strike wave in the Western Cape.

While the numbers involved were not that significant, the strikes were significant from two perspectives.

The issues sparking unrest were becoming more complex. While dissatisfaction about wages and conditions were obviously ever-present as a background to the strikes, several were sparked by demands for union recognition, protests at the dismissal of union leaders, and the like.

The second departure was that a surprising number of strikes were being won by workers -- at least some of their demands were being met.

At the Cape Town docks, for example, a stevedores' strike prompted by an employer refusal to recognise a union committee, ended rapidly as employers agreed to that demand -- and ultimately to a recognition agreement with the unregistered WPGWU at three Cape harbours.

By the time employers and civil servants broke for the end-of-year holidays, they may, had they been reading the signs, have developed a sneaking suspicion that the total strategy was not that total after all.

1980: YEAR OF THE RUBICON?

The developments begun in 1979 continued into 1980.

Political Implications of Industrial Unrest

Strikes affected all major industrial areas, including, for example, Pretoria which had not experienced unrest for years. In some cases, they affected rural areas as well.

The Cape strikes continued, culminating in an industry-wide strike in the meat industry (which ended in a worker defeat). In Durban, 7 000 Frame Group textile workers struck for wage increases.

Uitenhage saw a three -week strike for wage demands in which workers rejected the poverty datum lines devised by researchers as a wage standard and demanded to negotiate a "living wage" in excesss of the poverty lines. The strikes started at the Volkswagen plant and at their height involved 70% of the town's workforce.

The Johannesburg municipal strike, the biggest at a single non-mining employer, the strikes over union recognition and dismissals in East London, and a wave of wage strikes in the Rosslyn area, near Pretoria, were only some of the other strikes to hit industry in 1980.

Some of these strikes ended in defeats for workers -- particularly later in the year after employers had got over the initial uncertainty of dealing with the strike wave.

But "defeat" and "victory" are relative terms -- particularly in South Africa where the dice are loaded against strikers and most strikes have ended quickly in total defeat for workers.

Where strikes were crushed, as in the meat strike, this was achieved at great cost to employers who had to fire a skilled workforce and begin training anew. And a surprising number of strikes ended in a settlement which at the very least went some way towards meeting worker demands.

Union membership grew rapidly, and new unions emerged to win large followings in a relatively short time.

The most oft-quoted example is the SA Allied Workers Union, whose membership in East London shot from 5 000 to around 20 000 within a few months.

Whereas the Fosatu and Cusa unions had concentrated on factory floor issues and had developed largely in the traditions of Western European unionism, the new unions sought links with community organisations, proclaimed their commitment to involvement in politics and adopted a "militant" stance.

They also adopted "populist" methods of mass organising.

In some cases, the "new unionism" was uncannily like the old unionism of the Forties and Fifties.

The "new unionists" adopted the same mass organising strategies -- with the same results.

Perhaps the starkest example came when 9 000 Johannesburg municipal workers, most of them unskilled migrants, rallied round the Black Municipality Workers Union to stage a week-long strike. The BMWU had only been launched a few weeks before the strike.

The municipal strike brought the reality of black worker power home to white Johannesburg and the union's leader, Joseph Mavi, became a household name in a matter of days.

Some commentators saw the BMWU as one of the most significant labour phenomena in years.

But, realising unskilled migrant workers' lack of bargaining power, the city council and the police crushed the strike in a matter of days. Mavi and other union executives were arrested and hundreds of workers fired amd "dumped" back in their "homelands".

The BMWU's decline was as startling as its rise to prominence. Today it consists of two factions -- and, at the most sympathetic assessment, a couple of hundred members.

But other "new unions", while also organising a relatively large base, paid attention to building up strength in the factories. Saawu, for example, is still a power in East London, with around 20 000 members, despite repeated firings of members and police action against its leadership.

The trend towards community participation was not restricted to these unions.

In Uitenhage, just a few kilometres from Port Elizabeth, where Fosatu's motor union was being lambasted for eschewing community links, almost the whole of the union's black hierarchy were also officials of the Uitenhage Black Civic Organisation.

And when the Consultative Committee became Cusa in late 1980, its inaugural meeting was addressed by a range of black community representatives.

Some unions adopted a multitude of increasingly sophisticated strategies for enforcing demands, combining worker pressure on the employer with appeals to international unions, community campaigns and legal actions.

The parallel unions steadily eroded. They increasingly became seen by workers as "benefit society unions" a view emphasised by one worker who told Fosatu organisers: "These unions look after us when we are dead, but not when we are alive" -- a reference to their elaborate death benefit schemes.

In Uitenhage scores of parallel union members resigned to join independent unions and employer sources were quick to acknowledge that these unions were ceasing to be a factor in the area.

Labour unrest, the growing union movement, and their potential political impact became a major source of concern to the Government and employers.

What soon became clear was that the tough anti-strike legislation was being honoured in the breech and that the control legislation introduced in late 1979 was achieving few of its aims.

Some of the fastest-growing unions were precisely those who refused to register; they were often also the unions whose members were striking.

Besides urging workers to use the official machinery -- urgings which were entirely ignored -- the authorities appeared to be largely overcome with stasis.

Amendments to the 1979 Act introduced in 1980 limited themselves largely to changing the definition of an "unfair labour practice", thus reducing the court's ability to control events, and in attempting to exclude victimisation by employers from the court's ambit, thus almost ensuring that African workers would find no reason at all to pay much attention to its existence.

Not that the Government was powerless to control events.

Officials in unrest-hit areas like East London urged employers to deal with liaison committees; officials are believed to have encouraged employers to fire illegal strikers; police were an almost constant presence at strikes; the Minister urged East London employers not to deal with unregistered unions and to "hold out" until legislation was passed to deal with them.

And, at times, police intervened directly -- either by arresting strikers or detaining strike leaders.

But none of this was particularly new. It was the same Government reaction of the past six decades -- but greatly reduced in its scale.

The Government's reaction certainly did not bear the stamp of a sophisticated control-through-reform strategy. If anything, the reform programme reduced the authorities' options in handling the labour movement.

Because they were committed, at least in the abstract, to acknowledging blacks' right to freedom of association, they could not be seen to be taking too tough an anti-union line -- at least by South African standards.

What officialdom did seek to do was to distinguish between those unions which were acceptable and those which were not.

But official perceptions of what constituted an acceptable union were forced to undergo a drastic change as the year wore on.

At the beginning of the new dispensation, parallel unions were seen as the acceptable section of the union movement.They were prepared to register, had been well schooled in "South Africa's tradition of trade unionism" and could be expected to make few waves on the factory floor.

But towards the end of the year, a new divide had to be drawn as it became apparent that parallel unionism was not a viable means of containing conflict.

Thus officialdom tended increasingly to distinguish between bodies like Fosatu and Cusa (who, whatever their commitment to genuine bargaining, were at least prepared to register) and the unregistered "crazies" (one member of the National Manpower Commission invited an unregistered union to address a meeting of business students, saying they wanted to hear the "lunatic fringe" view).

This is not to say that these organisations were overly delighted by at least limited Government approval. Or that these unions were to be compliant as the authorities hoped.

But the grand blueprint was undergoing a reformulation as it collided with events on the factory floor.

The employer reaction was harder to categorise. Many employers reacted to labour unrest by the time-honoured method of firing strikers, refusing to recognise unions, and, at times, by inviting parallel unions into factories in order to keep their independent rivals out.

Many said they were prepared to deal with black unions, but only if they were registered.

But this pattern was not uniform. Whatever the Wiehahn proposals had intended, they created a good deal of confusion in the minds of employers.

Firstly, because management had been protected for so long by legislation, South African personell management techniques were in a state of disrepair and in no state to respond to the spread of unionism on the factory floor as some of the bars on unionisation were removed.

If the unions were inexperienced, most managers were a good deal more so.

Secondly, while many unionists and analysts may have seen the proposals as a formula for control, many employers did not.

The press was full of officials and others sympathetic to the new dispensation talking about the new rights afforded to black unions, and it was often assumed that the authorities were more committed to freedom of association than they actually were.

Thus some employers assumed that they would not be able to rely on official support if they resisted unionism.

These factors were to become less important as events took their course. Management techniques for handling unions became more sophisticated and will, of course, continue to become more so.

The official attitude became more clearly defined -- as in East London, where officials and police made their opposition to militant unionism apparent.

But the initial inexperience and confusion in employer responses was certainly a factor in the rebirth of the union movement.

Towards the end of 1980, however, an employer response began emerging which was neither confused nor inexperienced.

As the unrest swept the country, a small but influential group of employers -- as well as a major employer lobby group , the Federated Chamber of Industries -- began questioning the official attitude to unionism.

Some employers were faced with demands from unregistered unions for recognition -- either from those who refused to register, or those which had not yet received registration.

The option of choosing a tame union to negotiate with was increasingly eroding and a refusal to deal with representative unions because they were unregistered threatened to become a source of disruption in the factories.

At the same time, some senior employer representatives were becoming increasingly worried at the lack of enthusiasm from foreign unions and even employers -- potential investors -- for the new dispensation.

The FCI began to appeal to the Government to make registration more attractive to unions by eliminating racial bars, extending official union rights to all blacks and removing some elements of control from the process.

But they went further -- deciding that they could not wait for officialdom to sort out the registration issue any longer.

At a meeting in September, the FCI advised members that it might be advisable in certain circumstances to deal with unregistered unions.

The biggest industrial conglomerate in the country, Barlow Rand, also opened the possibility of dealing with these unions in a later statement.

These initiatives were given added substance later as the FCI published detailed guidelines, urging employers to deal with representative unions, whether or not they were registered, and Barlow Rand made a similar move.

These moves may not have made a startling impact on most employers -- many ignored them. But they did spell out an alternative to the "no negotiation outside the official system" approach of bodies like the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation.

This new approach was also manifested in concrete factory floor events. An increasing number of companies began to recognise black unions -- including "militant" unregistered unions.

By the beginning of 1980, there were three recognition agreements between employers and black or non-racial unions. At the time of writing there are some four dozen with more on the way.

This trend does not indicate a wholesale change of employer attitudes -- there are some 40 000 employers covered by the industrial council system alone -- but it did indicate a qualitative change.

For the first time, the union movement had begun to win something which had eluded it since 1919 -- a base in the factories.

THE UNOFFICIAL SYSTEM: PRESENT DEVELOPMENTS

The pattern begun in 1980 continues. Although most strikes no longer grab the headlines, the strike wave has not abated and some estimate that there has been at least a strike a day this year.

The union movement is still growing, despite the fact that tough employer and police action -- firing of strikers and the like -- took its toll on unions, particularly on the newer ones.

The trend towards community involvement by unions has continued, irrespective of whether those unions proclaim themselves as "community" unions or not -- Fosatu does not have a "community union" image, but developments in its unions on the East Rand have shown almost precisely the same trends as those in "militant" East Cape unions.

The small, but growing, trend towards recognition agreements has continued and is beginning to develop in a significant direction.

The events of 1980 increasingly revealed the weaknesses of the official bargaining system.

The industrial councils in particular -- cornerstones of the system -- have come under stress and the growing union movement -- registered and unregistered -- has increasingly rejected them.

At first glance, the argument over the councils appear to be an abstruse debate about industrial relations structures. That is misleading. It is, in fact, a debate about the very basis of union power.

Most employers who are covered by council agreements insist that it is not their function to negotiate with unions -- that is the task of the professional negotiators in the employer association. The individual employer simply abides by the agreement.

The wage issue is the most obvious example of the implications of such a stance. In most cases, there is a difference between the going rate -- that actually paid -- and the agreement rate, which is merely a minimum standard.

If bargaining is channelled through the councils only, unions participate only in setting this minimum. The employer unilaterally sets the going rate, and there is no negotiation with unions on actual wage rates.

In addition, black unions argue that the councils have become time-consuming bureacracies, far removed from the factory floor, in which unionists are expected to spend their time helping to administer the bureaucracy, rather than representing their members on the factory floor.

They thus lose touch with their grass-roots who rarely, if ever, participate in the bargaining process.

This "worked" when the system served only protected non-African workers, whose skills were in short supply. If their members didn't like the going rate, they could sell their labour to another employer at a higher rate and they saw no need for collective bargaining.

That option is not open to less skilled African workers.

Hence the demand by unions to negotiate directly at the factory floor, rather than to discuss wage minima at the councils. Some unions are refusing to participate in the councils -- others are, at the very least, demanding that their participation be backed up with direct recognition agreements.

The recognition agreement, once a goal forced on unions by legislation, has increasingly come to be seen as an end in itself.

Employers in some areas, too, have increasingly been forced by events to re-evaluate their commitment to the councils.

On the East Rand, several strikes have been caused recently by workers rejecting the increase negotiated in the councils and demanding a higher rate. They didn't negotiate the increase, and see no reason to be bound by it.

Several East Rand factories bound by industrial council agreements have, therefore, decided to negotiate directly with unions on actual wage rates, rather than insist on applying the council agreement.

At least one company in the area covered by an agreement has signed a permanent recognition agreement with a union, providing for annual wage negotiations, and more are expected to follow suit.

These companies are, of course, a tiny minority. But it is important to understand the implications of their decision.

Not only are they agreeing to the development of an informal bargaining system, free of official control, but they are also conceding the right of organised workers to negotiate directly on an area of company decision-making.

This, many critics argue, is precisely what the official system -- and the councils in particular -- are designed to prevent.

This form of negotiation is thus the most important breakthrough for the union movement to date -- and, perhaps, the most important step towards free collective bargaining, rather than the controlled form of unionism favoured by officialdom and most employers.

It is given added significance by the fact that the FCI has taken its guidelines a step further by issuing a qualified endorsement of plant-level bargaining.

The signs at present are that an alternative bargaining system is beginning to develop. This seems likely to continue and, if it does, it will provide the starkest example to date of how Government attempts to control-through-reform have failed.

Not that the Government has been idle.

Firstly, eleven unionists this year -- all from unions which reject registration -- have been detained under security legislation. Five are still in detention.

And it has finally enacted into law a Bill which belatedly enacts more of the Wiehahn controls.

The Bill imposed new political and other controls on unregistered unions --an attempt to subject them to the same curbs as those applying to registered unions. It also imposes new controls on strike pay for "illegal" strikers and introduces the works council system proposed by Wiehahn.

The idea behind the law is to force unregistered unions to register, thus bringing all unions into the official control.

At the same time, it seeks to make the official system more attractive to unions by extending registered union

rights to all workers, including black foreigners, and by removing all references to race from the legislation.

The fact that the authorities have recognised the growing power of the black and non-racial union movement sufficiently to make these latter changes, despite substantial white opposition to them, is significant.

Nevertheless, the Government has not yet responded to calls to refurbish the official bargaining system to reduce the control it exercises on bargaining or to concede the principle of direct plant-level bargaining.

The new law therefore seeks to extend control over bargaining and is yet another example of the control-through-reform strategy. It illustrates the new Government approach by distinguishing between unions who are prepared to join the system and those which are not, between those who favour an overt political stance and those who do not.

Already the doom-sayers are once again gathering to predict the demise of the union movement as it is strangled by the new Bill.

However, the signs are that the new law will turn out to be the same resounding success the 1979 measures were.

Unregistered unions have had two years in which to grow and they say they will be able to continue operating outside the system.

And, even if they are forced to register, the view that registering black unions will in itself control them has been steadily eroded over the past eighteen months.

There are registered unions whose members are striking "illegally", which are increasingly co-operating with community political organisations and which are demanding to bargain directly rather than through the councils.

And the Bill's chances of success are further impaired by the fact that the entire independent union movement has met to pledge defiance of the clamp on strike pay and to sharply criticise the registration system and industrial councils.

Already the Minister is at pains to stress that the strike curbs and the clamps on unregistered unions will not be applied "harshly" and that the real aim of the Government is to attract unions into the official system, not force them to join.

Bearing in mind the history of trade unionism in this country, that is a major retreat. It seems to say that the Government itself is beginning to doubt its ability to control through reform.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

I have argued thus far that the signs point to the emergence of a black trade union movement -- this time permanently.

For the first time, the union movement is winning, through recognition agreements, a permanent base in the factories.

For the first time also an appreciable number of employers are beginning to set free collective bargaining as a viable option.

At the same time, elaborate Government plans to produce a controlled, compliant, union movement have failed and its attempts to maintain control while appearing not to are likely to be eroded even further.

While the union movement has not yet grown to the size of some of its predecessors -- there were about 160 000 workers in independent unions at the end of last year, according to most estimates -- the quality of organisation is vastly different to that in previous years.

The signs are that the movement will continue to grow, placing new pressure on employers to recognise it and to seek an accommodation with the unions -- a step employers will increasingly take.

This dynamic has had its effect on the legislative process too. Some employers, worried by the increasing gap between the official system and shop-floor reality, have been urging the Government to further relax the system to make it more acceptable to unions who at present refuse to enter it.

The Government has often reacted to this by seeking to further extend control -- but it has also been forced to respond, for example, by investigating changes to the registration process.

All this is not to say that free collective bargaining is around the corner in South Africa.

The bulk of employers are still resisting unionism -- either directly or by seeking to channel it through councils. They also often seek to crush unions by firing union leaders during strikes.

The police remain directly involved -- by arresting strikers, detaining unionists and at time even by directly intervening in strikes to attempt to force workers back to work.

An arsenal of "security" legislation remains on the statute books, to be used against unionists as well as other black leaders.

The migrant labour system remains -- indeed, it is being intensified -- and this obviously continues to weaken black bargaining power as striking workers risk dismissal and ejection to rural "dumping groups."

The balance of power remains firmly in the hands of employers and is likely to remain so for some time.

And the possibility always remains that the authorities will despair of their increasingly unsuccessful attempts to control through reform and will seek to crush the union movement through direct repression.

In addition, as unionists are always careful to point out, a recession would pose serious problems for unions by eroding black bargaining power.

A recession, signs of which are already apparent, could have a particularly devastating effect on mass-based unions without solid factory floor roots and particularly some newer unions are likely to suffer sharply through a slump.

But we are concerned here with trends. The severe skills shortage means that the Government and employer commitment to increased black skills training will continue.

Indeed, the skills shortage is so severe that many employers experienced acute shortages during the last recession and most expect to do so again during the next slump.

Black workers will continue to occupy skilled jobs on an increasing scale and will, therefore, become increasingly more difficult to replace. We have already seen how this strengthened black bargaining power during World War Two.

It is doing so again, only this time irreversibly - there are simply not enough white hands to go around. And, of course, if escalating guerilla war makes new claims on white manpower, this trend will increase even further.

For much the same reasons, black education levels are increasing -- a factor which makes for an increasingly articulate, impatient, black workforce. Asked when they would make significant inroads on the conservative Ford engine plant, the young militants in the Cortina plant said: "When the older workers start retiring and the ones with matrics like ourselves come in."

The option of crushing strikes by firing workers and ordering some more from the local labour bureau will come under increasing stress.

At the same time, the union movement has a foothold in the new factories for the first time through the recognition agreements which have been signed. This is a power base which will be increasingly difficult to break.

Defeats for the unions no doubt lie ahead - perhaps substantial defeats. But there is no sign that the movement is to be stopped dead in its tracks.

There are two sources of confusion among those who analyse the union movement today.

The first is the belief that the country already has a strong union movement, rather than an emerging one. The second is that the movement's potential for influence is being overstated, because there have been bigger union movements before and the majority of the country's black workers remain unorganised.

The union movement is still weak, still very much an emerging movement. But the trends point to it growing in influence.

This has implications for our views of political change.

There are those who believe that change will occur only when black conditions deteriorate to a stage in which blacks can bear it no longer.

To them, Government reforms and pragmatic employer reactions are a subtle strategy to buy off blacks and keep them subservient.

Some go further in arguing that improvements in blacks' material conditions are a dangerous device to slow the process of change. Thus black organisations like Azapo refuse to negotiate with the white authorities on bread-and-butter issues.

They reject the strategy of grass-roots organisation around material demands as an approach which plays into the hands of the white power structure.

This can best be described as the "big bang" theory -- at some mystical moment, blacks are going to become so angry that a "big bang" is going to occur, heralding the great day of "liberation".

At the same time, there are those who see in each Government or employer move a subtle blueprint for control which will succeed in warding off change.

The development of labour organisation over the past two years severely undermines those theories.

This is not to suggest that the reforms which were introduced in 1979 were a gesture of earnest and selfless commitment to change. They were a reaction to pressure and were born out of a desire to control.

Faced with community unrest, the strikes which began in 1973, the emerging union movement, increased international pressure for reform and a drastic skilled manpower shortage, the authorities took a step which, they believed, would enable them to control these developments.

The report was a blueprint for control -- a sophisticated one at that. But it didn't work. Indeed, it had the opposite effect. It forced the Government and employers to at least abstractly acknowledge freedom of association as a value, thus limiting the options for repression.

And it provided greater leeway for unions -- a far greater boost to their efforts than a thousand acts of repression.

At the same time, workers with better education and living standards have not, in the main become a "co-opted" elite.

Asked how he discovered the striker leaders in Port Elizabeth's New Brighton township, a foreign journalist replied that he had simply "looked for the new Cortinas."

Recognition agreement have not sapped worker militancy.

Certainly, they have channelled that militancy, as recognition agreements are supposed to do. But it is significant that the Kellogg workers on the East Rand are playing a major role in encouraging other workers to organise -- and they have an agreement and have won some of the largest increases in the area.

This may have a good deal to do with the fact that Kellogg is a forward-looking company -- but workers do not see it that way. Rather they see it as an indication of

the benefits to be achieved by worker organisation.

Where unions have won disputes, these are probably the first victories the workers concerned have achieved through collective action.

That appears to have played a major role in breaking down the despair occasioned by continual powerlessness -- and that, in a country in wiich a major stumbling block towards change is blacks' perception of their own powerlessness, is a major political event.

In short, winning victories through organisation -- through the negotiation rejected by some -- is likely to increase black political morale and muscle.

And, while there are those who argue that extensions in black bargaining rights depend simply on the strength and degree of organisation of workers, this, too, seems misleading.

A more open attitude by the Government or employers is likely to assist the strengthening of worker organisation. by giving it more leeway to operate.

This is not to suggest that all "reforms" contribute towards change. The Riekert proposals on influx control, for example -- seeking as they do to tighten the system denying blacks security in the cities -- may do the opposite.

But reforms which permit black organisation -- no matter how controlled -- are likely to do more to increase pressures for change than to diminish them.

The Government may be comfortable with repression as a means of control. But it is uncomfortable with the use of reform as a control measure.

By initiating reform in an area in which blacks have such obvious potential power the authorities may well, as white unionists claim, have "saddled a tiger which they cannot ride."

UNIONS AND POLITICS

The re-emergence of black unionism as a major social force is clearly a political event in itself.

However, its emergence as the most successful channel of black mobilisation has obviously raised the question of whether shop-floor militancy will come in time to take on a direct political role.

It is fairly evident that one of the reasons for the failure of reform-through-control is the absence of political rights for blacks.

A wide range of observers have pointed out that a situation in which blacks are "enfranchised" in the factories but not enfranchised outside it is a recipe for further conflict.

They have also predicted that blacks will increasingly use their labour muscle -- and the most substantial avenue of legal organisaion which they have -- to voice political demands and press for political change.

Evidence for this has been seen in the growth of links between black community organisations and unions and the increasingly overt anti-apartheid stance of some unions.

They add that recent strikes over proposed pensions legislation have provided an example of the way in which political issues will increasingly intrude into the labour arena.

Alarmed by proposed legislation "freezing" workers' pensions until retirement, workers demanded that their employers allow them to opt out of company pension funds. Where employers refused, workers struck.

Workers who enjoyed access to political power would not have had to pursue their demands in the workplace. They would instead have used their potential political influence to lobby for change.

Because this option was not open to them, they chose to voice their protest in the area in which they did have potential power -- the economy.

Employers, alarmed by the threat of unrest, appealed to the Government to relax the legislation, which it did.

This has given rise to predictions that bargaining will increasingly be cluttered by "political" issues. How valid is that assumption?

It is necessary to examine exactly what union "community links" mean.

Since the Fattis and Monis strike in 1979, black unions have co-operated with community groups on specific disputes. But this co-operation has taken place on labour, not community, issues.

Indeed, the co-operation has served largely to spell out how unequal bargaining in South Africa still is.

In disputes where employers have fired strikers -- a virtually unheard-of practice in the Western world until Ronald Reagan reinvented it -- the union may find it extremely difficult to sustain the dispute.

It often has no recourse through the law or official system, because the fired workers are no longer "employees" and therefore do not have rights within the company.

While they can rely on the employer's need for skilled labour to force him to eventually rehire the workers, this is likely to be a long process. In the 1980 meat strike, for example, employers appear to have decided that they would rather retrain labour at vast expense than give in to union demands.

The mobilisation of community support through boycotts, publicity campaigns and the like, therefore becomes an attempt to redress that unequal balance of power -- but only in the factory.

In the same way, the recent round of sympathy strikes in the Eastern Cape could be seen as an attempt to put pressure on a more "enlightened" employer -- where it will presumably have more effect -- in order to force a change of attitude in a more conservative company.

Certainly, this tactic is likely to increase and has proved effective for the unions -- but it is still centred on the factory.

At the same time, some observers have been profoundly excited by the emergence of unions who pass resolutions demanding the franchise for blacks, the release of black political leaders and so on.

It is no accident that the unionists who engage in this sort of activity almost invariably have little shop-floor organisation to back it up. They appear to be attempting to adopt the methods of the Forties and Fifties unions in claiming large membership with little firm organisation to back it up.

There is little evidence at present of black unions successfully seeking an overt political role.

This is hardly surprising. Their battle in the factories has by no means been won and unions with a substantial constituency to worry about are obviously concentrating their energies on attempting to win that battle.

What is true is that some unions have made it clear that they refuse to remove from the bargaining table political issues which affect their members.

Issues like migrant labour, housing , rents, transport costs and the like are all political and they all impinge on workers' lives.

It is equally evident that black workers see their participation in unions as a political act, with ultimate political goals. This is evident across the union spectrum -- whether union leaders are seen as "community-based militants" or not.

Demands for union recognition and the like are often articulated by workers as protests at the white decision-making hierarchy in the factory, which is seen in political terms.

As unions become increasingly established in the bargaining process and in the factories, these issues will obviously intrude increasingly on bargaining.

This may well have an important effect on politics if employers, as some are beginning to do, begin to see certain political concessions as essential to the defusing of tensions within their factories.

As on the pensions issue, they may increasingly wish to lobby the authorities for concessions in order to enhance industrial stability.

But there is a great deal of difference between this process and one in which unions themselves seek to mobilise workers nationally to make general political demands.

What appears to be happening is that political discontent, fused with the inevitable conflict in management-worker relations, is being increasingly focussed on the factory floor. It is likely to remain on the factory floor for a long time to come.

Indeed, it is even possible to view the focussing of political discontent onto factory bargaining as a concession of black political weakness in the wider society, where the potential of blacks to effect change through collective action is less apparent.

All this may change, of course, if the country really does evolve towards a free bargaining system -- a goal which, if it is to be achieved at all, is still quite a way down the road.

At that stage, black unionists and union members may well seek to use their more entrenched position in industry to voice broader political demands.

Indeed, it seems inevitable that they would do so -- a situation in which blacks are allowed to exercise some degree of power in the economy but not in the political system is clearly unstable.

Whether that action would have the same degree of success as labour action appears to be having remains to be seen. Certainly the degree of white power black workers would be confronted with would be much greater.

We will leave that to the crystal ball-gazers.

What we can say at present is that a profound change is taking place on our factory floors.

Black organisations are emerging with a real and powerful constituency and a real potential to effect change. Black workers are increasingly becoming involved in collective action and discovering a new ability to influence the course of their working lives.

And there is no immediate sign of that development being checked -- indeed, the reverse is happening as employers opt to deal with worker leaders.

And that, even if does not result in immediate calls for a nonracial political system, can only have a profound, if indirect, effect on political life.

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-FOOTNOTE: My thanks to Halton Cheadle for some invaluable insights into the union movement of the Forties and Fifties, as well as into contemporary developments with which he had some vague connection.

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