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Trade unionism in South Africa: a critical assessment of trade union strategy: the case of the CWIU, 1987-1999

Ndlozi, Mbuyiseni

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Abstract

By the end of the 1980s, the independent trade union movement in South Africa consolidated what Adler and Webster call 'radical reform' as a trade union strategy: building socialism using "legal means of struggle" and policy engagement through structures like NEDLAC. Labour set out to influence both the democratic transition and the shape of post apartheid South Africa. This work examines the limits, successes and failures of this strategy through a case study of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU, 1987-1999). Drawing on original research and a wide literature on debates over trade unions strategy, it argues that the union did not benefit from this strategy. It was unable to affect the direction of the chemical industry, or prevent retrenchments, outsourcing, privatisation and low salaries. Radical reform requires, in addition, a technocratic style of politics, based on expert negotiations and high level research leaving rank and file members as passive spectators. The union has, in short, not made major gains; instead, it has facilitated its own decline.