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455

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Revisiting the democratic traditions in the South African trade union movement

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REVISITING THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

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REVISITING THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

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***ABSTRACT*:**

This paper argues that most studies of the South African trade union movement, particularly the post-1973 unions, have failed to problematise the democratic tradition within these unions and thus do not provide a basis for understanding some of the changes in these traditions. This discussion examines how these traditions were invented and sustained. In this regard, particular attention is paid to the traditions of democratic membership participation, worker control and leadership accountability, all of which were central principles in the democratic tradition of union governance. It then proceeds to identify significant shifts and changes in these traditions and provides some tentative explanations thereof. The central argument is that the shortcomings noted in some of the literature can be avoided by interrogating these democratic traditions through focusing on the dynamics of power and leadership within these unions. Such an approach enables us to arrive at a different conclusion from those who have suggested that South African unions are an 'exception' and those who subscribe to the Michelsian orthodoxy. Although the democratic tradition was strong, particularly during the highpoint of worker militancy and mobilization in the 1980s and early 1990s, there have always been some anti-democratic tendencies within these unions. The decline in militancy and mobilization under the democratic political dispensation and globalisation have created space for these oligarchic tendencies to become stronger and more prevalent. However, an analysis of leadership and power dynamics reveals that although the democratic nature of the post-1973 unions can no longer be assumed, the persistence of the democratic political culture has become a matter of contestation.

REVISITING THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

1. Introduction:

Trade unions have now become a permanent feature of the collective organisational landscape in South Africa. The oldest of the trade unions established in the wake of the 1973 upsurge of worker action have been in existence for 25 years and many other have been established in recent years. One of the greatest contributions of the post-1973 unions has been the particular model of democracy that they established to govern their affairs. The model, which was based on the principle of strong membership participation in union structures, earned the new union movement praise and admiration at home and abroad.

However, since the beginning of the 1990s observers, have noted some signs that this democratic culture is on the decline. In his discussion of organisational trends in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Baskin has observed the shifts in the operation of worker control in the unions,

> "Major union issues cannot be adequately tackled and grasped on a part-time basis. As a result, it is usually union officials who wield real power, with elected worker leaders and executive committees acting as a check on the abuse of that power. ..Since the principle of worker leadership was originally intended to ensure hands-on leadership by workers, the system clearly no longer works effectively. While the principle is retained, officials wield more power than ever before, and effective worker leaders no longer spend much time at work" (1991: 461).

More recent studies have corroborated this observation (see Collins, 1994; September Commission, 1997 and Buhlungu, 1999) and in some cases, have gone further to question the very assumption that these unions are still democratic. For example, the September Commission (1997) concluded that COSATU unions are "much less effective, democratic and creative than

they could or should be" (1997: 168) . But the shortcoming of these and most of other studies of the studies is not their identification of this trend, but their failure to interrogate the democratic culture of the unions. Thus in most of these studies there is an assumption that the period before the 1990s was some kind of 'golden age' of union democracy. In other words, there has been a tendency to romanticise the democratic traditions of the union movement.

One of the few studies which avoid this trap is that by Maree (1982 and 1992) where he shows that during the first tens years of their existence, the independent unions exhibited both oligarchic and democratic tendencies and "circumstances determined which of these tendencies were dominant at any particular time" (1982: 51). But the usefulness of Maree's insights remains limited as his work covered only the first ten years of the post-1973 unions. A more fundamental shortcoming of most South African studies of the democratic traditions in the union movement, including Maree's, is their limited conceptualisation of power and leadership which is based on a zero-sum notion of power and powerlessness.

This paper begins by problematising the notion that the post-1973 unions are democratic. The approach adopted throughout this discussion is that the concepts 'democracy' and 'oligarchy' are analytical categories or ideal-types and their analytical relevance and usefulness becomes limited unless they are discussed in relation to power and its distribution and exercise. In other words, democracy and oligarchy are not simply about formal procedures and constitutional provisions. They are, in the first instance, about the power of groups and classes in society or groups within organisations and how that power is exercised by each group or class to pursue its own interests. Procedures and constitutions are mechanisms to formalise existing power relations between groups and classes, and often to obscure the discrepancies in the power possessed by these groups and classes. What this suggests in relation to organisations such as trade unions is that democracy and oligarchy are never found in their ideal-typical forms. They operate simply at the level of tendencies, latent or manifest, which are always the subject of contestation between different groups in organisations.

Thus in this paper, the concepts 'democracy', 'democratic tradition' and 'democratic culture' is used advisedly to refer to a situation where this tendency is more manifest or even hegemonic in the trade unions. Although Hyman's (1975) notion of 'countervailing forces' is helpful, it is still based on rather formalistic notions of democracy and oligarchy. A more plausible proposition is that presented by Hemingway (1978) where he argues that it is not helpful to assume an immutable tendency towards oligarchy in the same way that it is not safe to assume a participatory model of democracy. (1978: 176) For him what determines the predominance of one trend over another is what he termed the 'balance of control', a settlement which is the outcome of a battle for control. This balance is determined by the amount of resources each side can deploy to secure the compliance of the opposition (1978: 11). This view is premised on the view that trade unions contain factions or groups which have different interests.

This paper now proceeds to examine how the democratic traditions were invented and sustained. Later it will be shown how and why these traditions have declined since the beginning of the 1990's.

2. The 'invention' of democratic traditions in the Post-1973 unions:

The invention of the organisational and political traditions of these unions is linked to the political and economic context of the 1960s and the 1970s and the way in which the different groups which were involved in the organisation of the unions interpreted and acted on that context. The democratic tradition of unionism is often closely associated with white university students and intellectuals and individuals who had broken ranks with established unions. For example, Friedman's account of the early years of the unions singles out these groups' contribution to building democratic grassroots unionism "in a society in which workers have no experience of democracy" (1987: 59 - 60). He also asserts that the students "brought to the union movement an energy and enthusiasm it had not seen for years" (1987: 42). However, Baskin (1991) has identified five groups associated with the emergence of the unions in the early 1970s, namely, SACTU and ANC activists, the earliest worker recruits, white university students and

intellectuals, individuals from established unions and individuals from the black consciousness movement. This suggests that the picture was much more complex than Friedman's account allows for, and this complexity can only be grasped through an analysis of the economic and political context in which the new unions emerged.

The 1960s was a decade during which oppositional movements were defeated and mass protest muzzled. This made the worker uprisings of the early 1970s all the more dramatic. In this context it is tempting for observers to see the emergence of different forms of organisations in the early 1970s as a fresh start. For some commentators, the only lessons from the 1960s and before were the mistakes made since the days of the ICU through to the time SACTU was forced to go into exile. This reinforces the view held by many that the democratic culture of the post-1973 unions was a new 'invention' of some leaders and intellectuals whose "experience or reading made them aware of the mistakes of earlier union generations" (Friedman, 1987: 59). Thus, few observers have acknowledged that the building of shopfloor structures had its precedents long before the emergence of the post-1973 unions.[1]

It would seem, therefore, that the tendency to emphasise the contribution of one group over others in building the new unions and its tradition is not just a passing error. It is a manifestation of political competition among the various groups, principally the white students and intellectuals on the one hand, and the ANC, SACTU and black consciousness groups, on the other. According to an activist who was around in the early seventies this competition became most intense after black students had left NUSAS because they felt their white counterparts who showed no commitment to the struggle because they were not directly affected:

> "When trade unions were organised in the seventies you had a disgruntled group of white students from NUSAS who saw themselves as the custodians of democracy by virtue of the fact that they were saying that strong factory based should be formed instead of taking a populist approach that would leave you much weaker. Build you base quite strong so that when you have to confront the government of the day, you are not going to be crushed like our people were crushed before because you will have your factory structures that will continue running. At the same time you had some comrades from SACTU inside

> the country, who worked together with NUSAS in the reorganisation of trade unions. Now those comrades were not very much warmly, warmly welcomed by people who would adopt a very strong workerist (I'm trying to look for a better word, but I don't have it at this stage) approach because they were seen as people who would destabilise what they were having in their minds. If you were seen to be having some kind of relationship with the ANC which was banned at that time or SACTU that was seen as part of the ANC, people would try to hold you at an arm's length. (Interview with SK)

A recent study (Lowry, 1999) notes a similar tendency by these intellectuals to emphasise their own contribution by downplaying the contribution of others, in this case the Urban Training Project (UTP). Lowry argues that the young white intellectuals' 'radical ideology' of neo-Marxism and the 'larger ambitions' of changing the country inspired by the 1968 uprisings in western Europe and the United States got a boost from the 1973 wave of strikes and fuelled a 'more permanent superiority complex towards the UTP's mere bread and butter unionism' (1999: 202 - 203).

It is possible that the other groups also made similar claims about the superiority of their strategy and contributions of the union movement. However, this group had intellectual skills and access to some resources and a much wider network of strategic contacts. Thus, not only were they able influence key strategic debates, they were also able to take the credit for the outcomes and the organisational traditions that were to become the hallmark of these unions.

The above background is useful for understanding why the democratic tradition in the unions came to be associated with a particular group among those involved in the establishment of these unions. For some of these intellectuals, their association with this tradition conferred a legitimacy which they had been deprived of since the emergence of the black consciousness movement in the late 1960s. It is important to note at this point that this legitimacy depended on this group (and the unions they established) making the claim to being the sole custodians of this democratic tradition. Thus, all other groups, rightly or wrongly, were cast in a way which portrayed them as being deficient in terms of their practice of democracy, both in the way in which they conducted the struggle and their vision of social transformation. Those with previous or current associated

with established unions, nationalist politics, race essentialism, 'populism', etc, were deemed incapable of conducting the struggle in a democratic fashion and achieving a truly democratic society.

Notwithstanding the claim by some white activists to being the sole originators of the democratic tradition, there is vast body of evidence to show that the invention of the democratic tradition owes its roots to a variety of sources, including the white activists. All the five groups identified by Baskin contributed to the development of the tradition. But more importantly, and this is missing in most of the analyses, the democratic tradition became entrenched because of a coincidence of subjective and subjective factors. Firstly, by the early 1970s there was already in South Africa a substantial body of experience with shopfloor unionism and other forms of union democracy. The depth of this experience was nowhere near that which the post-1973 unions achieved, nevertheless it constituted an important building block. For example, the idea of shop stewards or factory committees was not new in South African unionism and there may well have been among the workers in the early 1970s some who were shop stewards in the 1950s and 1960s. Secondly, notions of collective organisation and solidarity were not alien to black workers either. Indeed, one of ex-unionist has argued that black workers who joined unions drew from an accumulated body of their cultural experience of collective organisation which incorporated elements of democratic practice. In this regard he cited community gatherings in rural villages, burial and other self-help organisations and sports and cultural bodies in urban townships.[2] Lowry's (1999) recent study also shows that the religious influence played quite an important role, particularly during the early years. Thirdly, in a context of white minority rule, a government which had no legitimacy in the eyes of the black population as a whole and management who were drawn from only one section of the population, the notion of electing one's own leadership and having a voice in the running of the affairs of one's organisation predisposed workers to a democratic type of unionism. Finally, the numerical growth of the working class and the successful challenge which the 1973 strikes represented gave black workers a new confidence in their power and demonstrated the efficacy of collective action.

It is important that the subjective element in the form of active interventions of the various groups mentioned above should be understood against this background. In addition, as the work of Friedman (1987) and Maree (1992) implies, none of these interventions were fully coherent in initial stages of union organisation. A lot of them involved experimentation and trial and error and, if the factors which predisposed workers to collective organisation had been absent, these interventions would, probably, had ended in failure. At this point it must be stressed that although the interventions by the different groups were all important in contributing to the invention of the democratic tradition, the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics employed to build organisation and entrench the democratic tradition varied from one group to the next. For example, whereas the UTP was more successful than the other groupings in establishing unions in the early years, the FOSATU activists took longer to set up viable or sustainable organisations. (see Friedman, 1987 and Maree, 1992). On the other hand, the UTP seems to have been less successful that the FOSATU activists in theoretically elaborating and entrenching a democratic culture of organisation.

A discussion of why and how the democratic tradition of unionism became entrenched is apposite here as it sets the scene for understanding why the tradition changed in later years. This discussion flows from four propositions. Firstly, the imperatives of building effective organisation dictated that for the unions to become sustainable, workers had to be given ownership of the unions. Friedman sums these imperatives as "to 'be different from TUCSA' and necessity" (1987: 93) and the strategy entailed a shift from mass recruitment to factory by factory organisation and consolidation. Secondly, the leadership question was a sensitive one for the white activists and their legitimacy depended on them putting in place governance structures led by workers themselves. Failing to do this would have exposed them to charges, particularly from black consciousness quarters, that they were hampering the empowerment of black people. Thirdly, many activists were committed to the development of worker leadership and democratic governance within the unions. Finally, many workers were favourably disposed to the notion of running their own affairs. But more importantly, they translated the theoretical constructs of the democratic tradition into their cultural frames and thus were able to give the tradition a worker

perspective which often went beyond what the intellectuals had envisaged.

Some commentators have pointed out the workers' lack experience in democracy. But none have noted that the white intellectuals did not have that experience either. This seemingly unimportant omission has far reaching-implications for how one understands the dynamics of leadership and power in the trade unions. It implies that not only did these intellectuals know all about democracy, but also that they also knew how to conduct themselves in a democratic union. Thus, in the view of these commentators the role of white intellectuals was not problematic and that their ability to conduct themselves properly in a democratic organisation can be taken as a given.

The foregoing underlines importance of seeing the democratic traditions of the post-1973 unions as a complex synthesis made up of a multiplicity of contributions and experiences before and after 1973. An assessment of which contribution and experience was more important than others, is not the focus of this paper. Suffice it to say that the coherence usually attributed to the tradition and some of its originators during the early years of these unions is inaccurate. Such a view ignores a fundamental aspect of how organisational cultures and traditions emerge and develop, namely, that organisational cultures and traditions operate at three levels, namely, the intellectual (ideological) level, the practical (formal organisational) level and the symbolic (cultural) level. The strength of only one of these dimensions, for example the intellectual one, does not give a tradition the coherence it requires to be sustainable. Thus the sustainability of an organisational tradition or culture occurs when an organisation manages to find a balance among the all these three levels.

At the end of the 1970s this balance had been achieved in many of the new unions. The unions sought to prevent such a concentration of power by advocating the notion of 'worker control' and the accountability of the leadership to their members. They de-emphasised the role of the union official and instead encouraged a tradition in which workers and worker leaders played a more prominent role in decision-making within the unions. The rationale for this was to build a culture of democratic participation from the rank-and-file and to discourage any tendencies towards

bureaucratization of the movement. In many of these unions the principle of worker control permeated every aspect of their organisation and functioning, for example:

* the emphasis on shop floor structures led by shop stewards,
* the creation of representative structures in which worker delegates were the majority,
* the practice of mandated decision-making and regular report-backs to members,
* factory level bargaining which allowed workers and shop stewards to maintain control of the bargaining agenda and the conclusion of agreements,
* the subordination of full-time officials to control by worker-dominated structures,
* the involvement of workers, at all levels, in the employment of full-time officials.

By this time the democratic tradition, in the form of worker control, had moved beyond the intellectual realm and was beginning to serve as the basis of union practice and the collective consciousness of unionised workers. At a symbolic and cultural level, worker control found expression and resonance in songs, worker poems and other activities such as theatre. It was in the process of these processes that workers "began to inject their own, more practical, perspectives into the debate" on union democracy (Friedman, 1987: 92). But this was more than just injecting new perspectives, it was about appropriating the traditions for the entire movement such that by the mid-1980s many workers and shop stewards had become the custodians of the democratic tradition. This began to expose some of the difficulty some of the activists had in working in a democratic environment. The following section of the paper discusses how these contradictions emerged and unfolded.

3. Changes in the democratic culture of unions

Since the mid-1980s many of these unions grew very rapidly and become complex organisations and in recent years some shifts have been noted in the democratic traditions of these unions (see Baskin, 1991; Collins, 1994 and Buhlungu, 1999). Although Baskin's observation on the decline of worker control is accurate, the trend that he identifies is not entirely new. In an earlier study of

democratic processes in the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), Webster (1985) made a similar observation.

> "There is evidence that decisions that go beyond the immediate concerns of the shopfloor are made at leadership level with limited participation outside that group. The clearest illustration of this is the nature of decision-making over registration" (1985:250).

An ex-shop steward and full-time official of the same union makes a similar point, but goes further to suggest that the tradition of worker control was not as deep as many believed.

> "Look, there has always been a thin spread of leaders who could stand their ground on philosophical, theoretical and policy political questions. On the basic components of politics we could argue. But the more we have to support them through and through then the capacity to do so starts to decline. And I think that brings us back to the idea 'how well entrenched was worker control?' I think you have one set of officials at head office, another set at provincial and local level, right. One must be careful not to generalise and to say only the head office-based ones were guilty of manipulation. I think officials at provincial and local level would always contest ideas and sometimes the ideas they contest and win, are not imbibed by workers to the extent that after such ideas are accepted the workers cannot live the whole process of defending them and monitoring their implementation and compliance all the way. So if the local level officials want something through the organisation's structures and it goes up, more often the local level officials do not sit in the national structures. So the workers who go there are pitted against the head officials, the heavy weight officials and can't sustain debates with that layer of officials and intellectuals. So the positions would simply wither away. And I remember at one Congress of 1989 of NUMSA, the Wits regions (East and West Wits) who are known for their militant political line made proposals about political direction and after discussing their resolutions the provincial intellectuals were supposed to word them into resolutions. The wording differed radically from the decisions. And as the poor workers tried to present the written versions of their positions, it contradicted all what they had been arguing for. And that caused an extreme embarrassment to the worker leaders, and so there was again an extremely embarrassing situation of how intellectuals just really manipulate union positions. But the point I'm raising is that monitoring compliance with positions can be attained on some but not other issues. It may not be easy to cheat workers around wage questions because those are issues close to their hearts. But it may be very difficult for workers to sustain their ability to monitor officials' compliance with difficult policy questions." (BM)

Sipho Kubheka, also points out that some of the white students and intellectuals often used "dirty

tactics" to marginalise certain political tendencies and individuals (Callinicos, 1994). All this suggests aloows us to reach two conclusions. Firstly, it suggests that un-democratic or anti-democratic tendencies have always been present in these unions despite the official democratic position. Secondly, after the mid-1980s most workers appropriated the democratic discourse and injected their own perspectives into it. This meant that overtly undemocratic behaviour was more difficult to sustain and some of the officials resorted to manipulation to retain some of the power they had in the early period. Thus, un-democratic tendencies continued in the form of more subtle manipulative behaviour. One former shop steward and official described how this manipulation operated.

> "You see, they wouldn't say in a meeting officially that 'you have overruled us on these questions. We are going to go ahead with what we thought regardless of.' That would not be the line they take. What they do not like, they would not invest time and energy in implementing. So the decisions they do not support will die a natural death until the situation is ripe for they wanted to emerge in a slightly modified form. So the point about leadership manipulating the process I perfectly agree with." (BM)

However, it should be added that these trends were nor so powerful as to make the unions undemocratic. During the 1980s the democratic impulse was too compelling and the culture too strong, hence some resorted to subtle methods of manipulation while still maintaining their loyalty to the principle of democracy. Many current and past unionists have emphasised that manipulative behaviour should not be construed to mean a lack of commitment to the union movement. They argue that many of those who engaged in undemocratic practices were very committed to the struggle of the workers and the unions they led.

Nor is the focus on white intellectuals and students intended to suggest they were the only ones who engaged in undemocratic behaviour. Many black officials were guilty of similar and other practices, but the difference is that many of them was not as indispensable to the union movement as were the white intellectuals.

The above discussion raises a matter of crucial theoretical significance about trade unions, namely,

that democratic and oligarchic tendencies can, and do, exist simultaneously in an organisation. A further implication of this, which is discussed in more detail below, is that power is much more diffuse and contested than many accounts allow for.

Although they appear relevant, orthodox theories of oligarchy are not very useful for understanding and explaining the more recent shifts noted by Baskin either. These shifts have occurred in a context where of political and global economic transformation. In the first place, the imperative of building effective organisation for sustainability, has become less important as workers join unions whether they are going to be afforded ownership of the unions of the unions or not. Thus the pressure on unions to demonstrate the democratic *bona fides* is no longer as strong as it was before. A second change which has occurred since the late 1980s is that there is now a critical mass of worker leadership and the pressure on activists (black and white) to build this leadership is not strong any more. The legitimacy of officials no longer depends on their commitment to the building of representative structures. An official can remain anonymous while still exercising a lot of behind the scenes influence. These two changes account for some of the shifts in relation to the democratic traditions of the unions. Several other factors can be added to this explanation. For example, unions now enjoy legitimacy in society and recognition by both the state and employers and for some the need to maintain a militant and combative membership is no longer a paramount consideration. In a context of democratisation, the oppositional culture which impelled unions to acts of struggle and solidarity has diminished and the individualistic impulse has taken root across the borad.

However, some thing remain largely unchanged. For example, there are still many unionists who are committed to the development of worker leadership and democratic governance within the unions. In addition, many workers are still favourably disposed to the notion of running their own affairs. These serve to reinforce the democratic tradition and to deepen the worker perspective of democracy which was established in the early period.

The above then suggests that there are two parallel processes or tendencies at play within the

unions today. On the one hand, there is an erosion of the democratic tradition which manifests itself in the form of a tendency towards a bureaucratic type of unionism. One the other hand, the democratic tradition has endured and many workers and some officials are still committed to its maintenance. These two contradictory processes have been present in the trade unions since the late 1980's. Although the democratic tradition is still hegemonic, it is important to pinpoint those aspects of the tradition which have been eroded.

At the formal level, that is, the level policy and principle worker control and democracy in the unions remain unchanged. However, a closer examination of union practice reveals that a lot has changed and is still changing. Firstly, although virtually all unions now have shop floor structures led by shop stewards, the reality is that many of these shop stewards are much weaker compared to earlier generations of shop stewards. Education and training happens erratically and there is a also a new trend of outsourcing it to formal educational instititions such as technikons. The availability of avenues for upward mobility for shop stewards has also led to a change in the orientation of the shop steward function, from a political one to a more instrumental one where many see it as a way to build their career profiles.

Secondly, all unions have a majority of worker delegate in all their representative structures. However, the majority of these worker delegates have neither a say nor an impact on actual decision making in these structures. In circumstances where big union gatherings such as national congresses have come to perform a ceremonial role, the presence of worker delegates is becoming increasingly immaterial. Many full-time officials are also becoming adept at building power basses of their own and then using worker representatives to articulate their (union officials') positions on public platforms.

Thirdly, the practice of mandated decision-making and regular report-backs to members has become weaker across the board. It is not just the complexity of the issues of the day, but also the lack of a political will on the part of many union leaders, particularly full-time officials.

Fourthly, there has been a notable shift away from factory level bargaining which allowed workers and shop stewards to maintain control of the bargaining agenda and the conclusion of agreements. However, even in those cases where factory level bargaining still occurs, the observance of democratic method is far less rigorous than before. The nett effect is that some (few) officials have greater interactions with employers and state officials than they have with their own members. In the entire history of the post-1973 unions, these cases of democratic rupture are much more prevalent than ever before.

Fifthly, the subordination of full-time officials to control by worker-dominated structures has weakened considerably. Many officials, particularly those from the "new generation" of union officials (Buhlungu, 1999) not only resent worker control in in this sense, but they also resist it. In many cases officials use thei access to information and knowledge to reverse the power relations in this relationship. But this is not a problem that is confined to the new generation of officials. As shown above many officials have used manipulative strategies to get their way since the early days of these unions. This trend has now accelerated and many union (worker) leaders often find themselves unable to discipline full-time officials.

Finally, the involvement of workers, at all levels, in the employment of full-time officials is not as stringent as it was before. In many instances, the process of staffing, including the employment and setting of reward systems for staff has now become a technical administrative matter rather than a political one. Thus the involvement of worker leaders in these matters has diminished and, in some instances, worker leaders no longer know how officials are remunerated.

4. As unions mature?: Power, leadership and democracy in unions

Although the trajectory of union development in South Africa has a uniquesness of its own, the changes discussed above bear some similarities to what has been observed in labour movements in other parts of the world. In his classic study of American unionism after the second world war, Richard Lester (1958) identified a process of 'maturation' or settling down in these unions. He

argued that the unions had followed a "natural evolution of organizational life" characterised by stages of development which began with a radical and democratic stage. However, as unions matured they tended to outgrow their youthful characteristics and became less radical and democratic (1958: 21). At first glance, the erosion of the democratic traditions of the post-1973 unions would suggest that these unions are entering a similar stage of maturation.

A similar analysis which has now become an orthodoxy was advanced by Robert Michels ealier this century when he developed his notion of an 'iron law of oligarchy' which is based on the view that in every human organization, there are "immanent oligarchic tendencies" (1959: 11). Michels' thesis can be summarised thus: the growth in size and complexity of an organisation inevitably leads to a greater division of labour between the leaders and the led, which in turn leads to 'class' differentiation, goal displacement and conservatism by the leadership. In such circumstances democracy becomes an impossible dream while the rule of the oligarchy becomes an unavoidable reality.

Although both positions are tempting, they have serious limitations because they are based on a zero-sum notion of power and leadership is also assumed to have all-subsuming power. In addition, they make no allowance for struggle and contestation. However, the argument made in this discussion contradicts both Michels and Lester. It has been shown that in the post-1973 trade union movement there have always been some undemocratic or anti-democratic tendencies, Furthermore, it has been a discussion on democracy in social movements necessarily involves a discussion of the dynamics of power and leadership in those movements and that power never resides solely with membership or solely with leadership. Both democratic and oligarchic tendencies are always present in a trade union and thus democracy in a union is always about contestation for power.

5. Conclusion

Although the democratic tradition was strong, particularly during the highpoint of worker militancy and mobilization in the 1980s and early 1990s, there have always been some anti-

democratic tendencies within these unions. The decline in militancy and mobilization under the democratic political dispensation and globalisation have created space for these oligarchic tendencies to become stronger and more prevalent. However, an analysis of leadership and power dynamics reveals that although the democratic nature of the post-1973 unions can no longer be assumed, the persistence of the democratic political culture has become a matter of contestation.

Endnotes:

1. This is the case despite evidence that SACTU unions had built grassroots unionism and active factory committees (see Lambert's,1989).

2. Interview with Moses Mayekiso, August 1999.

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