

Rethinking “Workerism” and the FOSATU Tradition, 1979-1985

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Paper presented at the Durban Moment Conference
Rhodes University, 21 – 23 February 2013

Abstract

This paper is concerned with unpacking key aspects of the politics of the influential “workerist” current that emerged within the trade union movement, notably in the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), the largest independent union federation in South Africa from 19179-1985. This current dominated the main black and non-racial trade unions, played a central role in the anti-apartheid struggle, and was notable for its scepticism about the ANC and SACP, preferring instead to building an independent working class movement. Examination of “workerism” is not a new area of focus within left and labour circles, since workerism was highly controversial and featured, most notably, centrally in the “workerist-populist” debate in the 1980s. Yet it remains strikingly under-examined, with its core project obscured in key accounts. This is partly a reflection of the non-primary and often polemical nature of many previous reports, which too often rely unduly on vague claims by secondary interlocutors. This paper addresses these shortfalls through primary research, centring on in-depth interviews with key FOSATU “workerists” as well as an extensive examination of FOSATU documents.

This enables me to present a picture of the politics of “workerism” that overturns large swathes of conventional wisdom on the subject. In doing so, several unexpected conclusions about the history and historiography of the 1970s and 1980s are unearthed, many of which hold important implications for labour scholars and activists today. I demonstrate that “workerism” was a distinctive, mass-based and coherent multiracial current in the black trade unions, played an important role in the larger anti-apartheid movement, and stressed class-struggle, non-racialism, anti-capitalism, worker self-activity and union democracy. It was also, contrary to certain accounts, fundamentally concerned with the national liberation of the oppressed black majority; with a mass base amongst black workers, it can also not be reduced to the views of a small coterie of radical white intellectuals. Strikingly, “workerism” also distanced itself from the established traditions of mainstream SACP Marxism and of Congress nationalism, fashioning a radical approach to national liberation that combined anti-capitalism with anti-nationalism. On the other hand, it was weakened by tensions within its project between a quasi-syndicalist and a left social democratic approach, as well as related contradictions in its tactical, strategic and theoretical positions. This paved the way for the victory of ANC/ SACP “populists” when FOSATU merged into the new COSATU.

Introduction

The “workerism-populism” debate of the 1980s was an event of decisive importance for South African politics; it played an instrumental role in shaping both the trajectory of the labour movement, and of the anti-apartheid movement more broadly, and as Steven Friedman has suggested, “did not involve merely a difference about union tactics” but was a struggle between two currents (“workerists” and “populists”) with “two very different political strategies, battling it out... for the leadership of the liberation movement”.¹

This paper revisits this important debate as a basis through which it becomes possible to deepen our understanding of the “workerist” phenomenon. “Workerism” is a label often used to describe a political current to which a small but significant group of trade unionists is said to have subscribed; a group mainly associated with the leadership of the Federation of the South African Trade Unions (Fosatu).

Fosatu was the first national trade union body for black workers since the decline of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), and the largest and most important union federation in South Africa from its founding in 1979 to its dissolution in 1985. At its formation Fosatu claimed a membership of 45 000 in eleven unions, registered and unregistered.² By 1981, Fosatu’s membership had soared to 95 000,³ and by the end of 1984, Fosatu claimed a membership of 120 000.⁴ It constituted affiliates located in the major industrial centres in the Transvaal, Natal and the Western and Eastern Cape. By 1982, through a number of amalgamations, the number of affiliates stood at eight. These included the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) centred on Pietermaritzburg and Durban, the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), alongside the CWIU, the National

¹ Friedman cited in Dwyer, P. 2009. “South Africa under the ANC: Still Bound to the Chains of Exploitation” in Zeilig (ed.). *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa*, Haymarket Books: Chicago, pp. 203-204. The workerists, it is argued here, adopted a class-based approach, which differed fundamentally from the nationalism of both the ANC and SACP.

² Friedman, M. 2011. *‘The Future is in the Hands of the Workers’: A History of Fosatu*. Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust: Johannesburg

³ Adler, G and E. Webster, 1995. “Challenging Transition Theory: The Labour Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa” in *Politics and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 80

⁴ Lacom. No date. *Freedom From Below: the Struggle for Trade Unions in South Africa*. Sached: Durban

Automobile and Allied Workers Union (Naawu),⁵ the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (Sfawu), the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (Pwawu), and the Jewellers and Goldsmiths Union (JGU).⁶

Fosatu was also “one of the central advocates of building broad unity among the emerging unions” and “helped engineer the creation of the ‘super-federation’”, Cosatu, the “largest trade union centre in South African history”, which claimed more than 1.2 million members at its formation.⁷

But Fosatu also occupies an interesting place in South Africa’s history for the historical novelty of its ideas – as a momentary expression of an explicitly dissident socialist politics (“workerism”) sufficiently powerful to have seriously challenged the long dominant and seemingly immovable socialist tradition the SACP. Although this tradition dominated Fosatu, it had deeper historical roots – being pioneered in Durban in the Trade Union Advisory Co-ordinating Committee (Tuacc), in a collaborative process with workers and worker leaders, which brought with them their own democratic practices, insights and experiences.⁸ The tradition combined a principle of non-racialism with a strategy focussed on national, industrial unions, strong factory floor organisation, democratic worker control through shop steward structures and “tight organisation” (where affiliates agreed to common policies and pooled resources).⁹

This novel and radical approach, and the challenge it presented to rival currents (both nationalist and Marxist) meant that Fosatu and its “workerism” attracted much controversy.

⁵ Naawu was formed out of a merger between the National Union of Motor and Rubber Workers of South Africa (Numarwosa), the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW) and the Western Province Motor Assembly Workers Union (WPMawu).

⁶ See Friedman, M. 2011. *‘The Future is in the Hands of the Workers’: A History of Fosatu*. Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust: Johannesburg, p. 75 for a fuller discussion and diagrammatic representation of the Fosatu affiliates and regions. See also Historical Papers (hereafter HP): AH 1999: C1.7.3.17.18. Miscellaneous, document titled “Timeline”, p. 2

⁷ Lacom. No date. *Freedom From Below: the Struggle for Trade Unions in South Africa*. Sached: Durban

⁸ See Ulrich, N. 2007. “Only the Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers’ control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979; Buhlungu, S. 2001. “Democracy and Modernization in the Making of the South African Movement: the dilemma of leadership, 1973-2000”, PhD Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand

⁹ Ulrich, *op. cit*; Buhlungu, *op. cit*. Importantly, the idea that this tradition the sole preserve of white academics with connections to the international New Left has been successfully challenged by these authors.

But, given the above, it is clear that workerism has not been given the consideration and diligence it deserves. Academic literature on the subject is limited – which in fact is true of South African labour history as a whole. No in-depth general history of the federation exists,¹⁰ and most of its affiliates (bar Mawu, i.e. Metal and Allied Workers Union, arguably Fosatu’s most militant and “workerist” affiliate and today part of Numsa, i.e. the National Union of Metalworkers of SA) remain unexamined.¹¹ Where Fosatu features, it is usually written about from a point of view as the precursor to Cosatu¹² and it is never the central focus of the study.¹³ The result has been that the politics of workerism and their location in broader historical and political contexts have not been captured in sufficient detail.

Moreover, workerism has routinely been depicted in ways that have shrouded the phenomenon in a layer of confusion, caricatured its influence, and ultimately obscured some of its central tenets. In fact, the literature is replete with contradictory and inaccurate accounts of what workerism stood for, further effacing its historical importance. This is partly because few studies have undertaken a serious examination of workerism by way of reference to its own ideas rather than by the meanings ascribed to it by others.

This paper, which draws on a larger project, differs from much of the existing work because it is based on extensive primary research into Fosatu documents, education material, literature, and minutes, as well as in-depth interviews with a wide range of key workerist figures associated with the Fosatu leadership. Through this, it responds to several lacunae in the existing literature, notably, the dislocation between the significance of the role of the workerists and the insignificance afforded them in most popular histories (that seem increasingly dominated by the triumphalist ANC

¹⁰ In 2011 Michelle Friedman published “*The Future is in the Hands of the Workers*”: *A history of Fosatu*”, but this mainly just an overview, focussing on photos and pictures.

¹¹ Forrest, K. 2007. “Power, Independence and Worker Democracy in the Development of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and its Predecessors”, PhD Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand

¹² See Kraak, G. 1992. *Breaking the Chains: Labour in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s*, University of Michigan Press: United States; Baskin, J. 1991 *Striking Back: A History of Cosatu*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg; Friedman, S. 1987. *Building Tomorrow Today*, Ravan Press: Johannesburg

¹³ Forrest, *op. cit.*

narratives¹⁴), and the question of what defines workerist ideology – something that has made it a topic for persistent and controversial debate.

There are reasons for this. The first relates to the context in which the “workerism-populism” debate was played out – a context in which the stakes were no less than the leadership of the liberation struggle and the very character of a post-apartheid South Africa. Because of this, the debate was heavily polemicised, and workerism intentionally caricatured. Although the end of apartheid has shifted the parameters of the debate somewhat, there remains a deliberate obfuscation of the phenomenon by those for which a particular historical narrative plays an important legitimating role. This will be explored further in this paper.

By way of qualification, before a discussion of workerism can be attempted, the problematic nature of the label must be acknowledged. Like “populism”, it was used as a derogatory label in an intense debate, rather than as a useful and explanatory category. It was also used in a wide range of contradictory ways, often devised without close attention to what “workerists” actually argued. However, I have decided not to discard the term, not because I agree with it, or what is often suggested by it (a narrow economism for example), but because it is the content of the ideas that I am interested in, which would not be altered by replacing it with another label.

Outline and Arguments

Elsewhere, I have undertaken a very detailed and in-depth account of workerist politics through analyses of its theoretical, strategic and tactical approaches and defining characteristics. A similar undertaking is obviously not possible, or necessary, in a paper such as this one; what is possible is to highlight a number of crucial issues.

First, I argue that there has been a tendency to ignore or downplay the ideological influences on workerism, which has led to a de-emphasis of the contextual nature of workerism. In particular, the connections between workerism and the New Left have been identified but not fully explored, producing a literature that

¹⁴ A closer investigation of the period reveals a much more complex and colourful picture of the liberation struggle in which a variety of social forces and ideologies emerge. Forces like workerism and Black Consciousness, at least for most of the 1970s and 1980s, one of the most important periods in the history of liberation, often relegated the ANC to the shadows. This project is therefore partly an attempt to recover some of South Africa’s “lost” history.

often reduces workerism to a form of “Marxism”¹⁵ – a simplification that precludes a deeper exploration of its ideas and praxis and ignores the full range of important ideological influences that came to bear on it. In addition, I argue that the influence of the New Left on workerism introduced elements that were the source of much of the power of Fosatu, but at the same time contained important implications for the longevity of the workerist project.

Second, workerism has regularly been described, I would argue, in overly-racialised and caricatured terms that efface its influence – for example in the imagery of workerism as represented by a handful of “forces amongst the intelligentsia”,¹⁶ mostly white, carrying a foreign ideology and praxis that was not influential beyond this small group.¹⁷ On the contrary, I demonstrate that workerism was in fact a *mass black current* in the trade union movement of the period, and despite some contestation over its ideas, was never *seriously* rejected within the federation. This is important because, in the words of Martin Legassick, it raises questions about the “political independence of the working class from nationalist orthodoxy”.¹⁸

Workerism and the New Left

Several writers have noted the fact that workerism contained a particular set of ideas and a distinguishing praxis reminiscent of those circulating within the international New Left.¹⁹ And it has also been recognised that workerism was no mere

¹⁵ See for example, Nash, A. 1999. “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XIX No. 1

¹⁶ Where “The dangers of ‘Legal Marxism’ in South Africa” in *African Communist*, 99, p. 80

¹⁷ See for example, Buhlungu, S. 2006. “Rebels without a Cause of Their Own? The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973–94” *Current Sociology*, Vol. 54, No. 3; Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 2006 “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg; and to a lesser extent Ginsburg, M. 1997. “Trade Union Education: Its past and future role in the development of the South African Labour Movement” Masters Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Von Holdt, K. 1987. “Trade Unions, community Organisations and Politics: a local Case Study on the East Rand”, *Sociology of Work Institute*, Research Report 3. Johannesburg.

¹⁸ Legassick, M. 2008. “Debating the revival of the workers’ movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and post-apartheid patriotic history” in *Kronos* Vol. 34, no. 1

¹⁹ Plaut, for example, argues that “the workerists were products of the 1960s and the union recognition battles of the '70s. They were inspired by the French student revolts of 1968, and owed as much to the *New Left Review* as to *Das Kapital*” (Plaut, M. 1992. “Debates in a Shark Tank: the Politics of South Africa’s non-racial trade unions” in *African Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 364) See also Nash, A. 1999. “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XIX No. 1; Ulrich, N.

reproduction of this phenomenon, but rather fundamentally shaped by the particular context in which it appeared – a key aspect of which was its delayed and fragmentary assimilation into the heavily censored South African political landscape.

However, as others have argued, the dominant tendency in South African scholarship on unions in this period – referred to by Ndlozi as the “Websterian”²⁰ tradition – has tended to ignore the overall *political* orientation of trade unions or unionists in favour of analysis of practical and organisational issues, such as, for example, strikes, or issues of labour process or restructuring.

In the context of Fosatu, this focus has meant that the location of workerism in the New Left has rarely been explored in any substantive way. It is the argument here that only by placing workerism in context – as a key element in the emergence of the eclectic and varied New Left in South Africa – can certain defining features be adequately understood. Furthermore, exploring the New Left link raises surprising implications for our thinking of the period in question.

Workerism and Ideology

For example, the eclecticism and pragmatism prevalent in workerism has been highlighted repeatedly (including by workerist themselves²¹) – but very few sources have contextualised this self-defining feature. In certain cases, this praxis has been

2007. “Only the Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers’ control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979”, Masters Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand; Lunn, H. 2009. “Hippies, radicals and the Sounds of Silence’: Cultural Dialectics at two South African Universities, 1966-1976”, PhD Dissertation: University of KwaZulu Natal

²⁰ Ndlozi, M. 2010. “Trade Unionism in South Africa: A critical assessment of trade union strategy. The case of the CWIU, 1987-1999”, Masters Research Report: University of the Witwatersrand, p. 53.

²¹ See Forrest, K. 2007. “Power, Independence and Worker Democracy in the Development of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and its Predecessors”, PhD Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand; Southall also shows how internationalism in Fosatu was more pragmatically than theoretically driven (Southall, R. 1995. *Imperialism or Solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town). Fosatu leaders concur: almost all testified to their “instinctive” (e.g. Adler) or “pragmatic” (e.g. Bonner, Erwin, Fanaroff, Mayekiso, Barrett) as opposed to “doctrinaire” praxis (to cite Fanaroff), and many considered themselves “practitioners” (Adler) as opposed to theoreticians. (Interview with Taffy Adler, 16th March, 2010; Interview with Phil Bonner, 18th October 2010, Johannesburg; Interview with Alec Erwin, 23rd July 2009, Cape Town; Interview with Bernie Fanaroff, 27th November 2009; Interview with Moses Mayekiso, 25th January 2010, Johannesburg; Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010, Johannesburg). Even *Fosatu Worker News* remarked that “ALL TALK AND NO ACTION IS A DANGEROUS GAME!” pointing to a much more practice-driven approach (*FWN*. 1982. “Editorial”, March edn., emphasis original).

interpreted to mean that workerists “did not articulate a coherent position”, making it “very difficult to define their ideology as a group”.²² This difficulty is certainly a real one, but it is compounded by the failure to locate workerism within a broader New Left milieu. In fact, the phrasing used here actually provides an important insight for appreciating the imprint the New Left on workerism.

Although complex and contradictory, the New Left has been described as “a synthesis of individual idealism and mass activity, but without the fetters of a programmatic orthodoxy”,²³ the point of which was “not to put forward a new ideology, but to abolish and demystify all ideologies”.²⁴ This has also often linked to scepticism of “pure theory” and a treatment of theory as if it was simply of pragmatic interest.²⁵

If defining the *ideology* of the workerists as a group is difficult, this difficulty derives, I would argue, precisely from the aversion and scepticism of those in the New Left to “ideology” (interpreted as the dogmatic and rigid acceptance of pre-defined formulas for action). Therefore, a central notion within the New Left, one which was clearly transmitted into workerism, revolved around the attempt to define a *new politics* – one that was not simply a reproduction of “dogma” as laid out by Marx, Pannekoek or Gramsci (to select popular examples), or predetermined revolutionary strategy as laid out by say, Lenin. As several authors have suggested, “Revolutionary theory” in the era of the New Left, “no longer preced[ed] social action but follow[ed] it, or at best [ran] parallel to it”.²⁶

A few key points will serve to demonstrate that this type of thinking, so distinctive of the New Left, was also pervasive in workerism.

First, workerism followed the New Left in using as part of a matrix of ideas, Marx’s tools of analysis over a Marxist political programme; and importantly, used them selectively: as a “guide” rather than a “roadmap”,²⁷ predominantly informed by,

²² Ulrich, N. 2003. “The Emergence of Trade Unions in Natal and the Development of a New Trade Union Tradition”, Unpublished Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, available at <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20ulrich.PDF>

²³ Caute, 1988. *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968*. Harper and Row: New York, p. 25

²⁴ Gombin, R. 1975. *The Origins of Modern Leftism*. Penguin: Hammondsworth; Renton, D. 2004 *Dissident Marxism*, ZedBooks: London, p. 20

²⁵ Ehrenreich B. and Ehrenreich J. *Long March, Short Spring*. Monthly Review Press: New York, p. 94

²⁶ Gombin, R. *op. cit*; Renton, D. 2004 *Dissident Marxism*, ZedBooks: London, p. 16

²⁷ Interview with Bernie Fanaroff, 27th November 2009

rather than informing, practice. Taffy Adler for example asked, were we “trying to mould that [theoretical literature] into some sort of theoretical action, or theoretical framework that would motivate action? I *think it worked the other way around*”.²⁸

Second, most respondents downplayed their academic histories and expressed hostility to overly ideological, or “esoteric”²⁹ questions, often claiming that discussion of that type led to “armchair politics”.³⁰ Similarly, workerists were purposefully eclectic: for Mayekiso, it “...it depends on *getting something out of this and getting something out of that*, and mould your own... not necessarily dogmatically stick to whatever”.³¹ They were also explicit in their quest for “*finding a new politics*, and not simply latching onto establishment politics”³² – an approach typical of the larger New Left milieu.

Third, respondents in this research attested to a general lack of interest in pre-established theories, including of revolution, such that “revolutionary theory... was not something that was either brought into discussion at the formal level, or in my view, to a great extent informally”.³³ Rather, theory was consciously subordinated to the needs of organisation, and demoted to the status of “tool” - used for more pragmatic ends. This is nicely illustrated by Adler, who recalled, “I used to talk about surplus value and class” but this “was very intimately tied up with the way we organised people; we used it as as an *organising tool*”.³⁴

This “pragmatic” approach, in which theory is closely connected with action, or in Eddie Webster’s words, “theory and practice were merged in an emancipatory project”,³⁵ was absolutely central to the New Left – as it was to workerism.

This is an important point to recognise because it goes directly to the heart of what distinguishes the socialist politics of the workerists, both from the socialist politics of the SACP, and from the various Trotskyist groups that existed at the time – and because it is this that places them neatly within the context of the New Left.

²⁸ Interview with Taffy Adler, 16th March, 2010

²⁹ Fanaroff, op. cit; Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010

³⁰ Fanaroff, op. cit

³¹ Interview with Moses Mayekiso, 5th January 2010

³² Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010

³³ Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010

³⁴ Interview with Bernie Fanaroff, 27th November 2009

³⁵ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010

Workerism and Strategy

The workerist strategy is similarly revealing when considering workerism as an expression of the New Left.

Fosatu's objectives were twofold. First, to build up a strong, resilient and independent labour movement, which could fight for the improvement of the economic and social wellbeing of its membership the short term, and second, to overthrow both capitalism and apartheid.

In achieving the former, workerists devised a sound short-term strategy, which has already been comprehensively described in the existing literature. It will therefore not be discussed in detail here, except to outline some of its key hallmarks, which included: an emphasis on gaining the trust of workers through focussing on everyday economic demands as a prerequisite for a truly class conscious, strong and united labour movement; a focus on worker control and building resilient and accountable shop steward structures that could resist repression; a stress on legal means of struggle; locating the base of the organisation where workers have the most power – on the shopfloor; focussing organisation in strategic departments, geographic regions and sectors; non-racialism; national, industrial unionism; “tight” federation; developing an accountable and effective worker leadership, and maintaining union independence. This schematic description somewhat unsatisfactory given that it was these short-term strategic initiatives that contributed most to the success and distinctiveness of workerism, however, space does not permit.

The question over how to achieve its longer-term ambitions was more complicated.

On the question of an alternatives, workerism was vague: it spoke of “transformation of society *as a whole*: economic transformation, social and political transformation”,³⁶ and invoked visions of, for example, “a just and fair society controlled by workers”,³⁷ or a society characterised by “generalised worker power”.³⁸ Clearly this encompassed a substantial degree of workers’ control, and evidence suggests that many workerists were considering a model in which power was located in decentralised workers councils. (Russian soviets, the Italian factory council movement, the British shop steward movement of the 1910s, 1920s and 1960s. and

³⁶ Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010

³⁷ HP: AH 1999. C1.7.3.16.3.10. The Workers Struggle, p. 2

³⁸ Interview with Phil Bonner, 5th November 2010

the Yugoslavian co-operative model were viewed with interest.) However, this was never formally or adequately assembled into a clear vision, and workerists never fully resolved questions over the nature of the “transformation” required, the existence and nature of the market, or the state, or the character of production relations - or social relations in general.

Related to this, workerists avoided questions of long-term strategising. Instead, they devoted themselves to this short-term programme, and concentrated their efforts on building the movement, building solidarity and building accountable structures. This was because, in the words of Jane Barrett, “there was a very deep belief, across the spectrum of leadership and ideology in Fosatu, that people saw empowerment in action”.³⁹

Like its ideology, this flexible and pragmatic strategic outlook was deeply embedded in the action-oriented praxis of the New Left, and a massive factor in the explosive growth of the federation and in its admirable success. However, it meant that both theory and long-term strategising were consciously subordinated to short-term programmatic and demands and pragmatic, spontaneous action, which had important consequences for the long-term project of workerism. In particular, it meant that the question of how to achieve liberation from capitalism and apartheid was never fully resolved.

This is something that was recognised by several critics of Fosatu in the 1980s, who understood that workerists had not thought through to a conclusion the strategic problems of liberation facing the labour movement,⁴⁰ but also by key workerists themselves. Webster has noted inadequacies in dealing with the “unresolved” question of “white-black as coloniser-colonised”.⁴¹ Jane Barrett’s assessment that there was “not a great deal of discussion”, including about “*well if we are worried about this two-stage theory, what are you going to do about it?*”, and that this was a “huge weakness of the movement historically”,⁴² is astute. For Barrett, the explanation for this resides partly in the exigencies of the political climate at the time (“isolation, lack of access to material, fear... given the treasonable nature of

³⁹ Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010

⁴⁰ Storey, P. 1984. “Trade Unions and the UDF” in *Inqaba yaBasebenzi*, November issue, p. 13; Nash, A. 1999. “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XIX No. 1

⁴¹ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010, Johannesburg

⁴² Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010, Johannesburg

[subversive workerist ideas]”), but it was also linked to “a bit of blind faith” that “as long as we all sort of believed the transformation at some point that we would find the tools when the moment arrived”.⁴³

The outcome of this strategic limitation was embodied in the presence of inconsistencies and contradictions in what longer-term strategic thinking did exist. As such, the underdeveloped long-term strategy as outlined by workerists often vacillated between libertarianism and authoritarianism, radicalism and reformism, spontaneity and constraint, and its political practice could be concurrently “boycottist” and “engagist”.

For example, workerism was quasi-syndicalist in its strategy: it absorbed revolutionary syndicalist influences and also approximated historic syndicalism in important ways (this is explored a bit more later in this paper). But the appropriation of these ideas was fragmentary, and alongside this libertarian tradition ran a more cautious, piecemeal and statist strategy akin to social democracy - centred on more traditional institutions and urged less radical change. This means that at any given moment, the workerist praxis contained components analogous to both of these traditions, while never fully reconciling them into a coherent strategy.

Similarly, Fosatu *concurrently* urged direct action *and* legal action; downplayed the distinction between building a counter-power (which rejects class collaboration), and co-determination; and applied its analysis inconsistently.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, while fundamental tensions existed, and while the workerists never articulated a fully-fledged political programme, workerism can be said to constitute a distinct tendency, with certain important concepts and notions featuring centrally in its long-term thinking. These actually reinforce the claim that workerism

⁴³Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010, Johannesburg

⁴⁴The most noteworthy example of this relates to Fosatu’s refusal to involve itself in the UDF. During the registration debate, Fosatu criticised the “boycottist” unions who argued against registration, stressing that participation in industrial councils would not necessarily tie the unions up in bureaucracy and erode worker control, and that these could be turned to the benefit of the workers. But, this logic was not applied to the UDF – to which Fosatu adamantly refused to affiliate. If, as Fosatu argued, the UDF was undemocratic and its leadership dominated by petit bourgeois elements (both exaggerated claims, but a valid concern nonetheless), why not enter into it in order to “transform” the from the inside – the same way the motor unions had supposedly “democratised” the liaison committees in the 1970s, or, the same way Fosatu argued it could turn the industrial councils inside out – which were undoubtedly more decisively dominated by “capitalist elements”, and indeed, less democratic.

should be located within a section of the New Left, and key examples are discussed briefly below.

The first example is the theme of worker control – a popular notion in the New Left. (“Workers’ control” is used here to denote the process by which workers limit the autonomy of management, and should be distinguished from workers self-management, which refers to the situation whereby workers themselves possess sovereignty.) Officially in Fosatu, the term “worker control” had “quite a narrow meaning - it meant “workers’ control over the union, it meant that shop stewards should be accountable; that they should be directly elected”.⁴⁵ However, for the workerists, whose position was not always explicitly stated as that of the Federation, the concept of worker control *went beyond* a concern for democratic practices in the trade union. Although not developed into a coherent strategy, the call for workers control was simultaneously a call for the democratisation of the production process itself,⁴⁶ in a process whereby workers “build up [their organisation] so [they] can control the employers”,⁴⁷ with a view to “wrest[ing] arbitrary control from the company’s management on the shop floor”,⁴⁸ or “pushing back the frontiers of control”.⁴⁹ This was informed by the vision of the sort of society they desired.⁵⁰

Part of this was also to extend the sphere of workers’ control outside of production – into the reproductive sphere. This is part of what Fosatu meant by creating a “working class politics” and “movement”.⁵¹ Examples of this include the locals, which concerned themselves with broader political issues. Another is the important role played by trade unionists (equipped with the experience and knowledge

⁴⁵ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010

⁴⁶ Interview with Phil Bonner, 5th November 2010; Webster, op. cit; Interview with Taffy Adler, 16th March, 2010

⁴⁷ Baskin, J. 1982, “Growth of a New Worker Organ – The Germiston Shop Stewards Council” in *South African Labour Bulletin (SALB)*, Vol. 7, No. 8, p. 43. A similar claim was made by Fosatu workerist leader Sauls, who noted that “worker control” was also about fostering a popular culture of assertiveness and a questioning of authority outside of the unions. (Interview with Fred Sauls, 29th January 2010, Port Elizabeth)

⁴⁸ Bonner, P. 1983. “Independent Trade Unions since Wiehahn” in *SALB* vol. 8 No. 4. Feb edn., p. 26

⁴⁹ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010, Johannesburg; Webster, E. 1985. *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour process and trade unionism in the foundries*, Ravan Press: Johannesburg, p. 279; HP. AH 1999. C1.7.3.16.3.10. “The Workers Struggle”, p. 31

⁵⁰ Interview with Fred Sauls, 29th January 2010, Port Elizabeth

⁵¹ HP. AH 1999. C1.7.3.16.3.10. “The Workers Struggle”

of democratic bottom-up organisation) in the formation of the civics, and in building the street committees built under the UDF banner.⁵²

While notions of workers' self-management were less common, the use of historical examples of workers movements (notably in the British shop stewards' movement, the Italian Factory Council Movement – both of which were deeply influenced by syndicalism, and the Russian soviets) provided a conduit through which these sorts of ideas were brought into the federation, although thinking in this direction was not systematic.

A second key aspect of the long-term thought of the workerists was a serious commitment to worker education. In the short term, this was used for equipping shop stewards and worker leaders with skills - necessary for them to be effective. In the longer term however, Fosatu provided a broad socialist education which was to create a “working class politics”⁵³ embedded in a “working class movement”,⁵⁴ which extended beyond the union movement; reaching into all spheres of life: material, political, ideological and cultural.

There were three main aspects to this project. First, the creation of a counter-culture that could challenge the imposed, ruling class culture transmitted largely through the bourgeois media, and build a specifically working class identity⁵⁵ (This came replete with it's own history, newspapers, heroes, newspapers, songs, choirs, cultural days and festivals etc.). Second, popular education designed to counter the state schooling system which was structured to perpetuate class domination and stamp out all creative and critical faculty; and third, the development of “organic intellectuals” – politically astute and accountable cadre of worker leaders as the fulcrum for a new worker knowledge and counter-culture. This was done in the hope of “winning the kind of ideology/consciousness battle among the shop steward leadership, in the hope, with the desire that this would spread out, and that they in turn would influence or become key players or influences influence in the community”.⁵⁶

It is here that clear links to ideas developed by Gramsci and popularised by the New Left are most notable. And it is here, too, that an important, if largely

⁵² Interview with Daniel Dube, 21st July 2009, Port Elizabeth; Interview with Bernie Fanaroff, 27th November 2009

⁵³ Webster, E. 1985. *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour process and trade unionism in the foundries*, Ravan Press: Johannesburg, p. 279

⁵⁴ HP. AH 1999. C1.7.3.16.3.10. “The Workers Struggle”

⁵⁵ Interview with Phil Bonner, 18th November 2010, Johannesburg

⁵⁶ Interview with Phil Bonner, 5th November 2010

unrecognised and indirect syndicalist influence on the workerist current can be detected, because many of these notions were borrowed from it by Gramsci⁵⁷ (although they existed alongside ideas drawn elsewhere).

Third, workerism operated in a very distinct context, where the national question was a central feature of social contradictions, forcing workerists to begin to develop their thinking on these key questions. This is important to state because of the frequent assertion that workerists ignored or avoided race and were unconcerned with the national-democratic struggle,⁵⁸ or counterpoised it with the more important class struggle.⁵⁹ This caricature usually stems from a conflation of national liberation with *nationalism*, and the inability (or refusal?) to envisage the possibility of national liberation without nationalism – on the basis of a working class programme.

But the latter was the crux of the workerists' solution, although it wasn't fully developed. Workerists were sceptical of nationalism, largely because nationalism was interpreted as “petit bourgeois politics”⁶⁰, and “not necessarily for worker interests”.⁶¹ This position on nationalism was partly historically grounded, based in the “failures of African nationalism in the post-colonial context, and the way that trade unions have been really... sort of muzzled”⁶² by nationalist and populist liberation leaders and regimes. As such, the ANC (characterised as historically a “popular mass movement”) was viewed with a considerable amount of scepticism.⁶³

Based on this analysis, the workerist strategy revolved around combining anti-nationalism and anti-capitalism into a national liberation struggle – fought by a united,

⁵⁷ Carl Levy cited in Van der Walt, L and M. Schmidt. 2007. *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*: AK Press: Edinburgh p. 276

⁵⁸ For example Pillay, D. 2008. “Cosatu, the SACP and the ANC Post-Polokwane: Looking Left but does it feel Right?” in *Labour, Capital and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2. According to Pillay, “social movement unionism” (which he associates with Fosatu’s successor, Cosatu), was an advance because it combined the best of both “populism” and workerism, by fighting against “both apartheid and capitalism” (emphasis original). In other words, the “populists” stressed anti-apartheid struggle (but however ignored capitalism), while the workerists were against capitalism (but unconcerned about fighting apartheid). Similar claims can be found in Komanisi, B. 2006. “State Power” in the *Information Bulletin of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party*, Vol. 5, No. 1; Isizwe. 1986. “Errors of Workerism” in *SALB*, Vol. 12, No. 3. Ally argues that the workerists’ embrace of class politics (in the aftermath of the formation of the South African Students Association (Saso)), was an instrument to avoid racial issues. Ally, S. 2005. “Oppositional intellectualism as reflection, not rejection of power: Wits Sociology, 1975-1989,” in *Transformation*, No. 59

⁵⁹ Baskin, J. 1991 *Striking Back: A History of Cosatu*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg

⁶⁰ Interview with Daniel Dube, 21st July 2009, Port Elizabeth.

⁶¹ Interview with Moses Mayekiso, 25th January 2010, Johannesburg

⁶² Interview with Phil Bonner, 18th October 2010, Johannesburg

⁶³ HP. AH 1999. C1.7.3.16.3.10. “The Workers Struggle”

non-racial working class (as opposed to a multi-class nationalist or populist front) infused with socialist aspirations. This movement would have as its central ambition the building up of organs of worker power – in the key industrial sectors – with a view to overcoming both apartheid and capitalism “with one movement”.⁶⁴

This was precisely the thrust of an important paper by Erwin on this issue, yet even here, we find a clumsy and vague formulation of what this entails: “the form of the struggle may of itself raise the issue of transformation to a position of centrality...”.⁶⁵ The crux of the argument was that “liberation politics” can *within themselves* contain the “political practices” that will *simultaneously* undermine the legitimacy of the apartheid regime, and address problems of economic *and* political transformation.⁶⁶ Moreover, this was something that, according to Erwin, the democratic trade unions had already in 1985 begun to achieve.

This approach, termed “building tomorrow today”, also contains a noteworthy resonance to certain strands of liberation communism. Syndicalists have long stressed the prerequisite of building up a “counter-power”⁶⁷ capable of confronting the power of the ruling class and prefiguring a future society within the shell of the old. Council communists like Anton Pannekoek also stressed the “steady erosion of the bourgeois state and the simultaneous creation of a proletarian counter-state through the process of mass action”.⁶⁸ These ideas were also adopted by the early Gramsci, who envisaged the Italian Factory Councils as organs of worker control that could constitute “the nucleus of a new state appearing within the daily life of capitalism”.⁶⁹ Interestingly, Pannekoek, revolutionary syndicalism and Antonio Gramsci all featured in Fosatu’s education programme.⁷⁰

The fact that Gramsci provided a key reference for many workerists is significant because Gramsci has been read in so many ways - as a theorist of syndicalism or council democracy, *and* as an orthodox Leninist, while at the same

⁶⁴ Interview with Alec Erwin, 23rd July 2009, Cape Town

⁶⁵ Erwin, A. 1985. “*The Question of Unity in Struggle*” in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 1

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ Van der Walt, L and M. Schmidt. 2007. *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*: AK Press: Edinburgh, p. 65

⁶⁸ Gerber, J. 1988. “From Left Radicalism to Council Communism: Anton Pannekoek and German Revolutionary Marxism” in *Journal of Contemporary History* No. 23, p. 175, 184

⁶⁹ Boggs cited in Tilly, L.A. 1979. “Gramsci and Factory Councils” in *International Labour and Working Class History*, Vol. 14, p. 34

⁷⁰ HP: AH 1999. C1.7.3.17.1. Advanced Course May 1985.

time providing justification for the piecemeal conceptions of Eurocommunism.⁷¹ As such the Gramscian influence can be seen to anticipate and then exemplify the eclecticism and paradoxes of the long-term strategy of the workerists. Importantly, this sort of paradoxical praxis should not be seen to be anomalous within the New Left – which was itself a broad church bringing together many, often contradictory elements.

In their “action first, doctrine later”⁷² approach to politics and political struggle, Fosatu’s workerists were unable to formulate a suitably coherent theory of society and a corresponding political programme sufficiently solid to sustain their vision of a non-racial democratic and socialist South Africa. Indeed, in its respect for the autonomy of the workers’ movement,⁷³ rooted in a New Left-inspired conviction in the spontaneous activity of the working class, workerism left a strategic vacuum which the SACP and ANC were able to occupy. Moreover, in the context of the resurgence of mass struggle, without a clear conception of its objectives and the means necessary to achieve them, workerism was simply derailed as it became caught up in “a kind of sentiment that started to engulf the country”.⁷⁴ In the words of Eddie Webster,⁷⁵

Look, I’m a product of May 68 New Left, and I think in different ways everyone else in that group was. Turner’s eye of the needle captures it better than anything else... if you put everything on action, then thinking about alternatives which is... *ja*... no it’s a weak part... The necessity of utopian thinking... that’s how we resolved it – think utopically.

The New Left: Recognising Multiple Influences

It has been mentioned that while socialist, workerist leftism broke with the dominant socialism in South Africa typified by the SACP and Sactu. However, there remains a fairly common characterisation of workerism as a form of Marxism – albeit a novel and dissident form that broke with the Marxism of the Soviet Union. To give

⁷¹ See Showstack Sassoon, A. 1988. “The Gramsci Boom Continues” in *History Workshop Journal*, No 26

⁷² This phrase was used by Genovese in relation to the New Left. See Genovese, E. 1971: *In Red and Black: Marxian explorations in Southern and Afro-American history*. Pantheon Books: New York, p. 17

⁷³ Nash, A. 1999. “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XIX No. 1

⁷⁴ Interview with Taffy Adler, 16th March 2010, Johannesburg

⁷⁵ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010, Johannesburg

one example, Andrew Nash, describes key workerists as belonging to a “generation of Marxist intellectuals and activists that emerged in the 1970s”, sharing a “distinctive form of Marxism”, situated in the “the assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa”.⁷⁶

But, as has already been alluded to, it is incorrect to suggest that workerism can be reduced to a form of Marxism. Rather, workerism must be located in as part of an eclectic New Left that directly and indirectly absorbed, besides insights from several strands of Marxism, a number of other influences. Thus the conflation of workerism with Marxism is simplistic, and tends to promote a literature that provides only rough sketches of the ideas and praxis to which the workerist current subscribed. It does not, for the most part, recognise its complexity, or its congruence of its ideas and practices with those popularised by the New Left globally.

As Nash himself admits, some of the strategic innovations developed in the 1970s that paved the way for the revival of the workers movement were not Marxist, having been pioneered by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In fact, it was in fact the Students Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee in the US who played a key role in popularising for the New Left the idea of organising “at the grassroots”, and these themes were then adapted by various student and Christian organisations in South Africa, including NUSAS, the University Christian Movement and the Christian Institute, and later by the Black Consciousness Movement.

Besides Marxism, the New Left included a number of other libertarian, socialist and existentialist currents and influences, among them those from Sartre, Morris, council communism, anarchism and syndicalism, Castrosim, Maoism and Trotskyism. Furthermore, and much of the Marxism in the New Left was heavily influenced and shaped by other currents. György Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci are good examples. Both were taken up as key “Marxist” reference points within the New Left, but in fact both were “very involved with the council movements in Hungary and Italy [respectively] while grappling theoretically with Sorelian and syndicalist themes”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Nash, A. “The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XIX No. 1, p. 68

⁷⁷ Tucker, K. H. *French Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Public Sphere*. Cambridge University Press: United Kingdom, p. 212

Indeed, contrary to the later myth, the early Gramsci was immersed in Italy's vast anarchist and syndicalist movement, and according to Carl Levy, he was "by no means a Leninist: his views were close to anarchism, the key figures in his circle, grouped around the fortnightly *L'Ordine Nuovo* ("New Order"), were anarchists, and his then-libertarian ideas had an appeal precisely because of their resonance with Italian popular culture".⁷⁸ Not co-incidentally, many workerists testified to a strong Gramscian influence, and the "early stuff – the factory councils"⁷⁹ was given special emphasis. This means that although workerists were influenced by Marxism, they also absorbed other influences, including anarchism and syndicalism, and even Eurocommunism, which featured heavily in the New Left's repertoire.

In fact, for reasons outlined in this paper, my research found that several of these currents can be demonstrated to have exerted their influence on workerism – both directly and indirectly. It is, then, too simplistic to reduce the politics of workerism to form of "Marxism", even if its "distinctiveness" and distinguishability from the historically dominant form in South Africa or globally are taken into account.⁸⁰

In retrospect it is important to stress that in general the workerists in this study actually self-identified as Marxists, and in cases even denied anarchist/syndicalist influence.⁸¹ Likewise, although most respondents in this study admitted some connection to the New Left, many do not call themselves "New Left". However, I have not used self-identification as the basis for this analysis. Rather, I have attempted

⁷⁸ Carl Levy cited in Van der Walt, L and M. Schmidt. 2007. *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*: AK Press: Edinburgh p. 276

⁷⁹ Interview with Eddie Webster, 20th November 2010, Johannesburg

⁸⁰ Van der Walt has noted that the historically dominant form of Marxism globally, embodied in Stalinism and Maoism, has been "reductionist and statist", and that "all Marxist regimes ended as state capitalist dictatorships" (See van der Walt, L. 2011. "Counterpower, participatory democracy, revolutionary defence: debating *Black Flame*, revolutionary anarchism and historical Marxism" in *International Socialism*, Issue 130. See also the response to this by Blackledge, P. 2011. "Anarchism, syndicalism and strategy: A reply to Lucien van der Walt" in *International Socialism*, Issue 131).

⁸¹ Interview with Alec Erwin, 23rd July 2009, Cape Town. On the other hand, some workerists did testify to a "strong syndicalist strand" running through workerism (Webster, *op. cit*). Pat Horn recalls only realising the similarities between workerism and anarcho-syndicalism much later: "I only came across people who called themselves anarcho-syndicalists a few years ago in Brazil and I asked them what that meant. And they explained the "anarcho" part and they described to me something that reminded me of our syndicalism of the early days. But I never really read any syndicalist authors.... I mean we regarded it as a circumstantial thing..." (Telephone Interview with Pat Horn, 30th November 2010, Johannesburg)

to understand their politics on the basis of the *content* of their ideas and the nature of their practice, and the intellectual lineages of both, and it is on this basis that I argue that an analysis of the theoretical and strategic premises of workerism place it firmly within the ambit of the New Left. And this implies that multiple influences, both Marxist and otherwise, can be demonstrated to have left their imprint on workerism – directly and indirectly through conduits like Gramsci. Apart from raising unexpected conclusions about the character of the “Durban moment”, recognising these influences can also account for some of the confusion surrounding the workerists. Specifically, this relates to their refusal to endorse some central theses of classical, mainstream Marxism – including the idea of the revolutionary non-potential of trade unions, and the impossibility of trade unions as major vehicles for the creation of a socialist consciousness – while still identifying as Marxists.⁸²

Like much of the New Left, therefore, workerism was often (but not always) “unaware of these historical antecedents”⁸³ to its practice.

Workerists in Black and White

Workerism was at least as important as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) as an anti-apartheid force by the early 1980s, and, like the BCM, overshadowed the ANC for a time. Yet, its very existence has almost entirely been written out popular constructions of the South African past. Where it is given credit, there continues to exist persistent imagery of workerism as influential only among a small clique of white academics.⁸⁴ This is a caricature that greatly diminishes its importance, significance and role in the struggle for black liberation.

⁸² Bernie Fanaroff noted that “even though we would’ve called ourselves Marxists, we used the loopholes in the law very effectively” – which is another example of this flexible approach and haphazard application of theory. (Interview with Bernie Fanaroff, 27th November 2009)

⁸³ This phrase was used by Richard Gombin, who notes the often ignored fact that the New Left was heir to a tradition of anti-authoritarian communism counterposed to “state socialism and the various authoritarian conceptions of social organisation that came to be identified with the theory of the proletariat”;⁸³ a tradition which played a part in “the great autonomous mass movements in Russia (1905-7), Germany (1918-19), England (1918-26), Italy (1920), Spain (1936-7), Hungary (1919, 1956) and France (1936, 1968)” (p. 9).

⁸⁴ See for example Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 2006 “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg; Buhlungu, S. “Rebels without a Cause of Their Own?: The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973–94” in *Current Sociology* May 2006, No 54: 3.

The recent focus on the role and place of race in Fosatu⁸⁵ is important and necessary for several reasons, not least that it broaches a usually tabooed topic and in light of the crucial and continuing role it played and plays in shaping the lived experiences of most South Africans. But it is also important for our understanding of workerism and for developing a full and accurate picture of the period in question.

The literature on the subject has raised several important questions: about the extent to which whites were able to gain acceptance and play a central role in a basically black movement, about their motives for attempting to do so, and related, about their class position and historical privilege, and about their dominance over the federation's position and political direction. This paper does not attempt to answer these questions, except to suggest that the framework in which the debate on race has played is simplistic in its analysis of the racial profile of workerism. Buhlungu's contribution, for example, although valuable, tends to posit too neat a bifurcation between the white unionists (which he implies constitutes "a new elite"), and the distinct "world of black workers".⁸⁶ Of particular relevance here is that this bifurcation has then been transposed onto a delineation between "white workerists" from "black populists": "most populists were black while most workerists were white",⁸⁷ even if some exceptions are acknowledged.

My research has suggested instead that workerism was in fact a multiracial current; it included a large number of black workers and prominent Fosatu leaders like Daniel Dube, Joe Foster, Moses Mayekiso, Fred Sauls, (and the late John Gomomo, although he was not interviewed) – alongside the whites. Writers like Ulrich,⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See the debate between Sakhela Buhlungu and Johann Maree in *Current Sociology* May 2006, No 54: 3. The debate includes four articles: Buhlungu, S. "Rebels without a Cause of Their Own?: The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973–94"; Maree, J. "Rebels with Causes: White Officials in Black Trade Unions in South Africa, 1973–94: A Response to Sakhela Buhlungu"; Buhlungu, S. "Whose Cause and Whose History?"; Maree, J. "Similarities and Differences between Rebels With and Without a Cause". The question of race was also raised by a splinter faction of Mawu on the East Rand, who claimed that Fosatu was "dominated by a bureaucratic white elite" (See *Work in Progress*. 1984. "Mawu and Ummawsa: Fight for the factories", No 33).

⁸⁶ Buhlungu, S. "Rebels without a Cause of Their Own?: The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973–94" in *Current Sociology* May 2006, No 54: 3, p. 430

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ Ulrich, N. 2007. "Only the Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers' control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970–1979", Masters Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand

Ndlovu and Sithole⁸⁹ and Buhlungu⁹⁰ himself have shown these workers helped create the Fosatu tradition. And because the Fosatu tradition was dominated by workerism, black workers and organic intellectuals played a key role in the development and elaboration of workerism.

Firstly, interviewees in this research, including those that have not been placed within the workerist camp, identified African Fosatu leaders like John Gomomo and Moses Mayekiso as workerist critics of the Freedom Charter, arguing against “populism” and the politics of the ANC.⁹¹ Conversely, many of the key polemics against workerism were written by white academics and/or SACP members, including Innes and Von Holdt, as well as SACP ideologues Cronin and Slovo.

More importantly however, Fosatu was profoundly democratic, and it is difficult to conceive that figures like Alec Erwin could have operated in the unions except under the guidance and mandates of the black membership. Partly, but not entirely, this was a survivalist strategy: where workerists believed that the genuine control of the union by ordinary members, who identified the movement as their own and were willing to fight for it, was considered a basic premise for the survival of the organisation in the heavily repressive context of apartheid South Africa – and thus a prerequisite for a the building of working class movement that was not simply a “paper tiger”,⁹² but a powerful force that could challenge the *status quo* in the longer term.

This led to the implementation of rigorous structures and numerous checks and balances to ensure democratic control by workers and shop stewards and leadership accountability. Fosatu’s Central Committee was a majority worker body, effectively a mini-Fosatu congress, with wide powers over senior leaders. It was, for example, empowered to order the suspension of the General Secretary under certain conditions, thereby ensuring accountability.⁹³ It was even debated whether to permit the General

⁸⁹ Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 2006 “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg

⁹⁰ Buhlungu, S. 2001. “Democracy and Modernization in the Making of the South African Movement: the dilemma of leadership, 1973-2000”, PhD Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand.

⁹¹ Interview with Chris Dlamini, 27th June 2009, Johannesburg

⁹² Interview with Jane Barrett, 26th February 2010, Johannesburg

⁹³ HP: AH 1999: C1.8. Fosatu Constitution (as amended at the second national Congress in April 1982), p. 17.

Secretary voting rights.⁹⁴ Furthermore, in order to prevent an unaccountable bureaucracy emerging, Fosatu's constitution stipulated that the General Secretary, President, Vice-President and Treasurers "shall vacate their seats during their term if they fail to be members of an affiliate",⁹⁵ which ensured these positions were filled by workers, rather than professional unionists. This also meant that such leaders were subject to a second level of control, by virtue of their membership of a Fosatu affiliate.

Therefore, the praxis of these workerist leaders, white as well as black, was defined by the positions and views of the majority of mandated, representative and elected Central Committee members. Both the national office bearers and the Central Committee were accountable to regular congresses, and subject to oversight by shop steward-based committees, themselves accountable to popular assemblies. Of course, the national office bearers had a substantial influence over the direction of the federation, but this should not be confused with a top-down, directive, power vested in the hands of a tiny, unrepresentative elite. This process interaction allows us to reasonably argue that the views of the (multiracial) Fosatu leadership were also in the main representative of the larger (black) Fosatu.⁹⁶ If that membership was basically "populist", it could easily have ousted a domineering, non-representative, white workerist clique. As Legassick has argued, it is tempting but flawed to read Fosatu and workerism through a racial lens.

What accounts for this overly racialised and caricatured portrayal? Partly it is related to the common conflation of national liberation with nationalism – a practice with its roots in both nationalist, and certain Marxist narratives (those that see nationalism a necessary component of the socialist project in the so called "third

⁹⁴ Ulrich, N. 2007. "Only the Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers' control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979", Masters Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand

⁹⁵ HP: AH 1999: C1.8. Fosatu Constitution (as amended at the second national congress in April 1982), p.10.

⁹⁶ One point of qualification is necessary. My original research was not initially designed to empirically investigate the influence of workerism amongst shop stewards and workers, mostly black, at lower structures within Fosatu; it took as its subject the workerist leaders, black and white, within the Fosatu Executive, and those closely associated with it. There is a need for deeper discussion concerning the perpetual and complex interaction between the leadership and mass base of the union, which takes stock of the vast theoretical literature on the subject. (In fact, this is a topic for planned future research.) However, this does not necessarily negate the argument for its sway and predominance amongst the base, although it does introduce some limitations on arguments presented here.

world”). Arguably, however, partial insights can also be gleaned from a debate between David Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich on the one hand, and Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu on the other.⁹⁷ The debate centred on two articles detailing revival of the black labour movement for the *Road to Democracy* volumes, a project of the South African Presidency. It originated after a lengthy dispute arising from the editor’s unilateral retitling of the articles, such that the role of Sactu and the ANC were emphasised – to the detriment of the role played independent trade unions. One of the key mechanisms for this was achieved through racialising the contribution of the Fosatu tradition (and that its predecessors), and thus presenting workerism as ultimately white. As Legassick has suggested, the retitling was part of an attempt to “repress uncomfortable truths in order to present a seamless picture favourable to the ANC and SACTU”,⁹⁸ and to suppress the notional possibility of a non-nationalist black working class movement.

This argument can be extended. The power of black workerists and the prevalence of workerism among blacks is a body blow to nationalist claims for authenticity. For many in the ANC tradition, which views itself as the natural and inherent crucible of African politics, an alternative project like workerism – which stressed independence from the ANC, SACP and Sactu – is almost by definition impossible for blacks. Correspondingly, non-nationalist ideologies like workerism must be somehow essentially white. This paves the way for the caricature of workerism as represented solely by whites – and the depiction of workerism as viable only when whites prevent blacks from expressing their natural nationalism through “organic” activists from “the community”.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ See Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 2006 “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg; D. Hemson, M. Legassick and N. Ulrich. 2006. “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy, Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg; Sithole, J. 2009. “Contestations over knowledge production or ideological bullying?: a response to Legassick on the workers’ movement” in *Kronos* (Bellville) vol. 35 no.1

⁹⁸ Legassick, M. 2008. “Debating the Revival of the Workers’ Movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and post-apartheid patriotic history” in *Kronos* Vol. 34, no. 1, pg. 241.

⁹⁹ This imagery can be found in Von Holdt, K. 1987. “Trade Unions, community Organisations and Politics: a local Case Study on the East Rand”, *Sociology of Work Institute*, Research Report 3. Johannesburg; Ginsburg, M. 1997. “Trade Union Education: Its past and future role in the development of the South African Labour Movement” Masters Dissertation: University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, amongst others.

In addition, far from “dismissing the quest for national liberation by the vast majority of the masses as just an aberration in a struggle for socialism”, an accusation levelled at workerism by Sithole and Ndlovu,¹⁰⁰ black and white workerists were deeply committed to national liberation but critical of *nationalism* as the solution, as previously discussed. It advocated – and indeed, to a substantial extent achieved – what Legassick calls “the political independence of the working class from nationalist orthodoxy”.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Despite the central role occupied by Fosatu’s “workerism” in our recent history, it has not been afforded the recognition or rigorous analysis it deserves. This is evident in the fact of its outright and unfair omission from many popular accounts, but also partly from the contradictory and caricatured manner in which the phenomenon it has been portrayed, including in scholarly accounts.

A focus on primary materials reveals many surprising conclusions, and allows us to go some way in clearing up the confusion and controversy surrounding this important phenomenon in South Africa’s recent history. In particular, it reveals that workerism developed a novel approach to national liberation that differed fundamentally from the approaches of the established traditions of the ANC and SACP, and that it absorbed influences from unexpected sources, including anarchism and syndicalism, council communism and social democracy. Recognising this has larger implications for our understanding of the “Durban moment”, and for our thinking regarding the character of the anti-apartheid struggle more broadly.

The failure of existing accounts to appreciate these interesting features is to some extent a function of genuine misunderstandings rooted in the nature of the literature available, but there are also more disturbing motives that are related to its controversial role: workerism uncovers very uncomfortable truths about important periods in our recent past.

¹⁰⁰ Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 2006 “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980” in SADET (ed.), *The Road to Democracy Vol. 2, 1970-1980*, Unisa Press: Johannesburg p. 196

¹⁰¹ Legassick, M. 2008. “Debating the revival of the workers’ movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and post-apartheid patriotic history” in *Kronos* Vol. 34, no. 1

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