

**SUBALTERN SUBJECTS, INSURGENT CITIZENS:
LABOR, RITUAL, AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA**

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CHAPTER 2
Consciousness in Conflict:
An Event History of African Unionism in the Sugar Industry

One cold morning in early 1985, as he was leaving the mill at Felixton after clocking out of a long night shift, Livingston Nzuzwa's car exploded. This was the most egregious incident in a series of attacks that had beset the young shopsteward in the months since he was hired at Felixton. As a leader of the sugar industry's local Fosatu affiliate – which had only recently begun to penetrate the north coast – he was targeted for intimidation by the supporters of National Union, which had long held a monopoly among black workers at Felixton and throughout the rest of the industry. Not incidentally, the conflict coincided with mounting tensions in the region between the IFP and the UDF, as the membership of the competing unions divided roughly along political party lines. Having grown up with a commitment to the ANC inspired by the influence of his radical older brother, Nzuzwa pressed on in service of the national struggle and – despite repeated threats against him – refused to back down from recruiting at the mill.¹

On the other side of the trenches, Fosatu was deploying its own arsenal of intimidation, meting out similar threats to the leaders of the opposition. Zebon Mbatha – National Union's president throughout the 1980s and a devout supporter of Inkatha – was targeted for attack during his early years operating with the union and repeatedly harassed by Fosatu agents at the union's headquarters on Durban's West Street. "Eh! They used to hunt me like a buck!" he recalled, "I had to constantly change my directions to keep safe." Passing Mkhuzwe on an afternoon's drive from a meeting in Durban back to work in Pongola, Mbatha was waylaid by Fosatu and pursued down the highway. "They chased me – I had to drive the car right into the bush and I kept quiet there and stayed until morning, without sleeping, because I was so scared. It was a very bad situation."²

Fortunately, neither Mbatha nor Nzuzwa ever ended up among the 20,000 people who were killed in political violence during the period leading up to democratization in South Africa. But scores of others in the union movement were not so lucky. Many on the north coast became victims of the civil warfare that engulfed the region, which saw competing political parties burning houses, dividing settlements, and brutally massacring one another with flaming tire necklaces. As the following narrative will illustrate, the internecine conflict that marred South Africa's political transition began initially among workers in the labor movement after the Wiehahn Commission legalized black unionism in 1979. Tensions escalated almost immediately between the newly formed Fosatu and the home-grown "independent unions" that its ascendancy marginalized.³ The emergence of Fosatu in 1980, followed by Cosatu in 1985, dramatically reshaped the political landscape of the workplace.

¹ Interview 2.1

² Interview 3.1

³ Labor historians continue to debate the appropriate classification of Fosatu. Chipkin (2004), for one, terms it "independent" and marks it in stark contrast with its successor, Cosatu, which had more explicit political ties. This distinction may have held in certain sectors – such as the metal industry, where workers vehemently contested the ideological transition from the "workerism" of Fosatu to the "nationalism" of Cosatu – but in the sugar industry the transition was by all accounts seamless. Fawu was heavily involved with the "mass democratic movement" under both Fosatu and Cosatu.

Pushing beyond mere shopfloor concerns to align with the broader movement for social change led by the UDF and the ANC in exile, these progressive formations inadvertently divided the working class by alienating those who refused to cede to their particular revolutionary agenda. Rooted firmly in a paradigm of liberal-democratic ideals, political unions promulgated a program of “national democratic revolution” committed to a liberal vision of the social good that held the autonomous individual citizen as the bearer of rights within the modern, egalitarian state. Guided by this project, they sought to override “backwards”, “traditionalist” solidarities to kinship, chief, and clan, which they considered inimical to the nation-building project. My aim is to approach the broader question of political violence in KwaZulu-Natal through an analysis of divergent ideologies of unionism. By exploring the history of independent and political unions in the sugar industry – wherein KwaZulu/Natal’s first legal black union was born – this chapter traces the development of the two competing forms of worker consciousness that drove political warfare in the region.

Works Committees and the Preemption of Discontent: 1962 - 1978

The Industrial Council for the Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Industry was founded in 1946 as one of the first of its kind in South Africa, and today bears the distinction of being the oldest bargaining council in the country. At its birth, four trade unions⁴ signed on as parties to the industry’s first collective agreement with employers, who were unified that same year under the Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Employers’ Association. The largest of these unions – the Natal Sugar Industry Employee’s Union (NSIEU) – commanded a membership comprised solely of Indians and a few so-called Coloreds, and was the only organization that represented the interests of non-white workers for the first thirty years of the Council’s existence.⁵

At the time of the Council’s formation, industrial relations in the sugar industry were governed by a two-tier agreement bifurcated between skilled and semiskilled/unskilled labor.⁶ While skilled and semiskilled workers enjoyed representation by the white and Indian unions, policies regulating the conditions and management of the unskilled workers – the vast majority of whom were black – were determined entirely without their input, save for the occasional presence of white agents from the Department of Labor who would attend Council meetings from time to time to “argue for the interests of the Bantu.” A de facto “color bar” governed job placement in the sugar mills and kept Africans from accessing the higher graded jobs covered by the skilled agreement. Direct correspondence between race and skill translated into a shopfloor hierarchy defined primarily according to color, and ensured a formidable wage gap between the two racialized tiers of the workforce.

African workers in the sugar industry, like their counterparts throughout the country, enjoyed no form of legal direct representation in matters concerning their own conditions of service. Labor relations were governed at the time by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, which denied official “employee” status to African workers and strictly prohibited the formation and registration of black trade unions. The Act did, however, permit limited franchise through employer-initiated “liaison committees” that operated at plant level and provided an avenue for communication with management. In 1962, the Tongaat mill became the first in the industry to implement this tool – known there as the “Bantu Factory Liaison

⁴ These were: (1) the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU); (2) the Sugar Industry Employees Association (SIEA); (3) the South African Electrical Workers Association (SAEWA); and (4) Natal Sugar Industry Employee’s Union (NSIEU).

⁵ In 1977, the South African Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Workers, Shipbuilders and Welders Society [Boilermakers Society] became the sixth member of the Council, providing representation for a mixed membership of whites, Indians, and Coloreds. (SASYB 82-83:35)

⁶ The unskilled-semiskilled category covered pay rates 1-12, while the skilled category covered rates 13-16; this was before the Patterson grading system was introduced.

Committee” – as a release valve for workers’ grievances.⁷ According to current Human Resources Manager Mark Tucker, Tongaat managers “foresaw dramatic changes” in the political milieu even then, and sought to “prevent worker radicalization” by providing channels for the controlled expression of discontent.⁸ Under the liaison committee arrangement, workers would submit their concerns to a Bantu Supervisor, who would then communicate with the Labor Manager, who would in turn convey grievances up the chain of command to the Mill Manager. While these committees provided an early template for black worker organization,⁹ they were ultimately rather toothless – an empty, paternalistic gesture offered by employers in place of meaningful participation by workers in decision-making processes.

By the early 1970s, these racialized arrangements for representation and job grading were beginning to erode. First, employers realized that their enforcement of an artificial color bar was stirring unrest among black workers.¹⁰ Furthermore, the arrangement was becoming increasingly costly to maintain. As milling operations became more technological, the comparatively inflated wage rates of white artisans slowly drifted beyond the budget. To ease the wage bill, employers regularly sought permission from the Council for “barrier exemptions” that permitted them to temporarily violate the color bar and place Indian and black workers in grades above their qualifications, which were formally reserved for white artisans. Using this strategy, the millers could fill labor gaps quickly and without recourse to the better-trained white workers who commanded higher pay. Thus the Employers’ Association agreed to abolish the two-tier system in 1971, and implemented a single, nonracial industrial relations agreement that took effect in 1973.

Contributing to the inexorable push toward deracializing the workplace was the chairman of the Employers’ Association from 1971 to 1983, Glyn Taylor – a visionary, a compelling orator, and a powerful figure in South African sugar. While maintaining a highly-respected reputation among even the most conservative elements in the industry, Taylor harbored progressive positions on the race question, and exercised significant influence over other employers in this direction. Not surprisingly, however, he justified this outlook with reference to the ideals of liberal capitalism, and envisaged a South Africa wherein all workers would be allowed to compete on the labor market freely and without legal stricture.¹¹ In his annual addresses, Taylor defended his compassionate attitude toward black workers as “a buffer against unrest”, arguing that – if left unmitigated – racial inequality would soon become so extreme as to generate the conditions for revolution and forcibly undermine the industry altogether.¹²

Much of Taylor’s ambivalence about apartheid stemmed from the fact that, as the industry’s delegate to the annual meetings of the International Organization of Employers and the International Labor Organization at Geneva, he was constantly compelled to reassure foreign business partners skittish about their ethical image and wary of sanctions that, despite the negative media commentary, South Africa was making strides toward liberalization. Upon returning from these gatherings, he regularly impressed the urgency of change on his colleagues in the industry, convincing them that controlled deracialization was in the interest of capital and important for attracting foreign direct investment.¹³ In short, the “progressive” attitude of Taylor and others against discrimination ultimately served the interests of a highly

⁷ Industrial Council minutes: 5/1461

⁸ Interview 1.1

⁹ See Alex Lichtenstein’s work on the role of works committees in the struggle for industrial citizenship in South Africa (Lichtenstein 2008).

¹⁰ SMREA minutes: September 8, 1975

¹¹ “Labor Relations Philosophy of the SMREA”, SMREA minutes: 1976.

¹² SASYB 1975-6:32

¹³ SMREA minutes: July 1, 1977

labor-intensive industry seeking to forestall worker insubordination, cut its payroll costs, and prevent sanctions. Worker insubordination became particularly pressing after 1973, when a massive strike wave swept through Durban's manufacturing sector: over 100,000 workers downed tools in protest over poor wages in the biggest spate of spontaneous industrial action in South African history.¹⁴ Widespread protest was first ignited by 1,500 workers who struck at a brick and tile factory run by Coronation, a subsidiary of the Tongaat Group – the same conglomerate that to this day owns many of the region's sugar mills (Lincoln 1981:44).

While the Durban strikes did not extend to workers in the geographically peripheral sugar industry, employers – especially Tongaat – nonetheless developed noticeable anxieties about the changing timbre of labor relations in the country. Glyn Taylor assessed the political climate of the time in remarking that he “felt a change was taking place in employer-employee relationships” that was leading to “unsettled conditions.”¹⁵ In 1973, agents from the Bantu Labor Office began to make more regular appearances at the Council's meetings, and instigated serious discussion about the plant-level liaison committee system. Thereafter employers rushed to shore up, expand, and more tightly control the committee system in an effort to preemptively repress black workers by channeling their discontent into ready-made and manageable forms.¹⁶ The result was the transformation of many liaison committees into “works committees”. While the former were designed merely to convey information between management and workers, the latter enjoyed a notch more autonomy and power – they could elect their own leaders and table demands directly to management. While the works committees more closely approximated plant-level unions than anything theretofore, they were still cynically construed by management to operate in classic “sweetheart” style, ultimately beholden to the final word of the employers.

In addition to expanding black worker representation, employers in the sugar industry responded to the threat of worker radicalism posed by the Durban strikes by raising the minimum wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers by 50% over three years, beginning in May of 1973.¹⁷ But these measures turned out to be too little too late. During the 1974/5 cane season, sugar producers were beset by pulses of industrial unrest and intensifying worker discontent. In addition to cane fires set by indignant saboteurs, a series of unprecedented wildcat strikes on the mills caused considerable worry among management. In October of 1974, 800 black workers struck at Felixton mill over the right to brew their own beer.¹⁸ Two weeks later, 600 struck at the Empangeni mill for higher wages.¹⁹ By the end of November, another 500 workers had struck at the Darnall mill, and a further 200 had downed tools at the Melville mill.²⁰ In many of these cases workers were threatened with immediate dismissal, and armed police with riot vehicles were called in to break the strikes with tear gas and dogs (Lincoln 1981:38²¹).

Exacerbating this already difficult production climate, employers found themselves suddenly faced with an increasingly competitive labor recruitment environment. In early 1974, President Banda of Malawi terminated the supply of migrant labor to South Africa after the death of dozens of Malawian miners in a plane crash en route back home. That same year, as the price of gold skyrocketed, South African mining companies transferred some of

¹⁴ For more in depth discussion of the Durban strikes see...

¹⁵ Industrial Council minutes: 5/1488

¹⁶ SASYB 1972/3:65-6

¹⁷ Financial Mail 7/3/1975, Sugar Industry Wages.

¹⁸ Natal Mercury, 16/10/1974, 800 Workers go on Mill Rampage; Natal Mercury, 17/10/1974, Felixton Strikers Dispersed; Natal Mercury, 19/10/1974, Police at Tense Felixton.

¹⁹ Natal Mercury, 26/10/1974, Police Rush Mill Strike

²⁰ Natal Mercury, 15/11/1974 Mill Strikers Face Sack Threat Today; Natal Mercury, 15/11/1974, Sugar Mill Workers Back Down; Natal Mercury, 18/11/1974, Strike Mob in Class with Police.

²¹ I acknowledge David Lincoln's secondary literature for alerting me to this series of events.

their enormous gains to their workforce, raising wages substantially in order to attract local labor to fill the sudden shortfall of Malawians. At the same time, in a bid to find enough workers to satisfy rapidly growing production needs, mining recruiters had begun to impinge on labor pools traditionally trolled by the sugar industry, such as KwaZulu and Transkei. In order to compete more effectively for workers against the labor-hungry and comparatively over-financed mining sector, the sugar industry found itself forced to offer further concessions – mostly in the form of wage hikes – to its existing and potential employees.²²

Following these developments, the Department of Labor aggressively encouraged Industrial Councils to introduce a limited form of black worker representation at their bargaining tables, as per the provisions of the amendments to the Bantu Labor Relations Regulation Act made in 1973 in response to the unrest that led to the Durban Strikes.²³ The Sugar Council received a series of letters from the Department of Labor to this effect in 1975, arguing that representation for African workers in negotiations pertaining to labor agreements that directly affected them was necessary in order “to avoid industrial disputes and unrest or even disruption.”²⁴ The employers had recognized this need themselves, and saw in it an opportunity to bring potentially rebellious elements of the African workforce under the ambit of the Council. Anticipating black unionization, a senior industrial relations manager in the industry argued:

Do you not think that, provided our sugar workers are given the basic rights of organization, negotiation, and – where necessary – even to strike, that it would be better to meet with employees in the industry themselves, rather than through some nationally organized trade union which might represent a wide spread of industrial interests?²⁵

The idea was to secure relative docility among workers by keeping them “within the family,” protecting them from the influence of external revolutionary agendas that would render workers impossible to manage. Glyn Taylor argued that the employers should embrace this opportunity to foster a form of black organization amenable to their own interests:

I like to think that, here too, the employers may be able to play a support role in developing the organization, representative and communications requirements of our black workers so that they, in turn, will continue to subscribe to the family concept. I believe that they share the view that this stimulates more meaningful and purposeful relationships than, for example, trade unions whose interests are [broader].²⁶

At a Council meeting in early 1976, the Employers’ Association followed this advice and conceded to the orders of the Department of Labor, accepting that, although it was “most regrettable,” “the time had come for Bantu representatives to join in the matter of wage negotiations.”²⁷ That April, for the first time in its history, the Council invited delegates from the liaison and works committees to attend a special meeting held to discuss the new labor agreement proposal. The white members of the Council made much ado about this “historic occasion,” congratulating themselves for so charitably allowing “Bantu employees to have direct representation in the negotiation of an agreement.” Mr. Bam, chairman of the Durban Regional Bantu Labour Committee, Mr. Selby Nsibande of Amatikulu mill, and Mr. Mlambo of Dunlop mill each addressed the Council in turn, thanking its members – with a modicum of painful sarcasm – for so graciously permitting their presence.²⁸ The veneer of inclusion that this staged event propagated turned out to be rather thin, however. In the end, the black delegates were not actually permitted to offer any input at all, much less participate in “direct representation.” They were summarily dismissed from the meeting after delivering their

²² Natal Mercury, 13/12/1974, Black Labor; Natal Mercury, 13/12/1974, Sugar Industry Wages.

²³ SASYB 1975-6:32

²⁴ Industrial Council minutes: 5/1525

²⁵ *Condenser*, 1976:3-7.

²⁶ SASYB 1976-77:30

²⁷ Industrial Council minutes: 5/1541

²⁸ Industrial Council minutes: 5/1551

perfunctory remarks of gratitude, and the Council went on to ratify the agreement in their absence.

Advancing its self-styled “progressive” agenda – at the insistence of Glyn Taylor – the Council eventually moved to allow black representation at its regular gatherings. This decision was in keeping with a steady shift in disciplinary practice from coercive control to “management by the consent of the managed”.²⁹ Beginning in late 1976, Council meetings included delegates of the Bantu Works Committees at the bargaining table for the first time, led by Mr. M.J. Lourens of the Central Bantu Labour Board. Lourens alone was permitted to speak, but only long enough to once again deferentially thank the Council for its beneficent display of largesse. Even though Mr. Lourens was never actually allowed to address the items on the agenda, the Council Secretary complimented him and his team for their “maturity” and their “fine performance during the negotiations,” and then promptly dismissed them for the remainder of the meeting.³⁰ Proud of this historic accomplishment and eager to extend it, the Secretary penned a letter to the Department of Labour requesting permission for “Bantu Labour Office and Works Committee delegates to attend all future council meetings.” The Department of Labor was evidently not yet ready to take that step, and responded by denying the Council’s petition outright, citing the secrecy provisions in the Industrial Conciliation Act and the Bantu Labour Relations Act. Bantu delegates, the Department insisted, could only attend as *observers* during *wage negotiations* that affected them *specifically*.³¹

This setback did not prevent employers from pursuing other reforms for the industry’s black workers. While black representatives were debarred from subsequent Council meetings, the Employers’ Association nonetheless initiated a highly controversial move to include black workers in the Sugar Association Industrial Training Center at Mt. Edgecombe, which at that time catered only to white and Indian apprentices. The ostensible goal was to create promotion opportunities for black workers in order to remediate outrageous income inequalities and therefore stall the rise of black worker discontent. Explaining the new deracialized training program, Chris Saunders – a top executive leader in the industry – explained:

One of the greatest problems which we face as we head toward the 21st century is the disparity which exists between income levels within our country, and therefore, if we seek peace and harmony, one of our fundamental economic objectives should be to maximize the per capita real income of our population.³²

Behind the lofty rhetoric, of course, Saunders – like his progressive colleague, Taylor – was unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to actualize the era of racial equality of which he spoke. But his comments nonetheless highlight employers’ awareness of the end of the era of racial capitalism, and bespeak a progressive vision forced by the challenges that an increasingly militant black workforce posed.

The employers pursued these reforms not only to forestall unrest among black workers, but also to ease the wage burden that came along with the monopoly held by white employees over skilled positions. Toward this end, the Council adopted the Paterson System of rationalized job evaluation in 1977, which took strides toward a more objective, less racially-based job grading system.³³ The profits to employers were not insignificant. As long as black workers were unable to command the extra-wage benefits held by their white counterparts (such as housing and healthcare), the philosophy of “equal opportunity employment” helped producers significantly lower their labor costs. It was for this reason

²⁹ SASJ 1981:531

³⁰ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1595

³¹ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1632-3

³² SASYB 1975-6:66

³³ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1721

that the industry's leaders spoke out – albeit timidly – against some of the discriminatory excesses of apartheid's segregationist policies. As the South African Cane Growers' Association saw it, "the appearance of a more flexible Government attitude towards the question of training Africans in White areas would be warmly welcomed by the Industry."³⁴ Chris Saunders – acting in his capacity as the Vice Chairman of the Millers' Association – embodied this reformist tendency at the highest levels. In a 1982 address to the International Organization of Employers Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, Mr. Saunders delivered a robust defense of "employer-led initiatives for change in South Africa."³⁵ At the level of international public relations, this "progressive" trend among sugar producers was spurred largely by fears of divestment, which had begun to mount rapidly by the early 1980s.

Labor market strains and black worker discontent were not the only vectors besetting labor relations in the beleaguered sugar industry during this period. The registered non-African unions in the Council had become radicalized then for the first time as well. Formed in 1937 and present as a founding member of the Council in 1946, the Indian union (NSIEU) had pressed since its inception for the introduction of a closed shop agreement to grant it a much-needed boost in recruitment. After forty years of employers rejecting this request, the union's indefatigable leader – Mr. Pillay – finally snapped. Reading a strident address to the Council one October morning in 1977, Mr. Pillay somberly announced that his union "had decided to withdraw from the Council in protest" until a closed shop clause was inserted into the new labor agreement. Not surprisingly, the Council Secretary registered his "strong objection" to this statement, and was backed by Mr. Britz of the conservative, white, and employer-friendly Engineering Union. Mr. Pillay denounced Britz – his erstwhile ally on the closed-shop issue – for conniving with the employers, and bitterly absented himself from the Council.³⁶

Mr. Pillay's year-long boycott of the Council marked a new epoch of worker radicalism in the industry; it was the first time that a union had actively rejected the process of formal bargaining negotiations. And the challenge actually worked. Employers dreaded the consequences of ratifying an agreement without the consent of the Indian union, afraid that it would spark racial tensions and ignite the anger of black workers.³⁷ Mr. Pillay agreed to resume his seat on the Council on the condition that the closed-shop issue be treated with the utmost priority in a session parallel to the labor agreement negotiations. Despite years of subsequent negotiations, the Council did not conclude a closed shop agreement until 1997, long after Mr. Pillay had retired and his union disintegrated. Nonetheless, Pillay's protest had registered a strong challenge to the Council, further confirming fears of escalating radicalism among non-white workers.³⁸

In sum, labor relations in the sugar industry during the 1970s were most saliently marked by a constant tug of war between the global capitalist economy, the apartheid state, employers, white unions, the Indian union, and disenfranchised black workers. The positions of these parties did not always fit neatly into the binary grid that typically defines employer-employee interests at the bargaining table. Employers' insistence on pushing the limits of apartheid law in order to allow cheap black labor to do skilled work made them appear simultaneously progressive and opportunistic, and placed them in an ambivalent relationship with the state. Apartheid was both boon and bane for the sugar industry. Through a coercive system of segregation and discrimination, the state provided deep pools of cheap labor from which the industry was all too happy to draw. But that same system prevented the

³⁴ SASYB 1972/3:59-60

³⁵ SASYB 1983/4

³⁶ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1663

³⁷ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1720

³⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of the history of the Indian union, see Lincoln...

development of literacy and employment skills among the African workforce and kept white artisans' wages inordinately high, which rendered technical modernization difficult (Lincoln 1992:69). The employers' profit-driven move to foster the advancement of black workers placed them in a difficult relationship with the white unions. Despite a sense of shared culture and common cause with their employers, the white unions were contradictorily committed to addressing the needs of labor at large while still protecting their own privileged positions as artisans from encroachment by Indians and blacks by fighting for the retention of the color bar. Black workers, meanwhile, had decided to accept the reforms advanced by employers, embracing avenues for promotion while reluctantly enduring the humiliation of ersatz representation in order to secure a foothold at the bargaining table and training in the principles of negotiation – small, sanctioned gains that paved the way for their eventual accession to the Council.

The Wiehahn Era and African Independent Unionism: 1979-1985

The momentum of worker discontent that gathered in the 1970s had impressed upon the industry's employers the inevitability of African unionism, and drove them to consider new ways to co-opt this more powerful form of black worker mobilization. The Industrial Relations Manager of the Hulett's Group demonstrated this sentiment in warning that

...the unionization of Blacks is inevitable – it is just a question of what form it will take. As unions are soon to become a permanent part of industrial life, let us accept them in good grace and learn to live in harmony with them.³⁹

This transformation was to be more immediate than even the most prescient of the industry's leaders had anticipated. A letter appeared on the Council Secretary's desk one morning in October 1979 that instantaneously revolutionized industrial relations in South Africa. Penned by the Department of Manpower Utilization, it addressed each registered industrial council in the country on the findings of the recently-concluded Wiehahn Commission. The letter announced, matter-of-factly, that the Industrial Conciliation Act had been permanently amended: the definition of "employee" would be extended to "all residents of the Republic," regardless of race, and "black trade unions [were to be] admitted as employee parties to industrial councils."⁴⁰

The already-anxious employers rushed to convene an emergency meeting to discuss this news. Fearing new strides in black worker radicalism, the employers' association urged the immediate extension of observer status to black representatives to the Council, and the rapid elaboration of in-company works committees to preempt the development of independent African trade unions and secure worker quiescence. Intensifying an earlier strategy, employers wished to use these committees to reassert control over a potentially refractory workforce. Glyn Taylor submitted that another method of black worker control would be to absorb them into the existing – and thoroughly employer-friendly – unions. Mr. Britz and the white unions refused this proposal outright, and declared as much forthrightly, while Mr. Pillay – in the spirit of non-racialism and desperate for a boost in membership – volunteered his union's openness to black members. By the end of the emergency meeting, the Council had agreed to form a Black Caucus Body that would consist of two representatives from each plant's work committee, and grant it immediate representation at the bargaining table.⁴¹

Works committees across the industry convened to discuss the prospect and conceded to form the proposed Black Caucus Body. Representatives collaborated to elect Selby Nsibande – a well educated, thirty year-old from Nongoma with close ties to the Zulu Royal

³⁹ De Wet, B., 1979. Labour Relations – Trade Unions for Blacks? Hulett's Review, 746:1-8.

⁴⁰ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1784

⁴¹ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1794

Family – to lead them in negotiations with employers. As a Cane Tester, Nsibande was formally employed by the South African Sugar Association but stationed in a lab at the Amatikulu mill. Highly skilled and outside of the formal control of the mills' managers (like most future leaders of the labor movement in the sugar industry), Nsibande operated in the interstices of managerial power and was therefore ideally positioned to agitate for workers' interests.

Contrary to the hopes of management, the Black Caucus Body had no intention of allowing the employers to control them on the Council. Instead, within weeks of convening, the Black Caucus Body penned its first letter to the Council containing the first official demand made by black workers. They asked for an immediate wage increase, to “cover rising costs of living” and – crucially – “so that our workers will be able to contribute to the ‘National Union of Sugar Milling and Refining Employees’ (“National Union”) which is in the course of formation.”⁴² Flouting the employers' intentions to preempt black unionization, the Black Caucus Body moved swiftly and decisively to form the first black independent union in the industry – indeed, the first black union in all of KwaZulu/Natal.

But the Employers' Association had anticipated this move well beforehand. Ever since rumors of Wiehahn's reforms began circulating, employers – led once again by Glyn Taylor – had been planning to instigate the creation of a legal black union themselves.⁴³ Reverting to this strategy, they met Nsibande's initiative halfway, and, with gentlemanly handshakes and jocular slaps on the back in congratulations for his unionist ambitions, offered him a loan of R10,000 to get the project off the ground.⁴⁴ The employers intended to keep the works committee system in place at plant-level, and from its leaders develop a single union – coterminous with the industry – that would work cooperatively with management:

We believe that a labor relations system should be so structured as to foster and develop a partnership between employees and employers both at company and industry levels and, therefore, negotiations should, as far as practicable, take place between people who have the interests of the Company and the industry at heart and who have a stake in it.⁴⁵

The idea was that by creating the union themselves and exercising financial proprietorship over it, employers could keep it within the family and tie it legally to the Council - the rules of which they controlled – thereby using it to defend against incursions made by external unions intent on more radical reforms.

Nsibande's union accepted the loan and within a matter of months – by August 1980 – had registered with the Department of Labour, organized 58% of eligible black workers in the industry, and submitted a formal request for a seat on the Council.⁴⁶ At a special meeting in September, the Council acceded to Nsibande's request and welcomed the union to the bargaining table – for the first time in Natal's history, a black union attended a Council meeting represented like any other party. Reflecting the nervous anxieties of the white people in the room, Mr. Britz delivered a short speech directed to Nsibande in which he lectured him on the virtues of respectful, quiet, and circumspect negotiation in “the service of industrial peace.”⁴⁷

After overcoming brief resistance to the idea of a registered African trade union on the Council, the Employers' Association happily embraced Nsibande's presence at the table. He was a powerful man, influential and highly popular among his African colleagues, and amenable to the pro-capitalist views held by the IFP – his political party of choice. Employers felt more comfortable with him under the purview of the Council than if he were

⁴² Industrial Council minutes: 6/1813

⁴³ SMREA minutes: January 30, 1980

⁴⁴ Interview 3.2.

⁴⁵ “Labor Relations Philosophy of the SMREA”, SMREA minutes: 1976.

⁴⁶ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1842. The union was officially registered on the 28th of August, 1980.

⁴⁷ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1849

mobilizing workers in ways external and illegible to its gaze, or with a more radical socio-political agenda. Despite all precautions, however, Nsibande turned out to be a troublesome opponent; certainly not the docile accomplice for which the employers had hoped. The first hints of his insubordination appeared in 1981, only months after his union's formation, when the Council accused him of breaching the "recognition and procedure agreement" between employers and trade unions. Nsibande aggressively refused to participate in the system of plant-based works committees through which management had wanted him to operate, insisting instead on his right to abide by the terms of his union's own constitution. The Employers' Association reprimanded Nsibande with fervor, bitterly disappointed that he had stymied their plan to retain the works committee system as a way of controlling black workers. They blamed him for fostering chaos among workers in the industry and fomenting insurrection outside of the monitored plant-based forums.⁴⁸ Three months later Nsibande led his members in a strike at Felixton mill in order to demand a "living-out" allowance for workers not housed in company facilities.⁴⁹ Later that year the union made a number of other forceful requests, demanding a "ration allowance" for workers who chose not to eat at company canteens, a more racially-equitable system of job grading, and a refund of all pension contributions extracted from black workers' salaries without their consent.⁵⁰ Frustrated by the unruliness of the "Black Union," Mr. Britz gave air to the concerns of the Council's white members by castigating Nsibande for "taking unnecessarily strong action [i.e., strikes]" instead of "using the machinery available for dealing with disagreements."⁵¹ In keeping with this reputation, 1982 saw Nsibande spearhead what became the first dispute over wage negotiations in the Council's history. In his typically calm but forceful manner, he insisted that "employers were deceiving themselves if they believed that production would not be disturbed by industrial unrest," and threatened that if employers attempted to ram the agreement through "they must be prepared to meet the challenge of the 'Black Union.'"⁵²

If the employers' attitude of paternal professionalism toward African unions was intended to appropriate black mobilization and forestall worker radicalism, it succeeded to an only limited degree. The wildcat strikes and dramatic confrontations with police that marked the early 1970s were indeed reduced, but the Council now had to deal with the steady, assertive force of an African trade union whose official registration only partially tempered its activism.

"Sweet Food" and Political Unionism: The Parallel Development

Before the end of his first year as General Secretary of National Union, Nsibande had stunningly acquired a membership of over 4,000 black workers, easily outpacing that of Pillay's union – its nearest rival – which boasted only 200 (Miller 1982). Having worked since 1971 as a at Amatikulu mill and developed a strong network of respecting supporters, Nsibande began his efforts there and fanned out to mills on the north coast, with the somewhat-anxious cooperation of employers.⁵³ For the first few years, then, Nsibande successfully focused his recruitment drives on the Tongaat and Hulett mills in the region, leaving the C.G. Smith mills in the midlands and on the south coast largely untouched.

Meanwhile, outside the purview of the Council, a different form of unionism was surreptitiously developing, this one brought in by outsiders with deep ties to external political movements but no relation to the sugar industry whatsoever. At the helm of this new movement was an upstart Indian activist by the name of Jay Naidoo – the young man who

⁴⁸ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1900

⁴⁹ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1903

⁵⁰ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1930-43

⁵¹ Industrial Council minutes: 6/1949

⁵² Industrial Council minutes: 7/47

⁵³ Interview 3.1

would become the first General Secretary of Cosatu upon its formation in 1985. Commissioned by the Cape Town headquarters of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU, or “Sweet Food”), Naidoo began furtively organizing non-white workers in the sugar industry in 1974, riding the wave of black worker radicalism emboldened by the Durban strikes. Beaming with revolutionary fervor and driven by his indefatigable idealism, the 20 year-old Naidoo quickly gained legendary status among the industry’s workers and won the immediate support of younger men amenable to his message of national liberation and socialist reform. His recruitment strategy was highly selective: he targeted the C.G. Smith Mills that were not party to the Council, a tactic which allowed him to simultaneously avoid competition with Nsibande’s union and defer registration with the Department of Labor. The Noodsberg and Dalton mills became focal points in the Sweet Food effort, given their proximity to the union’s regional headquarters in Pietermaritzberg.

Operating purposefully outside of the works committee system long before black unionism was legalized, Sweet Food’s organizers faced hurdles that their employer-controlled counterparts did not. They had to overcome the resistance of older, more conservative black workers who tended to be well-ensconced in the works committee system, dedicated to their representatives – who were often kin or home-boys – and reluctant to flout those enduring ties.⁵⁴ Furthermore, recruiting members was difficult for Sweet Food because of the fear that workers had of the repercussions of union activity. At the time, workers were forcibly housed on company premises and subjected to heavy surveillance. Alan Govindsamy, one of Cosatu’s longest-serving shopstewards, recalls that at Noodsberg,

...anything [disruptive] that you did on the company premises meant you were called for disciplinary action. You were a prisoner. There was constant fear: if you did something wrong you would be dismissed. Which was bad because you needed a place to stay. Also, certain workers were elected by management to be *indunas*; they operated among us and controlled the black workers.⁵⁵

Because it posed a threat to the industry that the works committees by nature did not, Sweet Food was compelled to organize underground. Shopstewards held furtive meetings off of company premises, and gathered for training sessions at the German-run Marionhill Catholic Mission. As Govindsamy put it:

We had to meet at Marionhill because the secret service was always following us. They used to bug the buildings where we were having our meetings. They used to hold roadblocks and check our documents, because it was a big change we were bringing, and it was actually a threat to the industry and the state. Black workers had a majority in this union, and management could see that we were committed.⁵⁶

Sweet Food definitively rejected the works committee system as artificial and undemocratic, and criticized its members for allowing themselves to be controlled by management in typical “sweetheart union” style. The union’s organizers opted instead to skirt – and undermine – the existing structures of worker representation. Not only did they try to siphon black workers out of the works committee system, they also worked to convert the Indian members of Pillay’s union, which they considered undemocratic and subject to management’s manipulation. And they did so not without considerable success. Within six years Sweet Food had “poached” all of Pillay’s members at Noodsberg, contributing to his union’s eventual collapse.

In addition to support from the Marionhill Mission, Sweet Food enjoyed informal affiliation with elements of what eventually became the UDF in Pietermaritzburg, and attended progressive civics’ meetings on a regular basis. Through these connections, the fledgling union self-consciously styled itself as the working-class branch of a broader

⁵⁴ Interview 2.2

⁵⁵ Interview 2.2

⁵⁶ Interview 2.2

movement for systemic social change in South Africa. Coming largely from the ranks of radical township civics, its leaders refused to separate shopfloor issues from “community” issues – such as education, services, rental rates, and the vote – in the struggle for a new democratic nation. The imbrication of these two causes became especially urgent for Sweet Food leaders after the Soweto student massacre in 1976. As Govindsamy put it, it was then apparent that “the only way to bring the country to change was for the working class to join with the political movements. We could no longer watch our children dying in the streets.”⁵⁷ Toward this end, the head office of Sweet Food had been collaborating with Alec Erwin and the leaders of other politicized unions throughout the 1970s to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), which was formally born – preempting the Wiehahn Reforms – in May of 1979.

While the federation itself unanimously embraced the legislative changes to the Industrial Conciliation Act recommended by the Wiehahn Commission, its constituent unions were deeply divided on the issue of official registration, with some concerned that it would lead to the corporate bureaucratization of the movement and render labor activists subject to state control.⁵⁸ Sweet Food fell squarely in this camp. Fearing that cooptation by the state would limit their political latitude, the union continued to resist incorporation into the Industrial Council well after Nsibande’s union had established a strong presence there. The Council had been anxious to bring Sweet Food into its fold since 1980, when employers finally resigned themselves to the inevitability of legalized black unionism. But despite numerous written requests to this effect, Sweet Food continued to operate outside the ambit of the Council, negotiating concessions at the plant level instead of through the centralized industrial relations structures – a practice known as “corporate bargaining” – which allowed it to strategically play companies against each other. By 1981, Sweet Food had won recognition agreements with both Empangeni and Noodsberg, with a majority at the latter.⁵⁹

Nsibande had been fighting to get Sweet Food to register and join the Council, too, as he recognized that its unofficial status had given it a definitive edge when it came to recruitment at certain centers. Aggravating his frustration, Nsibande had become fed up also with the prevailing structure of representation within the Council, which rendered his union much weaker than its numbers should have allowed. In 1983 Nsibande commanded 6,600 workers with majority representation at thirteen mills – an impressive 80% of the organized workforce – compared to the other five registered unions with a combined total of merely 300 members.⁶⁰ But because only one vote was granted to each trade union at the table, National Union controlled only one sixth – a paltry 17% – of the bargaining power. Incensed with this state of affairs, Nsibande absented himself from the Council in protest for a number of months and began corporate bargaining himself, in direct and sometimes hostile competition with Sweet Food. The Council plummeted into complete disarray, entirely unable to manage the industry’s fragmented labor relations scene. The minority members of the Council finally capitulated to Nsibande’s demands in August of 1983, and agreed to amend the constitution to allow representation based on one delegate per 1,000 members, or any part thereof.⁶¹ National Union was immediately permitted six delegates at the Council to the other five unions’ representation of one delegate each, marking a veritable revolution in the industry’s labor relations.

Of the five new delegates that Nsibande brought to the table, four of them were shopstewards from C.G. Smith mills. This represented a strategic move by National Union to

⁵⁷ Interview 2.2

⁵⁸ Ulrich

⁵⁹ SMREA minutes: 26 May 1981

⁶⁰ SASYB 1982/3:35

⁶¹ Industrial Council minutes 7/200.

battle Sweet Food on its own turf and reflected the rivalry that was intensifying between the two unions at the time.⁶² By 1983 Sweet Food commanded a total of 800 members, with majority representation at three mills – and they were gaining quickly.⁶³ A key recruitment strategy for Sweet Food was to discredit National Union in the eyes of workers by underscoring its origins as a brainchild of the Employers' Association, established with management's money. Fosatu peddled this story with particular urgency. Even a decade later, after the collapse of apartheid, the union's leaders pressured the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to request a statement from the Employers' Association confessing that they had established National in order to forestall the national democratic revolution. Condemning National Union as led by sellouts and collaborators, this statement served as a powerful recruitment tool and continues to sully National's reputation to this day.

A hostile debate eventually erupted in the Council over this rivalry in the 1980s. Aiming to jettison Sweet Food's momentum, Nsibande began insisting that the gains his union achieved for the industry's workers – such as wage increments, allowances, and benefits – apply solely to his members. The Council repeatedly rejected this demand, knowing that it would lead to a logistical nightmare and probably engender even further hostility between the unions. The conflict deepened nonetheless when, in 1984, Sweet Food managed to gain a slim margin over National Union at C.G. Smith's Pongola and Sezela mills. With National Union suddenly in the minority at these two mills, Nsibande's members became subject to the conditions that Sweet Food determined for them in plant-level negotiations.⁶⁴ At Nsibande's behest, and for the sake of industrial peace, employers at these two mills reluctantly agreed to install a dual pay structure, whereby the members of each union would receive the wage packet that their respective union had bargained for.⁶⁵ While this appeased Nsibande in the short term, it generated immense competition between the two unions and opened a gaping rift between them that would never entirely heal over.

Union Conflict and the Liberation Struggle: 1984-1994

While still riding the wave of his union's remarkable early popularity, Nsibande decided to try his hand at organizing beyond the confines of the sugar industry. In 1983 he renamed his union National Sugar Refining and *Allied Industries* Union, and changed its constitution to permit representation of workers in the building, steel, food distribution and maize-milling industries, among others.⁶⁶ By the end of the following year, National Union claimed a paid-up membership of some 25,000 workers throughout Natal and KwaZulu. Recognizing the force of Nsibande's massive following, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi invited National Union to affiliate with his Inkatha Freedom Party. For Nsibande – given his marital ties to the Zulu Royal Family of which Buthelezi is a part, and the fact that the vast majority of his members were already paid-up members of Inkatha – the alliance only made sense, and he agreed to make National Union the “labor wing of Inkatha.”⁶⁷ The relationship worked on an ideological level, as well. Inkatha had positioned itself in South African politics as the conservative counterweight to the ANC alliance, rejecting the struggle for “national democratic revolution” in favor of maintaining social stability, keeping the free enterprise

⁶² Industrial Council minutes 7/210.

⁶³ SASYB 1982/3:35

⁶⁴ Industrial Council minutes 8/83-205.

⁶⁵ This dual-pay structure arrangement benefited National over Sweet Food because Sweet Food – advancing its socialist agenda – had decided to transfer a portion of each year's wage increment from B grade to A grade workers in order to bridge the income gap. While this boosted Sweet Food membership in the short term, while the majority of the workforce was A grade, as the structure of the industry shifted toward the intensification of technology, members began shifting over to National for the higher pay.

⁶⁶ Industrial Council minutes 7/200.

⁶⁷ McCaul, Colleen. Inkatha's New Labour Wing, *Work in Progress* 1984, (32):34-35

system, fighting foreign sanctions and divestment, and pushing for modest reforms in the racial distribution of economic benefits.

Inkatha's capitalist reformism meshed well with National Union's particular philosophy of activism. Throughout his career in unionism, Nsibande remained a self-consciously committed "workerist." He insisted on keeping his union free from any "political" affiliation, with "political" here referring specifically to the politics of ANC-led revolution. As Nsibande himself put it:

I am a workerist. I am not prepared to create a space for politics in my union. I don't want to be dictated to by politicians; I prefer to take my mandate directly from the workers. Politically-affiliated unions are failing to really put the workers' interests first.⁶⁸

Guided by this philosophy, Nsibande catered to a population that shared his distaste for the radical politics of ANC-style revolution: a constituency that was entirely Zulu, rurally based, typically "traditionalist" and of an older generation, and relatively less educated than their counterparts in the mainstream of the liberation struggle. Fighting to keep workplace battles separate from nationalist politics, Nsibande kept accountable to the immediate needs of his membership on the shopfloor, and worked to establish a space where his constituents could freely advance their own particular concerns.

While National Union was preoccupied with creating ties to Inkatha, Sweet Food had been covertly cultivating loyalties with the UDF and the banned ANC, and had become firmly committed to the broad-based liberation struggle that those organizations led. For the members of Sweet Food, the struggle on the shopfloor could not be separated from the struggle for national democratic revolution outside the workplace and in the communities at large. Many of Sweet Food's leaders operated simultaneously as activists in the liberation movement. Alan Govindsamy embodied this ideological propensity in its fullest form. He became a member of the UDF upon its formation in 1984, and helped form "community liaison committees" in his township as forums for creating discussion around issues of perceived social injustice. In his dual capacity as union shopsteward and community organizer, he brought the two movements together into an organic whole with a single overarching agenda. As he put it:

I would push [democratic revolution] in the communities, and I would push it in the working class. We were involved in the working class and we were involved in the communities – so we were using both powers. I would invite workers to come to the community meetings. And some of the issues we were not happy about in the communities we would discuss on the shopfloor. So [the movement] became a mixture of everything. I forced the working class to go and attend the UDF meetings and listen to the political people and help them realize that we must have a democratic country.

Sweet Food's philosophy of unionism therefore differed significantly from that of National Union, which stalwartly resisted participation in the UDF/ANC-led struggle for social transformation.

The conflict between Sweet Food and its more conservative counterpart engendered intense rivalry between black workers in the industry, especially given the mounting success of Sweet Food outside of the purview of the Bargaining Council. Inter-union relations only worsened as tensions mounted between Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party and supporters of the UDF throughout Natal and the KwaZulu countryside. According to the prescient insight of SASA's personnel consultant at the time,

Black union rivalry [could] lead to internecine warfare based on ill feelings, jealousies, ideological differences and competition for the membership. The grip of the recession and the waning fortunes of the industry are hopefully indicators to the union organizers and members that

⁶⁸ Interview 3.2

a more professional and institutional route is needed if the mobilization of the black labor in the sugar industry is to be successfully continued.⁶⁹

The balance of power between the two unions remained strongly in National Union's favor until 1985, when, at the height of his popularity, Nsibande was deposed as secretary general for misappropriation of the union's funds. The coup was abrupt and decisive. Upon returning home from a sponsored, two-month training course in Washington, D.C., Nsibande received a letter from the Supreme Court in Durban instructing him to vacate his post. National Union's president, Mr. Zeblon Mbatha, and vice president, Mr. B.B. Mthetwa, had taken advantage of Nsibande's absence to expose his flagrant pilfering of the union's treasury for his own personal enrichment, to the tune of nearly R100,000.⁷⁰ This case had two significant consequences for National Union. First, the IFP – fearing the repercussions of negative publicity – withdrew its formal support from National Union and inaugurated the United Workers Union of South Africa (Uwusa) as its trade union wing.⁷¹ Second, Nsibande – fearing the investigation that had been launched by the South African Police into his activities – left National Union under the leadership of his erstwhile colleague Stefanos Nhleko, and began afresh by inaugurating a new union, which was born on May 1, 1986 as the National Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (Nicwu). At the helm of Nicwu, Nsibande fought first to shore up a majority at Umfolozi mill, and from there spread out to recruit members in other centers, primarily his former loyalists from among the ranks of National Union's membership.⁷² While the rivalry between National Union and Nicwu continued until Nicwu's collapse in 2008, it was a primarily a struggle of personality rather than of ideology. National Union and Nicwu drew their support from roughly the same demographic: both supported the tenets of the IFP's platform, and were united in their shared commitment to workerism and the denunciation of ANC-led politics. With their politics so precisely similar, the split between the two unions fell along lines of kinship loyalties and work-mate bonds.

Capitalizing on Nsibande's year-long absence from the union scene and taking advantage of the dramatic split within National Union, Sweet Food managed to make substantial gains in its membership after 1985, a shift which made industrial relations quite volatile. When Sweet Food's organizers first entered long-time strongholds of Nsibande they were often met with outright violence. For instance, when Sweet Food started recruiting workers at the Pongola mill – an IFP stronghold – they were met with severe repression from both management and National Union. Their attempts to hold meetings were violently disrupted by National's members and conveners were chased out into the bush, denied the right of association and employer cooperation that the latter enjoyed. National's leaders organized a sabotage campaign against any of their colleagues that expressed an interest in Sweet Food's message, framing them for dismissal by planting contraband items in their lockers. In many cases, National was aided in its terrorism by management, which allegedly rigged the disciplinary system to be unreasonably harsh in dealing with even minor infractions by Sweet Food members, engineering a slue of unfair, politically motivated dismissals.⁷³ Sweet Food organizers were feared by both employers and National Union as "communists." Noting these incidents, the Council Secretary insisted that "the Council faced a serious problem in determining conditions for the industry when a major party [viz., Sweet

⁶⁹ SASYB 1983-84:31.

⁷⁰ "Official bought car with union's funds, Court told," *Natal Mercury*, August 7, 1985.

⁷¹ Because Uwusa was artificially imposed instead of emerging organically from among the workers, it lasted only a few years before collapsing completely.

⁷² NICWU did not formally register with the Department of Labor until February 21, 1989, and agreed – under duress from the employers – to join the Bargaining Council in April of the same year (Industrial Council minutes 10/3).

⁷³ Interview 2.4

Food] was not present,” and vehemently exhorted Sweet Food to join the Council “for the sake of industrial peace.”⁷⁴ In January of 1986, Sweet Food finally capitulated to these desperate requests and tendered an application for admission to the Council. Shortly after joining, the Sweet Food national office announced that it was changing its name to Fawu (Food and Allied Workers Union), in accordance with the new sectoral map developed by Cosatu, to which it had affiliated in 1985. Under the leadership of a strong-minded chief representative – one Mr. Zondi – Fawu quickly became the dominant union voice in the Council, outperforming even the garrulous Nsibande and his domineering Indian counterpart, Pillay. Altering the status quo at the bargaining table even further, Fawu adopted the somewhat presumptive practice of bringing shopstewards to Council meetings as observers – sometimes dozens of them; a presence which symbolically solidified Fawu’s organizational dominance over the other unions.

Ideological differences between Fawu and the independent unions (National Union and Nicwu) precipitated out almost immediately following Fawu’s accession to the Council. When the issue of US sanctions against South Africa arose in late 1986, National Union and Nicwu came out strongly against them – in true workerist fashion – insistent on protecting the industry’s workers and their families from the mass retrenchments that such a scenario would almost certainly entail, given the industry’s heavy reliance on quota-based exports to the US.⁷⁵ Fawu, on the other hand, followed Cosatu in supporting sanctions as a weapon against apartheid, subordinating the immediate needs of workers to the ultimate goal of national democracy. Asked by the Council to join National Union and Nicwu in denouncing US sanctions, the Fawu head office responded with a letter outlining a series of conditionalities that reflected in concrete terms its firm commitment to the tenets of political unionism. The letter claimed that Fawu would continue to support sanctions against the sugar industry until SASA agreed to make public statements requesting the government to: lift the state of emergency, grant political rights to all people in South Africa, release all political detainees, unban all political organizations, reinstate unconditionally all union ex-detainees affected by the state of emergency, and eliminate all forms of segregation in the industry. The employers declined to capitulate to the majority of these radical demands, and Fawu consequently refused to alter its position. The US went ahead with the imposition of sanctions, and the South African export quota for sugar was stripped.

In addition to demanding sweeping socio-political reforms not directly related to shopfloor issues, Fawu differed from National Union and Nicwu by supporting a number of measures initiated by the mass democratic movement. First, it agitated for the instatement of paid commemorative national holidays, such as May Day and June 16th – the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto student massacre. Second, it insisted – with a remarkable degree of sacrificial solidarity – on weighting the distribution of annual wage increases toward the lower grades in order to fill the income gap. Third, Fawu pressed its members to participate in solidarity strikes with mass stayaways in direct protest against the apartheid regime. National Union and Nicwu, to the delight of the employers and in keeping with their shopfloor focus, always made it clear that they did not support these radical, socialist-inspired concepts, that they “rejected the concept of mass action,”⁷⁶ and that they differed deeply with the social vision that Fawu was pursuing.

Epilogue: The Structure of Unionism in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Today, the milling operations of the industry include fourteen milling centers and a refinery, now consolidated under the ownership of only four corporations which together

⁷⁴ Industrial Council minutes 8/205

⁷⁵ Industrial Council minutes 9/86.

⁷⁶ Industrial Council minutes 11/106.

employ roughly 5,000 people.⁷⁷ The entire workforce is represented at the Bargaining Council through the “agency shop” agreement that the unions won in 1997, which determined that all workers would automatically receive union representation upon gaining employment. If workers reject affiliation with any of the operative unions, they get classified as part of the agency shop, pay baseline fees to the Council, and can still benefit from the gains the unions make on behalf of the workforce. Approximately 14% of mill employees fit this category. After Nicwu’s deregistration in early 2008 and the dispersion of its members into other unions, Fawu finally gained the long-sought after majority membership in the Council with 54% of all workers. National Union’s membership, by contrast, has plummeted to a mere 14% of the workforce, and the remainder is organized by the other two independent unions, Uasa (16%), and Saewa (2%), which maintain steady numbers given the very specific nature of their respective memberships. Saewa – now deracialized – is an electrician’s trade union whose coverage is skill-specific and applies solely to workers in the highly technological refinery (see Fig 1.2). Uasa, which began as a white artisans’ union and only opened to Africans and Indians after 1994, today manages a membership of primarily whites and Indians that is relatively higher-skilled than that of its rivals. The other four unions that were early parties to the Council – including the first white and Indian unions – slowly dissolved as Fawu gained precedence in the industry on the basis of racial inclusivism and competent internal management.

Fawu and National Union remain, then, to compete for members among the rank-and-file of the industry’s African workers. A glance at industry-wide union membership statistics reveals that, with 54% of all workers, Fawu is radically more popular than National Union, whose workerist approach seems to appeal to an insignificant and unremarkable minority. A closer look at the breakdown of plant-level statistics, however, reveals a more interesting story. National Union continues to maintain a strong presence – and in most cases a majority – in the mills that operate out of the north coast, the union’s birthplace and traditional stronghold. Its highest membership rolls are at Pongola, Umfolozi, Felixton, Amatikulu, Darnall, and Maidstone – centers that draw their labor from the heart of rural Zululand. Examining the membership breakdown in only this region, National Union emerges with a membership proportion that roughly equals Fawu’s, a reflection of its steady appeal among workers who hail predominantly from rural Zulu communities.

As has been the case for the most part since 1994, Fawu and the independent unions maintain an amicable relationship with one another and, in spite of deep-seated political disagreements, speak with a unified voice at the Bargaining Council. But tensions began to heat up in 2008 when Fawu finally gained simple membership majority – a status which grants the right to initiate changes to the constitution of the Bargaining Council. Fawu intends to use this power to try to raise the membership threshold that unions need to attain a seat at the bargaining table, thereby forcing the minority unions – such as National Union – out of the Council. With the opposition thus eviscerated, Fawu will have a better chance at implementing a “closed shop” agreement, which would mean that every new worker hired by the industry would be compelled to join Fawu. Under these conditions, National Union will slowly dissolve as its members retire. None of this will happen without a struggle, but the end result is inevitable. Should this homogenizing trend continue, 2009 may be the last year that alternative forms of worker consciousness in the sugar industry present an institutional challenge to the dominant agenda of national democratic revolution.

INTERPRETING THE CONFLICT

⁷⁷ The Union Co-Op mill at Dalton (UCL) is the sole exception to this, and its workers are not covered by the Council. UCL has long withstood demands that it join the Council on the basis of the fact that its operations are mixed – it mills not only sugar, but wattle as well.

The division between Fawu and the independent African unions appears to replicate the logic of the much-scrutinized conflict between the IFP and the UDF/ANC during the period bracketing South Africa's democratic transition. While this broader political conflict was complex and galvanized by a multitude of causes, most analysts have attributed it to Zulu ethnic nationalism or "tribalism" on the part of Inkatha, whose leaders successfully manipulated historical idioms to mobilize a massive popular following in KwaZulu (e.g., Adam 1992; Brewer 1985; Gwala 1989; Minaar 1993; Segal 1992; Sitas 1996; Southall 1986). While I find this assessment of the Inkatha phenomenon quite compelling, I submit that – at the level of the peasant-proletariat – the conflict Inkatha entered with the democratic movement was driven by concerns beyond identity politics. The interviews that I have conducted with union members, shopstewards, and organizers throughout the sugar industry demonstrate that – regardless of how closely they identify with "Zuluness" – workers on opposite sides of the battle line hold radically different visions of what the New South Africa should be. For the members of National Union, this vision draws less on the resources of an invented ethnic consciousness than on a set of culturally particular values – inscribed in the changing social order of the homestead – that govern their normative conceptions of "justice" (*umthetho*). This alternative, subaltern form of worker consciousness found a home in the works committee system and, later, in the African independent unions, and through those structures was able to mobilize resistance to the better-organized and more powerful political unions. It is to this convenient relationship that I turn next.

The Dual Structure of the Labor Movement

Having sought affiliation with Fosatu in 1980 and Cosatu in 1985, Fawu subscribed to the project of the ANC and enthusiastically embraced the tenets of national democratic revolution. As the narrative above demonstrates, to Fawu, worker mobilization formed one part of a broader strategy geared toward the achievement of national liberation and the inauguration of a modern, liberal democracy. Fawu saw the independent workerist unions – which vehemently rejected ANC affiliation – as invested with a deep social conservatism that refused to participate in political interventions off the shopfloor, and denounced them for "counterrevolutionary" tendencies as "backwards," "ignorant" traditionalists.

Fawu's agenda continues to carry immense appeal for workers who identify with the project of national democratic revolution, especially among younger, more urbane, higher-skilled, and better-educated individuals. But, owing to its political ideology, Fawu struggles to maintain majority representation at centers in rural Zululand. This is because the Fawu discourse of NDR has historically opposed "precapitalist" modes of political and social formation – clans, chiefdoms, and hierarchical or patriarchal kinship systems – such as those that partially characterize rural Zulu communities. As Ivor Chipkin notes, the theory of national democratic revolution "draws on a Leninist reading of Marx that deems the revolutionary working class a class in and for itself, necessarily separated from the clan or the tribe" (328). Identities rooted in anything other than "nation" or "class," or interests derivative of anything other than liberal socialist values, are therefore suspect as "counterrevolutionary."

Most African workers in rural Zululand find this discourse profoundly alienating, and feel more comfortable with National Union even though they know that Fawu possesses vastly superior bargaining power. Affiliation with National Union allows these workers to pursue their rights in the workplace without being forced to align with the broader, politically oriented agenda of national democratic revolution. The workerist philosophy of National Union does not mandate a transformation of workers' souls – it does not require them to become secular individuals divorced from their most deeply-cherished cultural values and beliefs, nor does it summon them to throw their lives into a revolutionary struggle aimed at

achieving a particular social order with which they might disagree. In other words, under the workerist paradigm workers do not have to become modern individuals in order to organize for their rights in the workplace. The open, politically-non-aligned democratic space and shopfloor-focus prized by the independent unions allows workers to act *as if* they were a class in and for themselves, while retaining firm commitments to interests that may be completely unrelated to class.

The relationship between rural Zulu workers and the independent unions is therefore *felicitous*. The people that populate the ranks of the independent unions only have to *appear* to share the Western Marxism⁷⁸ that its organizers deploy at the bargaining table, but can freely cultivate an altogether different agenda rooted in particular “indigenous” concerns. This inadvertent collaboration reflects what Edward Sapir calls “the friendly ambiguities of language”:

Differences of culture never seem as significant as they really are; partly because in the workaday world of experience they are not often given the opportunity to emerge into sharp consciousness, partly because the economy of interpersonal relations and the friendly ambiguities of language conspire to reinterpret for each individual all behavior which he has under observation in the terms of those meanings which are relevant to his own life. [Sapir 1932:237]

The African independent unions, in short, have historically provided an arena within which subaltern workers can practice an activism rooted in a culturally particular logic free from overdetermination by external political agendas, where they are protected from the subject-making project of the national democratic revolution. At the bargaining table these members may be formally *misrepresented* in the language of Western Marxism. But they are not entirely unserved by this discourse, which still equips them to confront the important shopfloor issues of wages, hours, and conditions of service, even while obscuring the particular reasons for which they seek redress.

The labor movement in the sugar industry thus bears a unique structure of duality. At the level of the bargaining table, a forum which constrains expression according to a stylized structure of dispute, union leaders and shopstewards deploy formally articulated ideologies – such as those discussed above – to represent workers within a bourgeois paradigm of interests, focusing on garden variety issues of wages, conditions, and rights. On a subordinate, grassroots level, however, peasant-proletarian politics bubble just beneath the surface of the unions’ official discourse. At this level, beliefs and actions do not fit into the grid of “interests” and “aggregation of interests” that constitute the world of representative politics (cf. Chatterjee 1993:159). The movement holds together in spite of this contradiction because the unions’ subaltern members make sense of industrial relations by translating modern bourgeois politics into their own codes, so that the language of individual and class interests undergoes a transformation of meaning in a radically different domain. Despite the appearance of a united front at the bargaining table, then, the movement remains fraught with hidden tensions that derive from the unacknowledged determinants of subaltern political activity.

The foregoing discussion raises a number of interesting questions that pertain to contemporary debates in South Africa labor historiography. As I have indicated, scholars of labor tend to describe the union movement as bifurcated between two distinct types of unionism: independent/workerist and political/nationalist. But the history of worker activism in the sugar industry defies such clear-cut categorization, showing that it relies all too heavily on the official ideological articulations of union leaders and pays too little heed to the more complex political imagination of workers themselves. National Union, for instance, is

⁷⁸ For a detailed discussion of Western Marxism in South Africa, see Nash, Andrew, 1999, The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 19(1).

properly neither independent nor workerist: it cannot be considered independent because of its long history with the Zulu Royal Family and the IFP – both eminently political formations – and it cannot be considered workerist because Marxist class interests are the concern not of its rank and file members but of its leaders – and even then only in representational rhetoric. Against this typology, I argue for an analysis of opposition to NDR that moves beyond examination of direct working class interests to pursue the deeper, unarticulated moral economy that inspires the members of National Union. In the case of the sugar industry, African independent unionism is not just about a focus on wages and rights to the exclusion of national political agendas; it is about the reformation of the body politic according to a particular moral compass. I will devote the remainder of this dissertation to unpacking precisely what this means.

The Meaning of “Politics” in a Postcolonial Milieu

When asked about their reasons for refusing to join Fawu, most of National Union’s members respond by expressing distaste for Fawu’s political affiliations, and explain that, by contrast, they “don’t understand politics”, “don’t believe in politics”, and want to “keep politics separate from the workplace” – as per the workerist philosophy of their leaders. But hardly anyone can identify the explicit policies and practices of Fawu, Cosatu, or the ANC that they disagree with. Fawu shopstewards, on the other hand, have a clear picture of their motivating agenda. They can quite readily outline the ideological program they see themselves pursuing, and are conscious of participating in the project of modernity through the “liberation struggle” and its liberal reforms. Fawu, drawing on deep institutional resources, provides its shopstewards and members with regular training sessions wherein it inculcates the values of the union in the form of explicit ideology, emphasizing the tenets of Marxism-Leninism (the two-stage theory of revolution), liberalism, and egalitarianism. A large part of this process includes a particular interpretation of history that is taught directly to the workers, which encourages them to accept the ANC-led liberation movement as the telos of all worker activism throughout the 20th century. Indeed, the ANC relies on the grassroots reach of its constituent unions – like Fawu – to convey its pedagogical program to the nation’s general populace, to conscientize them with revolutionary ideology.

National Union, on the other hand, has virtually no socializing apparatus that it exercises over its members: no structures of leadership accountability, no formal trainings, no constitutional interpretation, no official history lessons. Fawu members have ideology, it seems, while the members of National Union do not. Consequently, the latter find themselves unable to articulate their political positions with any confidence, and sometimes themselves insist outright that they “have no ideology”. This is not necessarily accurate, however: they *do* have ideology; but it is not discursively explicit in the way that Fawu’s is. Rather, their political project is tacit – almost subconscious – and their aversion to progressive, ANC-aligned organizations stems from an embodied moral economy rooted in the taken-for-granted structure of the rural homesteads to which – as oscillating migrants – they remain closely tied; a theme I will explore more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

At first blush it seems absurd that National Union’s members would take issue with the idea of “politics” itself, given that unionism is by nature political in the strict sense. But what these workers mean by their rejection of “politics” is a rejection of the specifically *liberal* politics of national democratic revolution, with which the term has become synonymous. To them, the term “politics” summons the specter of a fragmented, topsy-turvy social order defined by distasteful policy positions on gender roles, sexuality, abortion, generational hierarchy, welfare, land tenure, and, perhaps most interestingly, housing policy (Chapter 4). While this might *seem* like a standard conservative’s response to the encroachment of liberal values, in this case the objection takes a very culturally particular

form, one that constantly and patiently refers back to the *umthetho* (law, order) that structures modern homestead life and governs social relations.

Debating “Democracy” and the Politics of Representation

The other most salient mark of difference between the two unions is the question of intra-union organizational culture. In conversations with shopstewards and organizers, this surfaces as a debate about the practice of “democracy”. Each union stridently accuses the other of having undemocratic practices, while lauding itself for promoting a fairer and more just system of representation. By all “objective” measures, Fawu clearly operates in a more democratic manner than its counterpart. Its members pride themselves on an elaborate structure of representation that nests local, regional, and national bodies in an organized schema of rationalized accountability. Its leaders – from the national executives to the local shopstewards – are democratically elected on a regular basis, and candidates judged based on standardized assessments of performance and delivery so that power changes hands frequently and seamlessly. Fawu enforces accountability among its leaders to shopstewards and among shopstewards to members, and purports to maintain strict transparency in all of its procedures. Finally, Fawu’s constitution was collectively ratified and is readily available to all members in an accessible and attractive pamphlet form. In sum, Fawu seeks maintain an internal rule of law and ensures that its leadership positions are never intrinsically associated with particular persons. Authority, for Fawu, is always transparently contractual – achieved rather than ascribed.

National Union, on the other hand, does not hold regular elections of either shopstewards or executive leadership. Indeed, once elected, most of its shopstewards operate in that capacity until retirement, at which point the leadership nominates replacements. Apart from the momentary flux instigated by the internal split in 1985, the leadership of National Union has remained rigidly constant since its inception. Loyalty to particular leaders – sometimes along kinship lines, and often with reference to the lineage of the Zulu Royal Family of which both National’s founder and president are a part – is highly prized, and often cited by workers as the reason for which they support the union despite its waning influence. Finally, the constitution of National Union is entirely unimportant to both its leaders and members. The document itself was long ago lost, and nothing serves in its place to regulate policy and procedure. In sum, National Union is run by personalities rather than by principles.

Nonetheless, National Union members *persist* in claiming that their union is more democratic than Fawu. This puzzling contradiction flags an ongoing debate over the very nature of democracy itself: a politics of representation in the strict sense of the term. Put simply, National Union members have unique expectations of the process of representation itself, conceiving it in terms of a given hierarchical order and the exercise of a priori authority by figures who they trust to know what is best for the whole. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, this logic of institutional organization parallels that of authority within the kingdom, the chiefdom, and the homestead, all of which operate on the principle of representation by encompassment. In other words, when National Union members use the term “democracy” they have “representation” in mind, and freight it with their own normative conceptions of how representation should operate. Fawu members, by contrast, use the term “democracy” to connote representational authority as a process of gaining popular legitimacy within an egalitarian social field where each individual “naturally” represents his or her own interests. This semantic slippage is one of the reasons that the unions incessantly accuse each other of undemocratic practice.

The second reason for the debate about democracy is a bit more straightforward. National Union members accuse Fawu of behaving “undemocratically” because it takes

orders from higher political structures, such as Cosatu and the ANC, and imposes those external agendas on the workers. Often cited here are Fawu's demands for the 40hr work week, women's rights in the workplace, and its pro-sanction stance during late apartheid – all of which are seen as emanating from the top on the basis of a preformulated agenda that replicates progressive ideas borrowed from western countries. For this reason, National Union thinks of the Fawu/Cosatu/ANC complex as run by “foreigners”: people who spent a lot of time in exile during apartheid and consequently lost touch with local issues (the comparison between Mbeki and Buthelezi serves them well here)⁷⁹, or people who have not worked in the sugar industry and who rely for their expertise on “official qualifications” like degrees and certificates rather than on embodied, experiential knowledge. It doesn't help that these leaders are often very young, urbane, and in many cases women – a fact that further chafes with National Union's conception of authority, which is both generationally determined and heavily gendered.

On the face of it, then, Fawu models democracy in terms of liberal egalitarianism, whereas National Union models democracy according to various axes of hierarchy and encompassment. But these two modes are not simply models for *doing*; they are models for *being*. When Fawu's leaders emphasize the importance of universal franchise and the rule of constitutional law, they are not simply asserting guidelines for organizational procedure; they are insisting on a certain type of subject, consistent with that assumed in the modernizing narrative of national democratic revolution. This ontological dimension is masked in the neutral rhetoric of “democracy”, which – by a subtle sleight of hand – misdirects attention to the state of the public domain rather than to the state of the individual's soul, which is the real object of reform. This dual purpose of democracy is *precisely* what the members of National Union realize and *insist* on illuminating by challenging the meaning of the term itself. When they object to Fawu's practices vis-à-vis the question of “democracy”, they are *not* objecting to its theory of the public domain (they unanimously agree that inclusive decision-making is superior to authoritarianism), but to the form of *personhood* that the organization enforces. National Union members, therefore, refuse to be tricked by the conceptual slippage between “democracy” and the subject-making project of individualism, liberalism, and nationalism.

Conclusion: Reflections on a Revolutionary Nostalgia

Thus far – for the purposes of analytical traction – I have discussed the differences between Fawu and National in categorically oppositional terms, as if the members of the former are uniformly model comrades and the members of the latter are uniformly something else. But the reality of the situation is significantly more complex. For example, at Pongola mill, historical negotiations have dictated that Fawu and National have separate wage agreements with the employer so that their members are paid different rates for the same grade. This means that as workers slide along the pay scale they pragmatically switch to the union whose agreement will earn them the most money, resulting in a constant membership flux between the two unions. Furthermore, by dint of historical contingency, certain centers – such as the Refinery, Eston, Noodsberg, and other Illovo mills – completely lack a National Union presence, meaning that workers who *would* join National are compelled to join Fawu instead, as the best of bad options. Such scenarios make it difficult to generalize about the social characteristics and political attitudes of each union's members, and demonstrate the fluidity of the demographic difference between the unions. Workers' decisions to join one union over the other are sometimes driven more by the vulgar exigencies of accessibility and cost than by staunch political ideology.

⁷⁹ The ascendancy of ANC president Jacob Zuma alters this dynamic, of course – an issue that I will discuss more thoroughly at a later stage.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the leaders, organizers, and shopstewards of Fawu explicitly adhere to the political agenda of national democratic revolution, even if not all of their members agree with them. Fawu is aware of this disjuncture, and sees it as an opportunity to conscientize members into proper revolutionary ideology. Ali Mdluli, the Provincial Organizer for Fawu in the sugar industry, conducts regular training sessions with shopstewards explicitly in order to “politicize” them, and expects shopstewards in turn to gradually politicize their members. Shopstewards, in other words, are intended to serve as the shocktroops of liberal revolutionary consciousness. Following Marx, the assumption behind this project is that conscientization is a process of enlightenment, of shedding “false” consciousness in order to arrive at an understanding of the “true” nature of social relations. But, of course, conscientization is in fact *not* a neutral process of replacing false consciousness with true, but an *active* program of *producing a new* consciousness – a new political subjectivity – different from but equally as contrived as the old. It is this subject-making agenda to which the subaltern workers in the union movement object.

When Mdluli goes on recruitment drives he likes to take along his longtime comrade, Richard Gumede, with whom he used to traverse the province while mobilizing resistance against apartheid in the 1980s. Dressed every day without fail in the same uniform – black horn-rimmed glasses, short-billed leather cap, and tapered corduroy trousers – Gumede embodies in his appearance the anachronistic revolutionary nostalgia that Fawu peddles. Close friends with the likes of Jay Naidoo, Alec Erwin, and Blade Nzibande, he never tires of telling long tales of the struggle years, peppered with Marxist-Leninist clichés and punctuated by “Viva!s,” to a crowd he addresses as “comrades”. During recruitment drives, many workers identify strongly with this emotional invocation of the past, and feel invigorated to discover that the revolution continues. But others are less impressed. They feel alienated by the revolutionary clichés and chafe at being addressed as “comrades” – for the struggle that Mdluli and Gumede represent was never truly theirs. As this scenario illustrates, many peasant-proletarian workers reject not only the subject-making project of political unionism, but also the *narrative* that drives it, refusing to be appropriated for a bourgeois-liberal telos in the modernizing story of national democratic revolution.