

South African 'Workerism' in the 1980s

Learning from FOSATU's Radical Unionism

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This is a lightly edited transcript of a presentation at a workshop hosted by the International Labour Research & Information Group (ILRIG) and the Orange Farm Human Rights Advice Centre in Drieziek extension 1, Orange Farm township, south of Soweto, South Africa, on 24 June 2017. It was attended by a hall full of community and worker activists, including veterans of the big rebellions of the 1980s.

Thank you comrades for having me here. The Federation of South African Trade Unions is the focus of my talk. I want to look at what FOSATU stood for and what we can learn from FOSATU. When people remember it, they often label it as marked by “workerism,” and they take that as a bad thing. But I want to show the so-called “workerism” of FOSATU was very radical, that this radical South African “workerism” is very important to understand, and build upon, today.

I want to stress, at the start, that what I speak about here rests very heavily, not just on my research, but the work of other comrades, notably Sian Byrne and Nicole Ulrich... Although they are not here in person, they are here as a key influence and inspiration and, in a sense, are my co-presenters in spirit.

Before there was the Congress of South African Trade Unions, today’s COSATU, there was FOSATU. FOSATU was set up in 1979. There had been strikes and struggles in the 1970s, starting with a big strike wave in Namibia from 1971–1972, which was then a South African colony, then a big strike wave starting in Durban 1973, which spread around the country. Although we remember 1976 for the bravery of the youth and students, we must remember that the 1976 uprising also involved general strikes by the black working class, mass stay-aways.

And as the working class started to flex its muscles, and to organise new, independent unions, the need for unity was felt. In 1979, at Hammanskraal, FOSATU was set up. The flag of FOSATU was red, black and gold, with a hammer, a spanner and a spade. FOSATU grew quickly, despite repression by the apartheid state. Leaders and activists in FOSATU were banned, jailed; some, like Andries Raditsela, were murdered by police. There was continual intimidation, and employers would fire workers for going on strike or “agitating” at work. Unemployment is not just about money: unemployment is a weapon of the bosses, and this weapon was used many times against FOSATU.

But, despite the pain, repression and suffering of the comrades in FOSATU, it got bigger and bigger, and stronger and stronger, and by 1985 it was the single biggest black working class organisation in the country. And not just the biggest, but in many ways, the strongest. It didn’t just exist in a moment of protest, or as a crowd that gathers around a grievance or in a crisis; it existed continuously, as a democratic, bottom-up machine that ran smoothly even when struggles died down. And it had 150,000 members, it had large education programs, it had a newspaper, it had choirs, it had successful strikes and campaigns, it had affiliates across the economy.

FOSATU’S “Workerism”

“Workerism” was a label that was painted onto FOSATU by those who did not like what FOSATU was doing. The people who gave it the label were not the racist National Party government, were not the police’s brutal Security Branch, but the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. They denounced FOSATU repeatedly.

There was a simple reason: FOSATU refused to bow down to a political party, it did not trust the ANC and it did not like the SACP's top-down politics. FOSATU said that control in FOSATU needed to be in the hands of the workers, and that change in the country had to be radical and benefit the working class, and that parties could not be trusted to do this.

So, the first thing about "workerism" – the main current in FOSATU, and its core politics – was its emphasis on building autonomous workers' unions. What that meant was that trade unions needed to be free of outside control. They needed to be controlled by their members – the ordinary workers – and not controlled inside the union by a few leaders, and not controlled outside the union by political parties, by the bosses or by the government.

We must remember that in those days there were large so-called registered trade unions like the Trade Union Council of South Africa. In fact TUCSA was bigger than FOSATU at one stage. But unions like TUCSA were sweet-heart unions, moderate, entangled into the state, run from above, and weak; they were racially segregated, largely excluding black Africans, and also treating their Coloured and Indian members badly.

FOSATU didn't want to be anything like TUCSA. It wanted autonomy for the working class and poor, who were part of the working class. FOSATU wanted a union movement embracing all workers and under workers' control. In reality, it was mainly black African in composition but it was strong in places where there was a large Coloured working class, for example Port Elizabeth and East London, and where there was a large Indian working class, for example Durban. In its search for the unity of the working class across race, FOSATU also tried to recruit white workers in the factories in Port Elizabeth, East Rand, the Vaal, but with little success.

Bottom-Up Industrial Unions

The second key part of FOSATU's "workerism" was its stress on systematically building mass-based, bottom-up, profoundly democratic and fighting industrial unions. The idea was to organise industry by industry. So FOSATU would organise one union for the metal industry, one for textiles, one for chemicals and so on.

But rather than rely on laws or leaders, like TUCSA, FOSATU's approach was to organise carefully, patiently. I call it the brick-by-brick approach that creates a mighty fortress. A good example was FOSATU's Metal and Allied Workers Union, which was active in the ISCOR steel factories of the government, in the private sector car factories owned by multinationals, like Ford and Volkswagen, and in the metal and auto industry generally, much of it owned by local white capitalists.

FOSATU's approach, illustrated by MAWU, was quite careful. It would set up a very clear program of action, targeting first a big factory, with, say, 4,000 workers: it's easier to organise a big factory than a small factory. It would capture this base by forming a fighting union that raised demands and won them plus won "recognition agreements" (i.e. negotiating rights) with the bosses. From there, it sent out units to organise other factories nearby, including the smaller ones. Where needed, it would try and combine negotiations across factories, so that the smaller factories and union branches could be helped by the larger ones.

The idea is that you didn't just declare a campaign and make a demand, without an organised base, and without working class power to back it. You wage careful, sometimes slow, social war, factory by factory, workplace by workplace. Each that you win over is another fortress, another

centre of working class power from which you can expand outwards. You don't make demands that you can't win and you don't drop a demand that you raise. So MAWU might demand, for example, equal wages across races, fight for it, even for two or three years, get a deal, also raise an issue around layoffs, fight, get a deal and so on. These were things that bosses did not want to give, they did not want to concede, but they had to be fought for, and they could be won.

Each struggle and each victory developed confidence, numbers and layers of militants, and made real gains for the working class. If you take the workers out into a battle that you can't win, you lose the larger war; you lose the workers because they are tired and weakened; you break their hearts and wills. And struggle is based fundamentally on the fire and strength of the heart and mind, the will, that power within yourself to keep going. So that is a precious resource and FOSATU understood that you needed to manage it carefully.

By 1982, FOSATU had built MAWU into a mass-based metal union, as well as other strong unions. It was confident that it could confront the employers in key sectors and firms as well as the state where needed, act regionally and nationally and not just at individual workplaces, consolidate the power of the union base, and carry out struggles based on directions from the shop floor.

FOSATU did not, let me stress, reject participation in the formal Industrial Council negotiating system of the state. Rather, it insisted that all agreements be directed by and checked by, the base, to prevent the hijacking and misuse of their demands.

Assemblies and Committees

That brings me to the third key part of FOSATU's "workerist" approach. What FOSATU stressed was that a union was not a head office or a service centre, but was based on the shop floor. So they organised based on regular mass meetings, or assemblies, that elected shop stewards, and gave them clear instructions, and made sure they reported back and acted against them if they did not. The idea was you wouldn't have unions based on officials from outside the workplace; as much as possible the workers would be the organisers, and officialdom would be kept in check. This would be carried out within each union, and also across the federation.

So, the leadership at all levels were to be delegates, kept on a tight leash, always accountable to regular meetings. The idea here was to build a union that was based on many, many layers of cadreship, militants – and a leadership generated and regenerated from below. Remember, in the apartheid days, horrors like the 2012 massacre at Marikana, which shocked us, were a regular occurrence; death, torture, mass imprisonment were the daily business of the old regime.

The advantage was that, if one layer got taken out, sent to jail, banned, killed, the union survived. It was not secure because the different parts were separate and independent from each other, like independent cells with sporadic links – but rather, because it was deeply rooted in the workers at the workplaces, with the workers unified through effective, democratic structures and procedures that renewed themselves, in tight unions and a tight federation. The idea was that of a mandated, multi-layer worker-leadership.

Some people now praise assemblies and workers' committees as an alternative to unions, but for FOSATU, the union and the federation centred on assemblies and workers' committees.

People who were hired by the FOSATU unions or federation for specialist jobs, like media work or full-time organising, but who were not elected, could not vote in the union structures. Anyone hired was to earn an ordinary worker's wage.

ANC and SACP enemies of FOSATU often claimed that "white intellectuals" were running it. And certainly FOSATU activists included people like Alec Erwin, a former university lecturer. But people like Erwin were a tiny minority in the union leadership; they served either in elected positions, and so were accountable, or in unelected non-voting positions, and so were contained. And most "intellectuals" in the union were black African or Coloured worker-intellectuals, like MAWU's Moses Mayekiso and FOSATU's Joe Foster.

Education, Identity, History

Fourth, FOSATU's "workerism" placed a heavy emphasis on building working class education, working class identity, working class culture and working class history.

To understand that the working class and its struggles come from and to learn from earlier struggles, and to remember and value them, FOSATU outlined the history of the working class. That the working class in South Africa comes from the older classes of slaves and servants, sailors and soldiers. That the working class in South Africa is part of the working class of the whole world, with a common interest and struggle. That, in building a working class movement, we must understand where we come from, who are, to understand our struggles and recover our historical memory as a class, our pain and our victories.

In FOSATU Worker News, FOSATU outlined South African history from the perspective of the oppressed classes over three hundred years. It took a class line, attacking European colonialism and racism, but linking these to capitalism; and it drew attention to the role of African kings and chiefs in upholding oppression, including through slave-trading. Before FOSATU, there was the SA Congress of Trade Unions; before SACTU there was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union; outside the unions there were movements like the slave revolts of the old Cape, unemployed movements, the anti-pass protests of the 1950s and 1910s, the squatter movements of the 1940s; and many more.

And FOSATU helped popularize and publicize this history – to celebrate it, but also to learn from past failures, such as how the ICU was destroyed by sloppy organising, unaccountable leaders and ineffective strategy. FOSATU also worked with the radical History Workshop of academics at the University of the Witwatersrand, participating in their conferences. In 1984, thousands of workers attended the conference, going to and presenting in seminars, learning, talking, making and enriching a history from below.

For FOSATU, we South Africans were part of the world's working class: a South African worker, a Russian worker, a worker in Brazil were of the same class, with the same enemies. You can have Coca-Cola, you have a Sprite, a Pepsi, but they are all fizzy soft drinks. You are exploited in South Korea, you are exploited in Brazil, and you are exploited in Poland: different flavours but the same stuff. FOSATU stressed that the problems that we faced in the 1980s were not only South African problems, they are global, and part of a global struggle. So FOSATU highlighted struggles in Zimbabwe, Poland and Britain, and it located the South African class struggle in a global history of struggle.

FOSATU made interventions in a range of areas. It ran worker choirs, culture days, and promoted images and slogans that stressed its messages. Similarly FOSATU developed materials for the youth, around women's issues, and engaged in a range of political and social areas.

Beyond Wages, Beyond Workplaces

That brings me to the fifth element: contrary to what its enemies said, FOSATU "workerism" was never about ignoring politics or ignoring the world beyond the workplace.

At the workplace, FOSATU did not just raise issues around wages and conditions but other issues too. They recognized that women workers, especially black women workers, faced specific forms of oppression. They raised the need for crèches and childcare at work, and noted how women's jobs and incomes and promotion and role in the unions was affected by the double burden: after the factory, the home. They campaigned for changes and equality. They spent time catching bosses who were sexually harassing women, setting up traps and catching them, and getting them fired or disciplined.

FOSATU positioned itself as the voice of black, Coloured and Indian workers in a racist, capitalist society. It fought the apartheid wage gap, within the same jobs and between different jobs; and racist pension and labour relations and on-site facilities systems; and tackled the authoritarian and racist workplace management system. It fought to make the workplace more democratic, more non-racial.

So FOSATU's "workerism" wasn't just about money, wasn't just about bus fares, wasn't just about pensions, it was about the working class's struggle for dignity in the workplace, against racism in the factories – and also beyond the workplace. Because FOSATU did not stop at the workplace. It campaigned against oppression in the townships and the larger society, the oppression of the black and Coloured and Indian working class community.

It fought around the specific issues that some workers faced that others did not, from the perspective of solidarity and unity: besides the oppression of women, they spoke to the youth, to the unemployed, they put a lot of stress on the plight of migrant workers in the towns, and of the workers in the homelands or Bantustans. While unions like FOSATU were able to operate fairly openly in so-called "white" South Africa, homeland leaders like Lucas Mangope and Gatsha Buthelezi did not allow independent unions at all. FOSATU fought this, opposed the homeland system, and tried to break into them and organise unions.

So FOSATU wanted to become involved in township and other struggles, and extend the influence of the unions and organised workers into these spheres. Where possible, FOSATU entered into alliances or common work, especially through its shop-steward councils, which spanned the different FOSATU unions.

These brought together FOSATU workers from different FOSATU affiliates, who lived or worked in the same area. These councils could then engage directly with local community organisations, both as members and leaders in these, and through them bring the power of the unions to bear in their support. This could range from forcing employers to put pressure on bus companies, to infusing these structures with democratic practices drawn from the FOSATU tradition, and radical ideas drawn from that tradition.

FOSATU's politics also suggested that workers' control meant that workers, as the majority in the township communities, also had to have a large level of influence in those communities.

Alliances, Errors, Hesitancy

FOSATU was criticized, sometimes correctly, for being a bit too cautious in these engagements, and for not giving a greater lead. Sometimes it worked in parallel with other structures, rather than with them; sometimes it stayed away from campaigns; generally it avoided long-term alliances.

Part of this hesitation was because FOSATU was afraid of being swallowed by other groups. It believed, correctly, that many community-based anti-apartheid groups lacked stable democratic structures; that they were often run by the petty bourgeoisie, much of which was aligned to the ANC, SACP and other nationalists; and some engaged in political thuggery, including against FOSATU. FOSATU did not trust forces from outside the working class, and did not trust nationalism, which downplayed class differences by stressing common racial and national experiences.

In hindsight, it can be argued that they would have been much stronger and more influential by building long-term links and alliances – tragically, FOSATU stayed out of the United Democratic Front, formed in 1983, and lost the chance to build links with large, like-minded youth and community currents in the UDF. They did work with UDF at times, or support it, but in staying out, they also surrendered it to the nationalists and middle class.

But it is not correct to present FOSATU's "workerist" politics as narrow or bureaucratic. What FOSATU was doing was, in fact, carrying out its agenda, outlined at its 1982 congress in a position paper delivered by Joe Foster. This was that workers needed to be part of the "popular struggle" but to have their "own, powerful and effective organisation," "worker leadership" in the neighbourhoods, and forge a "working class movement" that went beyond the unions. FOSATU understood that unions were not enough, that the project and power that was developing at workplaces also needed to extend the larger working class, and that unions should be only one part of the FOSATU project.

Expansive "Workers' Control"

And this meant the need to strengthen the identity of the working class, to know where we fit into the capitalist system, to understand our power as the working class, and to understand that it is the working class alone who has the power to change society in a way that is fundamentally progressive.

So the notion that the FOSATU "workerist" politics was about being small and contained was completely wrong. There were contradictions and errors and hesitancy in FOSATU's work, but it was never a moderate, narrow movement.

That brings me to the sixth element: FOSATU "workerism" involved dealing with issues beyond wages in the workplace, and also, it involved building beyond the workplace, but what was the aim?

It pointed to an expansion of worker control over the society and the economy as a whole, a new South Africa, in which the working class, the masses, were not just responding to what capital and the state were doing, but exercising real control. "Workers' control," at one level, meant workers control of the unions; but at another, it was a more radical vision of steady transformation.

This could build on steps like pushing back the frontier of control at work, for example, by having a growing input on decisions, but it would not end its steps there. A new South Africa had to be one in which capitalism and the profit system that exploited and oppressed the working class would be progressively removed.

Some of the workerists, like Mayekiso, argued clearly against the ANC slogan that “The People Must Govern,” asking: who are “the people”? Did they include capitalists? Homeland rulers?

“The people,” here, was rooted in the ANC’s nationalist politics, which downplayed class issues and aimed at a multi-class alliance of all democrats, rather than a class struggle of all working class people. The cost of that alliance, what made it possible, was retaining capitalism. But retaining capitalism meant retaining the exploitation of the majority.

In place of the ANC/SACP “Freedom Charter,” Mayekiso called for a Workers Charter, which would provide a basis for the workers to “take over and direct the whole” economy.

Elsewhere in Africa, independence brought positive reforms, but soon ended up captured by a nationalist elite that turned on the working class. FOSATU studied the case of neighbouring Zimbabwe very closely, noting that nationalists led by Robert Mugabe smashed up strikes and unions, and defended capitalism, soon after taking office.

Why would ANC be different? If there are workers at the bottom, whatever the colour of the president, who are suffering then there is no deep change. So Mayekiso insisted that the Freedom Charter was a “capitalist document,” rather than a program for “a change of the whole society.”

So what you can see here is a radical anti-capitalist class struggle politics. But at the same time, FOSATU distanced itself from the SACP, and through its support for workers’ struggles in Poland by the Solidarność union movement, also rejected the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its client states, because in these workers had no power.

Workers Power, National Liberation

This meant that the struggle against apartheid had to be linked to the struggle against apartheid. The ANC and SACP wanted to remove apartheid but follow it with a reformed capitalism, a first “stage” called the “national democratic revolution” or NDR. According to the SACP, this would later (somehow) be followed by a second “stage” of socialism.

FOSATU’s “workerism” did not just disagree with the SACP’s vision of what the second “stage” would be (a USSR-style dictatorship), but rejected splitting the anti-apartheid and the anti-capitalist struggles. Mayekiso insisted that “apartheid is an appendage and a branch of the whole thing – the tree of oppression of capitalism.” So it was not enough to defeat the son, apartheid, you had to defeat the father. Capitalism, Foster said, hid “behind the curtains of apartheid and racism,” but “capital and its lackeys were undoubtedly the major beneficiaries of apartheid.”

FOSATU argued against the NDR two-stage theory, which was being pushed in the UDF and in unions outside FOSATU and by ANC and SACP cells inside FOSATU. In Mayekiso’s words, there should not be “two stages” but “one stage continuous; this thing of two stages is a waste of time and a waste of blood.” So it was crucial that the unions and the working class did not get captured or confused by existing white capital or emerging black capital.

Working Class Nation

FOSATU wanted one nation – but centred on the working class. It believed in a united South Africa: remember in those days, there was the Bantustan policy, the apartheid segregation in everything from jobs to toilets to schools, around 14 different parliaments for different races and homelands, different TV stations, different everything.

For FOSATU, these divisions had to be removed, as unjust, and as part of the working class struggle: the working class has many races, languages and cultures, but it had to be united around a common identity and aim.

A new South African nation needed to overcome the old divisions, including race, but be forged in struggle and based on justice and equality. Race was not the basis of inclusion or exclusion, but racial equality through radical changes in the cities, in the economy, in the society was essential. Here, majority rule meant working class power, and, of course, the majority of the class was black African, Coloured and Indian.

So the new nation would be non-racial, but it would be one in which the working class predominated. It would be driving the car, not fixing the car. It would be one in which the working class put its imprint on the nation. The culture of the nation would be that of the working class. The governance and power of the nation would be vested as much as possible in the working class.

It is sometimes argued that the choice is between national liberation (from apartheid) and workers' liberation (from capitalism), but FOSATU never set up such an empty choice: rather, real national liberation for the working class required workers power and anti-capitalism.

In Closing: Strengths & Weaknesses

I want to make three general points in closing. One, in many ways FOSATU was right. If we look at South Africa today, the poverty, powerlessness, injustice, if we look at how people like Cyril Ramaphosa – in his time, a hero of the working class, a union man, today a capitalist and a traitor – if we look at the ANC today, we have exactly the anti-worker outcome that FOSATU warned against.

FOSATU was right: when you get tied into the political parties, they take your best and brightest and corrupt them, they seek to capture the unions and smother them. FOSATU was right: the working class needs its own independent program, it needs to be anti-capitalist, its power needs to rest in working class mass organisations, not just in unions but communities and it cannot rest until capitalism is defeated by workers control.

But, in other ways, FOSATU was also wrong. FOSATU had a good criticism, a good daily practice and a vision of a good future. But at the level of a strategy linking what it did, in organising, educating and mobilising, and what it wanted in the end – that new South Africa it sought – there was no clear link. You can pack your bags for a trip to Cape Town, but unless you have got a plan to get there you are probably not going to get there.

In terms of a strategy linking the vision, linking workers' control today to a working class-centred new nation, linking present-day winnable demands to a massive shift in power and wealth, linking criticism of the nationalists to defeating the nationalists – FOSATU fell down.

Some parts of FOSATU were spending their time on court cases as part of a strategy to reshape the state; some parts were aiming at taking power: these are not the same thing. Some parts were working with the ANC quietly, some parts were saying to hell with the ANC. Some parts thought of the new South Africa as socialist, others as social democratic. All were vague on details. “Workerism” was not anarcho-syndicalism but a mixture of different ideas.

The “workerist” thinking in FOSATU wasn’t developed enough. This was partly because of daily pressures and a stress on getting things done. But it was also because the “workerists” hadn’t organised themselves into a specific group that could develop theory and strategy. They were a network, based in the unions, rather than a coherent group.

This also meant that, when the ANC and SACP began to build cells and secret cabals in the FOSATU unions, the workerists were not able to respond effectively. They needed to organise as a group in the unions, and outside the unions, including in the UDF, to plan and evaluate and strategise and intervene. Not just to clarify the problems in strategy, but to deal with other threats too.

People like Jacob Zuma, then the head of ANC secret intelligence, were directing ANC/SACP plans to capture the unions: they were skilled and they did not care about democracy. And they ended up winning.

When FOSATU joined with other unions in 1985 to form COSATU, it was the biggest and best-organised bloc, and the first COSATU resolutions had a deep “workerist” imprint, including independence from parties. Within two years, they were gone as a serious force. Even MAWU, which became the heart of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa in 1987, ended up adopting the Freedom Charter and NDR, even if they gave this a radical interpretation. Jay Naidoo, a great activist but an ANC cadre, was one who worked inside FOSATU, and he helped forge the defeat of “workerism” in COSATU.

Tomorrow, Today

Third, in closing, let us remember something key from FOSATU: the idea that tomorrow is built today, that, as MAWU said, learn from the past, act in the present, to build the future. What we do now shapes what we get tomorrow – you cannot take a tree that is growing, cut it down, take off the bark, take off the leaves and use as a kierie, or club, and then put it back in the ground and think that it is going to be a tree. You cannot build an undemocratic organisation and think it will become democratic. You cannot raise your dog to bite people and then be surprised when it bites people.

If we want a democratic, worker-controlled society, FOSATU understood, you need democratic unions and a democratic working class movement. If you want a society beyond capitalism you need clear ideas of how to get there and you need to practice what you preach. The ANC in exile was a top-down structure, it was run from the top by men like Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, top-down. When the ANC was unbanned, the exiled ANC took over and systematically undermined the best of the democratic traditions of the UDF, which it soon disbanded, and of COSATU, which it has systematically penetrated. It did not have democratic traditions or tolerate opponents then, and there should be no surprise that it is undemocratic and intolerant now.

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