

Commemorating the 1973 strikes and learning appropriate lessons

An approach to the 1973 strikes

- There are many ways through which one can approach this subject
- Including, the historical context within which the strikes occurred, including the history of progressive trade unions in RSA
- The post-war development of South African capitalism, and accelerated industrialisation in the 1950s and 1960s
- The debates within the trade union movement and in the broader democratic and liberation movement on the role of trade unions in our struggle
- Lessons from the 1973 strikes on a variety of issues – socialism, character of trade unions, unions in the national democratic revolution, etc

SACP
SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNIST PARTY

The history of organising black workers



- The 1973 strikes marked both a continuation, but also a new phase, in the organisation of black workers and progressive trade unions in RSA
- The SACP played a crucial role in trade union organisation throughout its 100 years of existence, including the building of the ICU, industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s, the 1946 Mineworkers strike, the founding of SACTU in 955, etc
- Organising in the wake of the 1921 white workers rebellion and the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act (excluding black workers as employees)

Apartheid intensified repression in the 1960s



- The banning of the SACP in 1950 in the light of its role in building the trade union movement and mass work
- The Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the banning of organisations
- The Rivonia convictions and the rolling back of resistance to apartheid
- The emasculation of SACTU and effective shutting of the progressive trade union movement
- The launch of the armed struggle and expansion of the underground beyond the SACP

The 1960s apartheid labour regime

- Attempts to build parallel black sweetheart unions under TUCSA
- An industrial labour exploitation regime based on the Indian system – recruitment of workers in particular factories from particular chieftaincies
- In KZN a long history of attempts to use the Zulu King as an enforcer of labour discipline in industrial areas, particularly in Durban factories
- Attempts at widespread enforcement of sweetheart structures of works and liaison committees as substitutes for trade union organisation



Contradictions in the apartheid labour regime

- Accelerated industrialisation required a transition from manual to stable semi-skilled labour
- Shift of the location of labour from rural to massive new urban settlements (eg. In Durban, Umlazi and KwaMashu)
- Introduction and expansion of Bantu education and secondary education to produce semi-skilled labour with urban residential rights
- Induna system could not survive the emergence of semi-skilled workforce – hence attempts at introduction of liaison committees and the introduction of black personnel practitioners



The 1973 strikes starting on 25 January

- The new semi-skilled workers as prime movers of the strikes
- These strikes that ended up involving 100 000 workers were largely spontaneous and spread like wild fire in Durban
- Started at Coronation (later Corobrik) No 1 plant
- They were strikes for higher wages in the wake of huge capitalist profits in the 1960s but with no increases for workers in many factories
- A more stable working class residing or with permanent houses in the fledgling townships



Trade union organisation in wake of strikes

- In wake of strikes there were three main participants in the organisation of black workers - workers themselves; SACTU stalwarts with a number of them released from prison (eg. Judson Khuzwayo); and mainly (though not exclusively) white university students and academics
- The latter group played an extremely important role in the organisation of workers and rebuilding the trade union movement primarily using the vehicle of the Wages Commission
- A number of largely new trade unions emerged in the textile, chemical, metal and transport and other sectors



The formation of FOSATU

- Most of the unions formed in the wake of the 1973 strikes formed themselves into FOSATU
- Facilitated by the recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission accepted by the apartheid regime for black workers to join and form unions
- A huge debate ensued on whether the unions should register or not in wake of the concessions by the apartheid regime
- Initially the SACP and SACTU were somehow hesitant on whether the unions should register under the new apartheid dispensation
- Most of the FOSATU unions chose to register correctly seeing this concession as a victory for the workers's struggle



The trade unions in the struggle: Key debates

- The key debate was whether the unions should register as required by the new apartheid dispensation
- There were some key differences between the unions that ultimately affiliated to COSATU and the unions closely aligned to the democratic movement, a few further remained as general rather than industrial unions
- Apart from the ‘registration debate’, the establishment of the black workers’ unions led to heated debates on their role in the broader national liberation struggle and their relationship to organisations like the UDF



‘The errors of workerism’ (1)

- The new unions affiliated to FOSATU generally adopted a ‘workerist political outlook’
- A 1986 issue of the UDF journal ‘Isizwe’ properly characterised and engaged this tendency, as being made made up of the related but distinct tendencies of ‘syndicalism’ and ‘economism’
- Their counter, as outlined, below essentially also revolved around the dangers of populism abandoning workers to petty bourgeois and other anti-worker interests
- Though ‘populism’ was to be found inside the ranks of the UDF for instance, but it was not the dominant form of politics



‘Errors of workerism’ (2)

- The controversial (FOSATU GS) Joe Foster speech of 1982, at the start of negotiations towards formation of COSATU said, amongst other things: “In the economy, capital and labour are the major forces, yet politically the struggle is being fought elsewhere”.
- ‘Elsewhere’ mean in the broader political and popular struggles
- “Our concern is with the very essence of politics, and that is the relation between the major classes, being capital and labour” (An example of economism)
- Joe Foster continued “There has not been and is not a working class movement in South Africa”, (Wiping out the struggles of a fledgling working class movement of the 1920 eg. The ICU, the SACP led working class movement of the 1930s and 1940s, etc)
- Indeed another key error of workerism was to distance itself from the workers struggle of an entire 20th century in South Africa



Lessons from 1973 and its immediate aftermath (1)



- Joe Slovo's 1988 piece on the working class and the NDR was a continuation of the critique of workerism and still remains an important document for our Party in the current period
- There is a need for strong shop-floor organisation with appropriate education for shop-stewards, including the basics of organising and negotiations
- Trade unions disconnected from broader working class struggles for liberation and democracy run the risk of being isolated
- In the trade union movement there will always be lingering workerist tendencies and they need to be combatted

Lessons (2)

- Traces of workerism are also to be found within the ranks of our own Party and must be engaged
- SACP must pay a lot of attention to the building of a trade union movement with strong workplace structures, but links with the broader socialist movement we seek to build
- Need for gendered worker education and organisation methods, and these to be mainstreamed in the trade union movement
- Relevance and urgency to reach out to the whole of the broader (and potentially) progressive trade union movement

