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'Remember Home': Gender, Trade Unionism and Urban Consumerism in Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

In the 1980s, South Africa's fast growing trade unions bore comparison to the rising generation of democratic movements that were taking on autocratic governments, as Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) transformed the cities of the Global South into consumer societies. This paper focuses on the large manufacturing workforces of Durban and KwaZulu-Natal. Strikingly, for all that radical intellectuals hoped these factories might become sites of socialist mobilisation, the material they produced (such as pamphlets, photo essays, and memoirs) reveals the extent to which union activists were deeply entangled in the rhythms of an apartheid consumer society. Commentators today lament a new culture of individualism and patriarchal aggrandisement inside contemporary unions that is at odds with their radical traditions. I delve into union-produced grey literature and archives, and argue that such questions of social mobility, consumption, and patriarchal aggrandisement have troubled the unions since their inception.

Keywords: apartheid; consumerism; gender; industrialisation; segregation; South Africa; unions

« Remember home » : genre, syndicalisme et consumérisme urbain sous l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud

Résumé

Dans les années 1980, les syndicats sud-africains en plein essor ont été comparés à la génération montante de mouvements démocratiques qui s'attaquaient aux gouvernements autocratiques. L'industrialisation par substitution aux importations (ISI) a transformé les villes du Sud global en sociétés de consommation. Cet article se concentre sur la main-d'œuvre de l'industrie manufacturière de Durban et du KwaZulu-Natal. Il est frappant de constater qu'alors que les intellectuels radicaux espéraient que ces usines deviendraient des sites de mobilisation socialiste, les archives (pamphlets, essais photographiques et mémoires) révèlent à quel point les militants syndicaux étaient profondément imprégnés des évolutions de la société de consommation de l'apartheid. Les analystes déplorent aujourd'hui une nouvelle culture de l'individualisme et de l'enrichissement patriarcal au sein des syndicats contemporains, en contradiction avec leurs traditions radicales. En analysant la littérature grise et les archives produites par les syndicats, j'affirme que ces questions de mobilité sociale, de consommation et d'enrichissement patriarcal ont semé le trouble au sein des syndicats depuis leur création.

Mots-Clés : Afrique du Sud ; apartheid ; consumérisme ; genre ; industrialisation ; ségrégation ; syndicats

In recent years, South African researchers have drawn on wider historiographies of consumption to write new studies on how late-apartheid consumer capitalism shaped patterns of urban politics and city-making. The topics they cover are wide and varied. They include the growth of white suburban consumerism and the decline of Afrikaner nationalism; the street styles of the youth movements who spearheaded the urban revolts of the 1970s and 1980s; the patterns of homebuilding and homemaking in the segregated townships and unauthorised informal settlements on the city margins; and the expansion of supermarkets into poor neighbourhoods notwithstanding entrenched patterns of inequality and hunger.[1]One issue that has arisen from this research is the suggestion that however much the South African anti-apartheid movement adopted a socialist rhetoric, struggles for freedom often played out within many of the governing norms of a late industrial consumer society.[2] As one African National Congress politician explained succinctly, 'I did not join the struggle [against apartheid] to be poor'.[3]

In this paper, I explore how the trade union movement that emerged in the manufacturing cities of South Africa was entangled in the rhythms of a late-apartheid consumer society. In one sense, it is a long-established topic. The January 1973 strike wave erupted in Durban, South Africa's leading post-war manufacturing city. In the wake of these strikes, a new set of independent trade unions mobilising black workers emerged: first the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU, which was established in 1979), and then the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, which was established in 1985). As these unions grew from several thousand (c.1974) to 1.2 million members by 1990, a contemporaneous generation of radical anti-apartheid activists studied what they described as 'the making of the South African working class'.[4] Indeed, trade union sympathisers in Durban were arguably the first to note that a rising generation of secondary school educated, semi-skilled factory workers formed the core leadership of the labour movement in the secondary industries of South Africa.[5] From this perspective, anti-apartheid protest looks much like contemporaneous mobilisations in the manufacturing cities of Latin America and East Asia, dominated by a bulging generation of skilled, socially mobile blue-collar workers during the decades when Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) was the dominant development strategy.[6]

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[1] The vast literature includes: Bank Leslie (2011), *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South Africa city*, London, Pluto Press; Hunter Mark (2010), *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender and Rights in South Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press; Hyslop Jonathan (2000), 'Why did Apartheid's Supporters Capitulate? 'Whiteness', Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985-1995', *South African Review of Sociology*, 31 (1), pp. 36-44; Lee Rebekah (2009), *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in Urban South Africa*, London, Bloomsbury.

[2] See in particular Posel Deborah, and van Wyk Ilana (eds.) (2019), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press (see also the vibrant critique/debate that then played out in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*). It is noticeable that like its American cousins, the Southern African literature engages with the entangled relationship between race and consumption–see Burke Timothy (1996), *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Durban NC, Duke University Press; Gilroy Paul (2001), 'Driving While Black', in Miller David (ed.), *Car Cultures*, London, Berg; Ross Robert, Hinfelaar Marja, and Peša Iva (eds.) (2013), *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840-1980*, Leiden, Brill, pp. 81-104.

[3] Quoted by Posel Deborah (2010), 'Races to Consume: Revisiting South Africa's History of Race, Consumption and the Struggle for Freedom', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (2), p. 157.

[4] A literature review: Gibbs Timothy (2019), 'Writing the Histories of South Africa's Cities after Apartheid', *English Historical Review*, 134 (570), pp. 1228-44.

[5] On Durban: Webster Edward (2014), 'Review: *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner* by Billy Keniston', *Transformation*, 85 (2), pp. 149 – commenting on Mare Gerry, Fisher Fozia, [and Rick Turner] (1976), *The Durban Strikes, 1973: Human Beings Have Souls*, Durban, Institute for Industrial Education and Ravan Press. Also: Webster Edward (1979), 'Profile of Unregistered Workers in Durban' *South African Labour Bulletin* 4 (8), pp. 44-51. Many South Africa trade union histories describe upskilling: on textiles, see Berger Iris (1992), *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press; on metals, see: Holdt Karl (2003), *Transition from Below: Forging trade unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press; Webster Edward (1985), *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press; on the mines, see: Crush Jonathan, Jeeves Alan, and Yudelman David (1991), *South Africa's Labour Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Goldmines*, Boulder, Westview Press, pp. 1-31; Donham Donald (2011) *Violence in a Time of Liberation: Murder and Ethnicity at a South African Goldmine*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, pp. 125-50; and on autoworkers, see: Duncan David (1997), *We Are Motor Men: The Making of the South African Car Industry*, London, Whittles.

[6] Comparisons: Seekings Jeremy (2000), *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991*, Oxford, Currey, pp. 1-28, 263-5; Seidman Gail (1994), *Manufacturing Militance: Workers Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-85* (1994), Berkeley, University of California Press; Skinner Robert (1997), *Modern South Africa in World History: Beyond Imperialism*, London, Bloomsbury, pp. 115-43. Also: Lambert Robert (2010), 'Eddie Webster, the Durban Moment and New Labour Internationalism', *Transformation*, 72/73 (2), pp. 26-47.

More recently, historians have looked more closely at the post-war global ideologies of consumerism that reshaped apartheid's manufacturing cities, as new industries selling mass manufactured products to increasingly affluent urban populations developed rapidly behind ISI tariff barriers. Some have studied industrial magnates such as Anton Wessels, who lured Toyota to Durban, and Philip Frame, who developed the mass-market textile industry in cities and industrial townships across Natal.[7] Others have examined the new ideologies of mass consumption and social mobility that animated working-class politics in the post-war era. The classic model here was the American 'Fordist' pattern of industrialisation in which well-paid, socially mobile, unionised factory workers bought the goods they produced, participating fully in postwar urban consumer society.[8] By contrast, manufacturing cities in the apartheid era were shaped by small, racially segmented domestic markets. If at the turn of the 1970s South African retailers and marketing firms were just beginning to focus their attention on township markets, the stark fact remained that 'white South Africa' (some 25% of the population) accounted for more than two-thirds of domestic consumer expenditure.[9] These segmented patterns of what Stephen Gelb descriptively terms 'racial Fordism' have been the subject of a small but lively literature.[10] This examines the new ideologies of mass consumption and social mobility that animated working-class township politics – particularly the vision of the home-owning, car-driving, suburban good life that so often lay in sight but beyond the reach of black South Africans living on the segregated fringes of apartheid cities.[11]

These apartheid tensions – of class and consumption, race, aspiration, and social mobility – were especially apparent, I would suggest, in the explosive union mobilisations seen in South Africa's leading manufacturing cities of KwaZulu-Natal, which produced cheap clothing and consumer durables for expanding township markets. My case study follows the trajectories of several of the leading working-class African male activists in these mass manufacturing cities of Natal, who rose from the factory floor into positions of leadership in the anti-apartheid metals and textiles trade unions during the years of mass mobilisation. Strikingly, for all that radical intellectuals hoped that these factories might become sites of socialist mobilisation, the rich archives and grey literature produced by the union movement suggest working-class solidarities of a very different sort. Drawing on wider literature that considers how the ideologies of the salaried male breadwinner can shape labour politics, I make four connected points[12]. Firstly, I emphasise the importance of the ideas of working-class aspiration, social mobility, and patriarchal home-building that shaped the activism of this rising generation of activists, who had often been born into poor, hungry families.[13] Secondly, I argue that the explosive militancy of trade union mobilisation in the 1980s was sharpened by the economic downturn and rising unemployment that threatened the male breadwinner. Thirdly, I argue that ideas about the male breadwinner shaped internal union hierarchies, limiting the role of women in senior leadership. Fourthly, I examine the tensions inside the unions between white suburban intellectuals who idealised socialist frugality, and black working-class leaders who believed they were fighting to give their members a share of industrial prosperity.

This will bring us to an awkward conclusion about the political culture inside the anti-apartheid union movement. Many post-apartheid South African commentators have lamented the '*new* culture of individualism' and patriarchal aggrandisement inside contemporary unions at odds with their 'radical Marxist

[7] Freund Bill (2018). *Twentieth Century South Africa: A Developmental History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Likewise: Sparks Stephen (2012), 'Apartheid Modern: South Africa's oil from coal project and the history of a company town', PhD Thesis, University of Michigan.

[8] Barrow Heather (2018), *Henry Ford's Plan for the American Suburb: Dearborn and Detroit*. Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press; Davis Mike (2018), *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*. London, Verso.

[9] Ehlers Anton (2008), 'Renier van Rooyen and Pep Stores Limited: The Genesis of a South African Entrepreneur and Retail Empire', *South African Historical Journal*, 60, (3), p. 436.

[10] Gelb Stephen (1991), *South Africa's Economic Crisis*, London, Zed. Gelb controversially attempted to explain racial Fordism through the lens of Marxist regulation theory. I have avoided these debates, and simply use the term in a descriptive sense.

[11] Bank L., *Home Spaces…*, op. cit., pp. 60-89; Dlamini Jacob (2009), *Native Nostalgia,* Johannesburg, Jacana; Hunter M., *Love in the Time of AIDS…*, op. cit.

[12] Hunter M., *Love in the Time of AIDS…*, op. cit.. Other examples include Cooper Frederick (2004), *Décolonisation et Travail en Afrique: L'Afrique britannique et française, 1935-1960*, Paris, Karthala-Sephis; Lindsay Lisa (2003), *Working with Gender: Wage Labour and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria*, Portsmouth, Heinemann.

[13] For wider views of working-class social mobility and aspiration, see: French John (2020) *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press; Ramsden Stefan (2017), *Working-Class Community in the Age of Affluence*, London, Routledge; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite Florence (2018), *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

rhetoric' (my italics).[14] Others have returned to the early years of the anti-apartheid trade unions focusing on the purer traditions of radical dissent that flourished in the 1970s.[15] Indeed, in much the same way as historians' debates on 'the Global 1960s' carry a piquant nostalgia, there is a deluge of South African writing that commemorates the 1973 Durban strike wave.[16]At the same time, I would suggest that when we delve into the archives, we discover that fraught questions about social mobility, consumption, and patriarchal aggrandisement were at the heart of South Africa's trade unions from their very inception. As much as they critiqued apartheid capitalism and spoke of a socialist future, South Africa's trade unions were deeply entangled in the rhythms of a late-capitalist consumer society.

Sources and methodologies

This paper draws heavily on the materials produced by 1970s and 1980s labour activists and anti-apartheid intellectuals, organised under a plethora of initiatives with loose ties to the University of Witwatersrand Wits History Workshop, which much like its famous British namesake pioneered new forms of working-class and urban popular history.[17] A slew of tracts and pamphlets, dissertations and books explored almost every imaginable aspect of working life and popular culture. Important, too, were the wider projects of engagement – the photo essays of factory life displayed by Afrapix, or the plays and choral works put on by the Culture and Working Life Project – such was the effervescence of the new social history movement in South Africa. All the same, these materials are shot through with tensions. In the final analysis, left-wing intellectuals returned to their E. P. Thompsonian interest in 'the making of the South African working class'[18] and their hopes of forging an egalitarian socialist society.[19] What particularly interests me in this article is the extent to which the South African labour movement was imbricated in the rhythms of late apartheid consumer capitalism.

In thinking through these issues, I have particularly drawn on memoirs of union activists as well as the life history interviews I conducted with around sixty union veterans – a dozen of whom are directly referenced here. It is the themes of intergenerational social mobility that emerge from their biographies that structure this article. Many union leaders and activists were born into impoverished families on the poor, hungry, rural margins of South Africa, the sons of semi-literate unskilled migrant mineworkers. The life histories they relate of their rising generation – the first to receive a secondary school education, enter semi-skilled manufacturing work, obtain a house in South Africa's cities, and buy a car – marked their political consciousness profoundly. I use thick biographical description to discuss these themes of social mobility and consumption in the late industrial cities of the apartheid era. Most succinctly, these themes are carried in the names of a generation of South African labour leaders – Zwelinzima (Heavy World), Malecane (Little Money), and Vusumzi (Restore the [Broken] Home/Household).

[14] Buhlungu Sakhela, and Malehoko Tshoaedi (2012), *COSATU's Contested Legacy: South African Trade Unions in the Second Decade of Democracy*, Pretoria, HSRC Press, p. 12. Also, Buhlungu Sakhela (2010), *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. For parallels, see Anderson Perry (31 March 2011), 'Lula's Brazil', *London Review of Books* 33 (7), pp. 3-12.

[15] Brown Julian (2016), *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976,* Johannesburg, Jacana; Keniston Billy (2013), *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner*, Johannesburg, Jacana; McQueen Ian (2018), *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements under Apartheid*, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

[16] Lichtenstein Alex (2016), 'Rick Turner and South Africa's Global 1960s', *The Journal of Labor and Society*, 19 (2), pp. 1089-1111; Morphet Tony (2015), '"Brushing History against the Grain": Oppositional discourse in South Africa', *Theoria*, 76 (2), pp. 89-99. More widely see, Christiansen Samantha, and Zachary Scarlett (eds.) (2013), *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, New York, Berghahn Books; Blum, Françoise, Guidi Pierre, and Rillon Ophélie (eds.), *Etudiants Africains en Mouvement: Contribution à une histoire des années 68.* Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016.

[17] This includes the grey literature produced by the English Literacy Project, the Institute for Black Research, the Natal History Worker Project, and the Ravan Press Workers Series. Important, too, is the *South African Labour Bulletin*, a slew of reports, research, and postgraduate theses that can be found in the libraries of the University of KwaZulu-Natal – not least at the School of Development Studies and its forerunners. See also the archives of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the South African Clothing & Textiles Workers Union (SACTWU) and individual union activists (notably Gerhard Maré and Johan Maree).

[18] Wolpe Harold (1972), 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', *Economy and Society*, 1 (2), pp. 425-56.

[19] Gibbs, 'Writing Histories…' op. cit., pp. 1228-30.

Working-class solidarities (1): Khumbuyelekhaya – 'remember home'

It is often argued that apartheid was synonymous with the 'cheap labour' of African migrant workers who took hard, unskilled work in the cities – most especially mineworkers, whose wages did not rise in real terms from the 1920s to the mid-1970s. Nonetheless, the independent anti-apartheid trade unions that rose in the aftermath of the 1973 Strike Wave initially built their base in the new kind of manufacturing cities that had prospered because of the apartheid government's pursuit of import substitution industrialisation. It is no coincidence that the unions were initially strongest in the Durban/Pietermaritzburg industrial region, which was a hub of textiles/clothing and automobile manufacturing, as well as other consumer-facing light industries such as furniture, shoes, and kitchenware.[20] One key to understanding working-class mobilisation is therefore to focus on the rising hopes and burning frustrations of this post-war generation of African factory workers, who were typically the first in their families to have had a secondary school education and to take on semi-skilled factory work. This experience of intergenerational social mobility in what remained a brutally unequal apartheid society marked the biographies of an entire generation of trade union leaders.

Figure 1: Growing urban populations

	Urban population	As % of national population	As % of African population
1904	1,2M	23%	10%
1936	3,1M	32	21
1946	4,4M	38	23
1960	7,5M	47	32
1970	?	48	33
1980	15,7M	54	49
1991	24,4M	63 (probably an over-count)	58 (probably an over-count)
2000	?	57	n/a
2010	32,8M	62	n/a

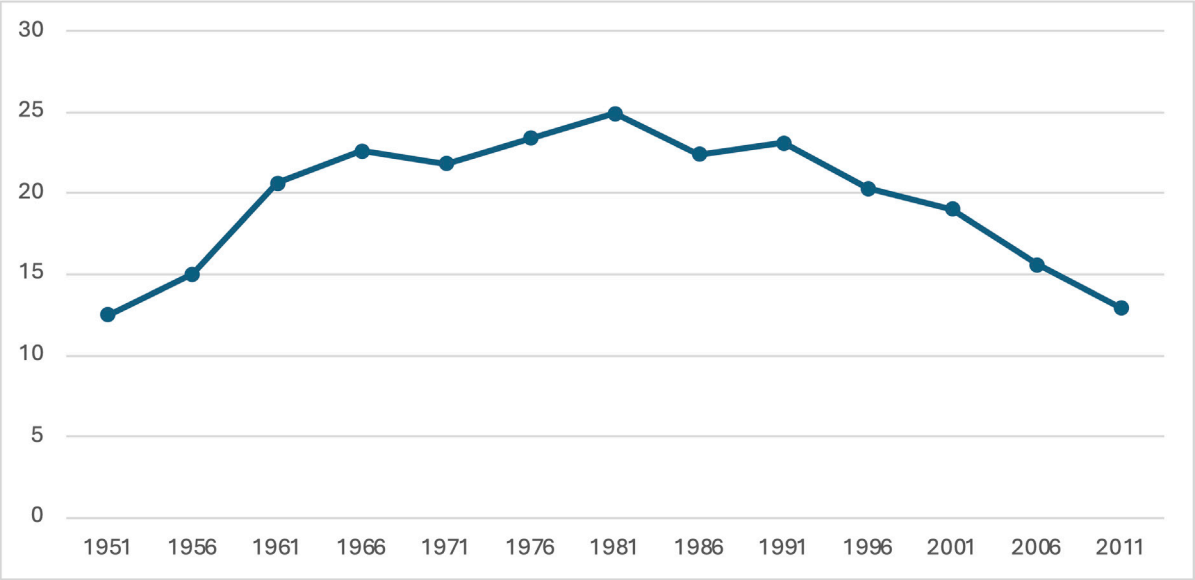
Sources: *Department: Statistics South Africa* (StatSSA). Online, 8 December 2024. URL: https://www.statssa.gov.za/; Beinart William (2001), *Twentieth Century South Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (see p. 355 for a discussion of the uncertainties of these statistics).

To speak of the South African labour movement as a vehicle of social mobility requires careful caveats – particularly if one focuses on the cohort of union leaders born in rural districts into poor peasant communities scarred by South Africa's long history of land dispossession and labour migration. Indeed, the first formative childhood memories of this postwar generation of union leaders (those born between 1945 and 1965) was typically apartheid's forced removals, which dispossessed 1.7 million rural African households across South Africa. One union activist in a factory in Durban described himself as the son of a migrant mineworker who had 'coughed out the harshness of his life on to his children'. [21] All the same, the third quarter of the twentieth century marked a generational watershed. From 1960 to 1980, average African manufacturing wages doubled in real terms – largely because of the expansion of the opportunities for semi-skilled posts.[22] The growth of the semi-skilled workforce was tied to the expansion of mass education, which increased the provision of racially segregated African schooling.[23] In the industrial cities of Natal,

[20] See especially Webster E., 'Profile of Unregistered Workers…', op. cit. pp. 44-51.
[21] Qabula Alfred (1989), *A Working Life Cruel beyond Belief*, Durban, UND Department of Sociology, p. 13. Similarly, see Fairbairn Jean (1991), *Flashes in her Soul: The Life of Jabu Ndlovu*, Hadeda Books, Pietermaritzburg, pp. 3-13; Labour and Community Resources Project (1989), *Comrade Moss: A Political Journey*, London, National Union of Journalists Book Branch, pp. 2-28.
[22] Seekings J. *UDF…*, op. cit., p. 12; Webster E. *Cast…*, op. cit.
[23] Hyslop Jonathan (1993), '"A Destruction Coming In": Bantu Education as a Response to Social Crisis', in P. Bonner, P. Delius and

where industrial employment peaked at 250,000 in 1980, an African school leaver equipped with a Standard 8 school leaver's certificate might expect to find semi-skilled work within months as labour shortages forced the easing of racial segregation on factory shop floors.[24]

Figure 2: Manufacturing as a percentage of South African GDP



Source: Nattrass Nicoli and Seekings Jeremy (2011), 'The Economy and Poverty in the Twentieth Century in South Africa', in R. Ross, A. Mager and B. Nasson (dir.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, 1885-1994*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 546.

The biography of Amon Malencane Ntuli (1958-2020) – the national president of one of the large clothing trade unions in the 1980s – illustrates several of these inter-generational shifts. His formative years were profoundly marked by the experience of apartheid dispossession. Indeed, the name Malencane ('Little Money') derives from his father's lament after the family was driven off their homestead in the white commercial farming districts of the Natal Midlands – one of the 750,000 evictions during this period of apartheid forced removals. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Ntuli household had sufficiently strong kinship networks to survive this act of dispossession. Through his homeboy connections, Amon Ntuli's father found secure work driving trucks for Mobil Oil in the South Durban Industrial Basin, investing his wages in building a new family homestead on nearby chieftaincy land for the extended Ntuli family: three wives, cattle, and a growing brood of children, of whom Amon Ntuli was the fifteenth. He remembered being raised in a secure, loving patriarchal household in which there were generally enough resources for food and school fees.[25] When one interviews union leaders, one repeatedly encounters such narratives of working-class resilience and rising up against the odds: of growing up in a close-knit family that held together and 'remembered home' (*khumbuyulekhaya).*

Amon Ntuli was also one the first in his family to attend secondary school – an experience that set his age group apart from their parents. A generation earlier, formal education had been a rarity. In the early 1950s, less than 40% of African children were in primary school and only 3.1% entered secondary school. Then came the 1953 Bantu Education Act, a self-consciously modernising piece of legislation that increased the state provision of racially segregated black schooling for the industrial society emerging in the aftermath of World War II. By 1980, around one-third of African children entered secondary school (although only 3% would reach the final grades).[26] Of course, the experience of education in an apartheid system that

D. Posel (eds.), *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935-62*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, pp. 393-410.

[24] Maasdorp Gavin, and Pillay Nesen (1983), 'Informal Settlements: Socio-economic profiles', Durban: Durban Metro Region report 2, p. 92. By contrast, township youth unemployment is more than 60% today.

[25] Author interview, Amon Ntuli, Durban, 27 June 2012. See also Copelyn Johnny (2016), *Maverick Insider: A Struggle for Union Independence in a Time of National Liberation*, Johannesburg, Picador Africa.

[26] Gibbs Timothy (2014), *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan*, Woodbridge, James Currey, pp. 70-

awarded white pupils 12 times more funding that their African counterparts was brutally unequal. It was perfectly possible to spend years in poorly resourced mud hut classrooms 'choked with plenty of dust', receiving instruction from ill-trained, demoralised teachers who themselves were functionally innumerate.[27] As a consequence, the rising generation of talented African trade union leaders – particularly migrants who hailed from the poorest districts – all had stories of an education won against the odds through sacrifice and self-denial, with parents 'going about with empty stomachs the whole day long… so that their children can go to school',[28] fathers selling off cattle to pay school fees until none were left, and children being forced to quit school, leave home, and seek wage work in the cities.[29] This motif of forcing one's way through the narrow door of educational opportunity appears in all the biographies of the South African trade union leaders.

As Jeremy Seekings argues, the expansion of domestic manufacturing that was a characteristic of the apartheid decades afforded an unprecedented opportunity for a rising generation of secondary school-educated black African workers entering the labour market.[30] Similar dynamics were seen inside the rapidly expanding independent trade unions, which required a rising cohort of well-trained shop stewards, organisers, and senior officials to manage these rapidly growing organisations.[31] (One gains some sense of this speed of union mobilisation if one recalls that FOSATU had 19,000 members in 1979, and its successor COSATU counted 460,000 members in 1985, rising to 1.2 million by the end of the 1980s).[32] Accordingly, like many intelligent secondary school-educated activists of his generation, Amon Ntuli rose meteorically inside the unions. He worked as a skilled weaver and then a pay clerk in Philip Frame's Durban textile mills, where his access to sensitive personnel files – a vital source of intelligence for the unions – made him the fulcrum of the hard-fought union campaigns of the 1980s.[33] 'Without question, Amon Ntuli [quickly emerged as]… one of a handful of worker leaders across the country at the epicentre of the union movement', remembered a close comrade. 'He grew in stature… travelling broadly [overseas] when serving on the presidium of the International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation'.[34] This personal journey – one that was so often imagined spatially from a hut in hills to the industrial centres of power and wealth – typified the social mobility that was possible for the most senior leaders of the trade union movement.

Many accounts of the South African trade unions at the turn of the 1980s stress the dynamism of the labour movement in materialistic terms, for this was a time when the anti-apartheid trade unions were turning into substantial organisations, as membership fees started pouring into union bank accounts. Photos of union meetings and mobilisations give us a glimpse of the charisma of these young trade union organisers, fashionably dressed in sloganeering trade-union t-shirts, brand-name jeans, and All-Star trainers.[35] Another veteran quipped that anti-apartheid activists became addicted to their cars, as they sped across the city freeways from meeting to meeting in a union vehicle.[36] Even so, trade union leaders generally believed that there was no dissonance between their own social mobility and a fervent commitment to a working-class solidarity grounded in personal experience of the hardships and hunger pains of their childhood. Surveys suggest that the majority also retained deep emotional connections and financial commitments to extended family networks and rural kinsfolk.[37] Certainly, as soon as he could afford to marry, Amon Ntuli built him-

76. See also Unterhalter Elaine (1991), 'Bantu Education, 1953-1989', in H. Wolpe and E. Unterhalter (eds.), *Apartheid Education and Popular Struggles*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, pp. 37-42.

[27] *Debates of the Transkei Legislative Assembly* (hereafter *TLA*), Umtata, Government Printer, 1968, p. 160

[28] *Transkei Legislative Assembly*, op. cit. 1970 p. 263.

[29] Author interviews, Enoch Godongwana, Johannesburg, 21 November 2011; Jabu Ngcobo, Durban, 18 July 2012.

[30] Seekings J. *UDF…*, op. cit., p. 12; Webster E. *Cast…*, op. cit.

[31] University of Cape Town archives, BC1288 (Johan Maree collection), File A1.A, Alec Erwin, 'History of TUACC/IIE'; Wits Historical Papers (WHP), National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) Papers File D1.2, 'NUTW: A short history, 1973-80'. See also, Keniston Billy (2013), *Choosing to be Free…*, op. cit.

[32] Friedman Michelle (2011), *The Future is in the Hands of the Workers: A History of FOSATU*, Johannesburg, Ultra Litho, p. 7; Baskin Jeremy (1991), *Striking Back: A History of COSATU*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, p. 185; Bonner Philip, and Nieftagodien Noor (2001), *Katorus: A history*. Johannesburg, Longman, p. 48.

[33] On the growth of African employment in Human Resources departments, see Murray Alan (nd), 'Metal Bashing on the East Rand', unpublished typescript held by Edward Webster; Donham D. *Violence...* op. cit., pp. 104-5, 125-6.

[34] Copelyn J. *Maverick outsider*..., op. cit., pp. 127-9.

[35] See for instance Friedman Michelle (2011), *The Future is in the Hands of the Workers: A History of FOSATU*, Johannesburg, Ultra Litho.

[36] Butler Anthony (12 October 2009), 'The beloved car is still a protected species in South Africa' *Business Day*

[37] Two studies that surveyed remittances/transfers: are Bhengu Sithembiso (2013), 'Wage Income, Migrant Labour and Livelihoods beyond the Rural-Urban divide in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A case of Dunlop Durban factory workers', PhD, University of KwaZulu-Natal, pp. 91-110; and Maasdorp G. and Pillay N., 'Informal Settlements'..., op. cit., p. 108. There are some wonderful

self a substantial rural homestead that he visited every month or so,[38] and when he died in 2020, this was where he was buried. A working-class kid made good was one who 'remembered home'.[39]

Working-class solidarities (2): the clenched fist of male militancy

Late apartheid tensions of class and consumption also shaped the explosive militancy of the trade union mobilisations of the 1980s. During the tumultuous strikes of the that decade, the 'clenched fist' of militant solidarity was so common that it became a cliché.[40] Indeed, ideas of black power and racial injustice played a key role in forging a very masculine notion of working-class solidarity entangled in the codes of material consumption.

One irony that struck several close observers of the South African trade unions was that the labour movement was structured by the same sets of material hierarchies that they were fighting against. Natal's culturally diverse, racially segmented manufacturing cities made for a complex mosaic of working cultures. The clothing/textiles sector is a good example of this. The hardest, meanest jobs were taken by the most vulnerable: divorcees and widows could often be found in the rag-picking departments of the cotton manufacturers. Some of these women who made their way to the cities from surrounding rural districts on the backs of lorries were said to be so poor that their feet were only covered with rags. By contrast, young, chic, fashionably dressed women fresh out of school took better-paid – if monotonous – work on the spinning machines. Their fights over boyfriends at factory gates and bus stops regularly led to broken bones and stabbings. As they worked to insinuate union organisation into the factories, labour activists worked closely with the best-paid, highest-skilled factory workers who held strategic positions in factory production hierarchies. In the clothing/textiles sector, it was a small cohort of male weavers who dominated union politics inside Durban's strategically important textile mills. When these men switched off their machines, entire factories and industrial zones shut down.[41]

It was also notable that the short, sharp wildcat strikes that typically brought trade unions into the factories were often angry outbursts protesting against racial insults and violations of moral codes (*imithetho*).[42] Crucially for the purposes of this article, these conflicts were often expressed in the symbols of late apartheid consumer society. One example will suffice: a few hours north of Durban stands the giant aluminium smelter of ALUSAF – one of the ten largest smelters in the world in the early 1980s. It was operated by a new generation of skilled African workers using the latest technological processes, but the white factory managers felt a visceral repulsion against the new trade unions that were building bridgeheads into their industrial workforces. After one consultation meeting between black trade union organisers and white ALUSAF factory managers, during which both sides sat down together to share tea and biscuits, a senior white executive systemically smashed the teacups that had been 'spoiled… [because] "the k*****s" drank out of them'.[43] This act of racism fitted into a more general pervasive sense of unease that industrial development and rampant consumerism had shattered social hierarchies. In the town of Empangeni across the causeway from Richards Bay, white townsfolk were incensed to find 'their' main street shops full of cosmetics and skin lightening creams catering for salaried blue-collar African consumers – 'merchandise [that was once] only available in the "Coolie" [i.e. Indian-owned] trading stores by the old train station'. 'They [the Africans] have grown cheeky', complained another white suburbanite.[44]

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interviews in Meer Fatima (ed.) (1975), *Black women, Durban 1975: Case studies of 85 Women at Home and Work*, Durban, Institute for Black Research.

[38] Interview, Ntuli (see infra 25).

[39] Interview, Godongwana (see infra 29).

[40] Friedman M., *The Future is in the Hands of the Workers…*, op. cit.

[41] UCT, BC1288 Albertyn letter, pp. 62, 64-5, 89-94. See also Meer Fatima (1984), *Factory and Family: The Divided Lives of South Africa's Women Workers*, Durban, Institute for Black Research.

[42] See von Holdt Karl (2003), *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press.

[43] "K*****" is the South African equivalent of the N-word. Forrest Karen (2005), 'Power Independence and Worker Democracy in the Development of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA): 1980-1995, University of Witwatersrand,' PhD thesis, p. 192; Author interview, June Rose Hartley (née Nala), Manchester, April 2012.

[44] Malan Rian (1990), *My Traitors' Heart: A South African Exile Returns to Face His Country, His Tribe and His Conscience*. New York, Grove Press. p. 150.

In mid-1980s apartheid South Africa, there were plenty of white factory managers who simply could not imagine living in a common consumer society with 'the k****s', let alone seeing black workers as industrial citizens who deserved equal rights. Indeed, when riot police deployed into protesting schools and factories to restore order, they sometimes punished the sharp-talking troublemakers, who slicked their hair back fashionably with Sayinova cream, by rubbing their heads into the red earth.[45]

A final point that deserves repeating is that trade union mobilisations gained a sharper edge in the mid-late 1980s as South Africa's economic slowdown and deindustrialisation brought about factory job losses. These economic trends threatened male breadwinners. Overall, the headline rates of unemployment increased from 10% in 1980 to 21% in 1992 – job losses that were felt most acutely in manufacturing industries exposed to globalisation.[46] The late Eddie Webster a pioneering South African labour sociologist who wrote a ground-breaking monograph in the early 1980s on the generation of semi-skilled African factory workers that reshaped industrial South Africa and the anti-apartheid labour movement. One of his informants was Josias, a powerful, well-fed, well-dressed labour migrant and labour activist who was well-known in union circles. Several years later, one of Webster's students travelled deep into rural KwaZulu-Natal to discover what had become of Josias, who had subsequently lost his job and fallen out of activist circles. The student discovered that Josias had become hollow-chested man wearing ragged clothing, living in a rural homestead with an ill-kept, sagging thatched roof and scrawny, underfed cattle. The village was full of gossip that Josias's youngest wife had recently absconded with several of his children.[47] In these very visceral material terms, he was an emasculated man who could no longer materially provide for his homestead.[48]

Blacklisted union activists were particularly vulnerable to being fired and permanently shut out of waged labour. 'Comrade – it is with dismay and disgust to write this letter to you [sic]', wrote men dismissed after a strike elsewhere in South Africa. 'We have no source of income... Some of us have lost valuable things by means of dispossession by furniture companies, and [the] divorce our wives… We starve'.[49] It is no wonder that the strikes of the mid-1980s were life-and-death struggles, with scab workers sometimes murdered by activists and defeated strikers occasionally committing suicide.[50]

Working-class solidarities (3): where are the women?

The central role played by male breadwinners in the South African trade unions also circumscribed the opportunities for female leadership inside the labour movement. This is a complex subject. In one important sense, worker rights were especially women's rights, given that apartheid factories had demeaned and discriminated against women most of all. However, while women's working conditions inside factories undoubtedly improved and feminists established a slew of women's forums inside the trade unions, a number of contemporary activists were being unduly optimistic when they suggested that a new spirit of sexual equality was emerging in this moment of radical militancy.[51] On the contrary, quite apart from fact that the confron-

[45] Hart Gillian (2002), *Disabling Globalisation: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 117. The sexual harassment of stylish young women factory workers was also freighted by the fraught politics of fashion. See for instance the interviews found in Meer F., *Black Wome*n…, op. cit.

[46] For the complex divergence of segmented labour markets, see Bezuidenhout Andries, Khunou Grace, Mosoetsa Sarah, Sutherland Kirsten, and Thoburn John (2007), 'Globalisation and Poverty: Impacts on Households of Employment and Restructuring in the Textiles Industry of South Africa', *Journal of International Development*, 19 (2), pp. 545-65; Kraak Andre (1987), 'Uneven Capitalist Development: A Case Study of Deskilling and Reskilling in SA's metal industry', *Social Dynamics*, 13 (2), pp. 14-31.

[47] Webster Edward (1985), *Cast in a Racial Mould…*, op. cit., pp. 195-210; Stewart Paul (1987), 'A Worker has a Human Face: Mahlabatini, Vosloorus Hostel and an East Rand foundry: The Experiences of a Migrant Worker'. BA Honours thesis, University of Witwatersrand; personal communication, Paul Stewart, December 2010.

[48] For a discussion of wealth, consumption and power in a de-industrialising South Africa, see Gibbs Timothy (2014), 'Becoming a "Big Man" in Neo-Liberal South Africa: Migrant Masculinities in the Minibus Taxi Industry', *African Affairs*, 113 (2), pp. 431-48.

[49] WHP, National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), Box B74.6, File 'Wits-Misc' Letter to 'Cde Fanaroff', 19 June 1989.

[50] The trial of 'The NUMSA Six' in one Witwatersrand factory offers a glimpse into what appears to have been a more common phenomenon – see WHP, NUMSA, Box Ch (Haggie Rand).

[51] In South Africa, see Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*... op. cit. pp. 291-300; Lichtenstein Alex (2019) 'Challenging 'uMthetho we Femu' (The Law of the Firm): Gender relations and shop-floor battles for union recognition in Natal's textile industry, 1973-85', *Africa* 87 (1), pp. 100-119; Neunsinger Silke (2019), 'Translocal Activism and the Implementation of Equal Remuneration for Men and Women: The Case of the South African Textile Industry, 1980-1987', *International Review of Social History*, 64 (1), pp. 37-72. Much of the wider literature on feminised labour assumes that unionisation equals feminist empowerment: for a discussion of this

tational protests of the decade gave precedence to a tough, masculine form of union mobilisation, there was also a wider sense in which many male trade union leaders aspired to be patriarchal blue-collar breadwinners providing for extended families.[52]

Figure 3: Average annual wages by race in manufacturing industry (ZAR – 1975 prices)

Source: Crankshaw Owen (1997), *Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour Under Apartheid*, London, Routledge, p. 99.

Note: Black African wages doubled from 1961 to 1981, while white wages increased by roughly 50%; nonetheless, the racial differential remains high.

Not even the textiles unions that represented 'feminised' workforces would have a majority of senior female leaders across the 1980s.[53] Accordingly, the feminist critique of male patriarchy inside South African trade unions criticised patriarchal conventions that privileged the male blue-collar breadwinner in a consumer society. At one women's workshop, Thembi Nabe 'presented a graphic description of the household life of the average female worker'. She described 'endless rounds of providing tea and food' for a husband, and 'when he gets to bed, he then starts to demand another overtime with you!' The male section of the audience listened to her talk in chastened silence and then erupted in angry response during question time.[54] Accordingly, the handful of women who had risen from the factory shop floors through union hierarchies into the most senior positions tended to be single, divorced, or widowed, and often adopted similar styles and fashions to their male counterpart: indeed, they sometimes smoked and wore trousers, and perhaps drove union cars in a manner that defied gender stereotypes.[55]

The long- and happily married trade unionist Jabu Ndlovu (1947-89) was an exception, to the extent that a workers' education project wrote a biography in her honour. Born in the cold uplands of the Natal Midlands mist belt, she came to the factories in search of work after she became pregnant and was forced

widespread misapprehension, see Gibbs Timothy (2005), 'Union Boys in Caps Leading Factory Girls Astray?' The Politics of Labour Reform in Lesotho's 'Feminised' Garment Industry, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31 (1), pp. 95-115.

[52] On South African blue-collar patriarchy, see Hunter M., *Love in a Time of AIDS…*, op. cit.; Gibbs T., 'Becoming a Big-Man'…, op. cit. For a summary of the vast literature on blue collar patriarchy, see Lindsay Lisa (1999), 'Domesticity and Difference: Male breadwinners, Working Women, and Colonial Citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian General Strike', *American Historical Review*, 104 (3), pp. 783-812.

[53] For a survey of the situation in the late 1980s, see Baskin J., *Striking Back...* op. cit. pp. 369-83.

[54] N.A. (1983), 'Workshop on Women', *South African Labour Bulletin* 9 (3), pp. 10-13. See also Perumal Devina (1988), 'Gender as a Mechanism of Social Control amongst Black Workers in the Textile Industry in the Durban Metropolitan Area', MA thesis, University of Durban Westville. More widely, see Moss Jonathan (2019) *Women, Workplace Protest and Political Identity in England, 1968-85*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

[55] Author interviews: Sibongile Buthelezi, Durban, 7 July; Nelisiwe Nyanisa, Durban, 11 July 2012; Winne Mlunisi, Durban, 13 July 2012.

to leave school. It was there she made her name as a trade unionist and civic activist – a vocal matriarchal figure – in the townships around Pietermaritzburg.[56] What set her apart from many other female activists was that despite the disruption of a teenage pregnancy, she had wed her childhood sweetheart and secured a stable family home at Imbali Township on the western fringes of the cathedral city. Childcare was outsourced to trusted relatives, and the infants spent their first years living with their grandmother in the hills. Jabu Ndlovu's husband, Jabulani, also seems to have been unusually willing to accommodate his wife – perhaps because he led a peripatetic life as the coach of one of the top township football teams, driving to matches across the city's townships every weekend. 'It was a very harmonious home', remembered neighbours: 'The house was immaculate and bursting with furniture' – a sign of working-class respectability and stability – for both Jabu and Jabulani regularly surprised each other with presents.[57] In apartheid's consumer society, furnishings were symbols of marital stability: a loving spouse was affectionately known as 'My Old Dover Stove'.[58]

Even an outspoken matriarch and union leader such as Jabu Ndlovu, who was admiringly described as 'bold, 'confrontational' and 'strong', accepted the limits set on her authority. Unusually, her kitchenware factory was led by four female shop stewards. Nonetheless, the men at the plant demanded that 'the love affairs of a man' were secret and had to be addressed in private, as 'women comrades might misunderstand these affairs as [patriarchal] exploitation'.[59]

Working-class solidarities (4): socialist abstinence in a consumer society

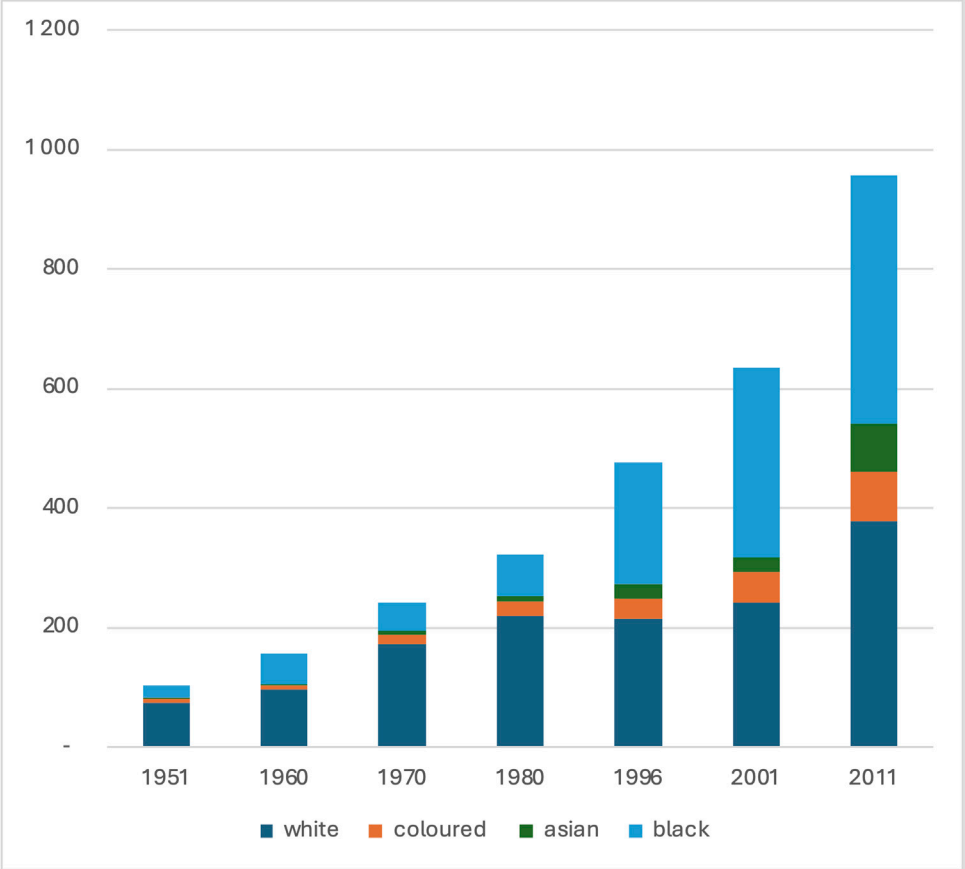
Perhaps the most explosive issue of the 1980s – because it raised fundamental questions of personhood that touched the sensitive nerve of black poverty and white suburban plenty – was trade union attitudes towards apartheid urban consumer society. With factory wages doubling across the decade as unionised workforces enjoyed repeated pay increases, these powerful ideas of black empowerment in the fashions, styles and images of consumer satisfaction, which saturated industrial South Africa, inevitably bled into the everyday political culture of the labour movement. One just needs to look at photos of union leaders in the 1980s: they were dynamic figures sporting trainers, tracksuits, leather jackets, and sloganeering t-shirts that showed off their roving – and often very masculine – energies. 'We travelled light, no heavy shoes or fancy suits, because we were always on the move, fighting the system', explained another township activist.[60]

At the same time, the materialism of the apartheid consumer society often rubbed awkwardly up against the abstemious institutional culture of the South African trade unions. Crucially, a small coterie of white leftist university students and young intellectuals from secure suburban families had played a critical catalytic role in organising the new independent unions in the 1970s and early 1980s. Many of these white student activists had a visceral dislike of the bland consumerist materialism of apartheid and had sought to overcome their 'suburban privilege' by carrying out experiments in communal living. Most notably, the trade unions held to the rule that even the most senior union officials paid themselves the same wages as blue-collar factory workers. There was much to admire in this culture of socialist egalitarianism. Alec Erwin, one of the leading lights of the 1980s unions, lived in a block of government housing in a white working-class suburb near the Durban docks. Others lived in a variety of multiracial suburban communes. Abstemiousness also caused tensions, however; in absolute material terms, frugality had the greatest impact on African union organisers, whose wages were expected to provide for large extended families. Paulos Ngcobo described the moment when he turned down a well-paid factory promotion – which would have required him to leave the unions – as a moment of crisis, when he almost 'sold out'. He retreated to his parents' home in the hills for several months to ponder his options. His family could not understand why a good son would not accept the promotion and pay rise: had he 'forgotten home' – *khohlw'ekhaya*?). Paulos Ngcobo stayed loyal to his

[56] On 'Motherism' (i.e. matriarchal power), see Healy-Clancy Megan (2017), 'The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women: A History of Public Motherhood in Women's Antiracist Activism' *Signs* 42, 4, pp. 843-66; Healy-Clancy Megan, and Hickel Jason (eds.) (2014), *Ekhaya: The Politics of Home in KwaZulu- Natal*, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
[57] Fairbairn J., *Flashes in her Soul…*, op. cit., p. 42, 5-43 *passim*.
[58] Fieldnotes, Mthatha, August 2009 (on a cold winter's day).
[59] Fairbairn J., *Flashes in her Soul…*, op. cit., p. 42, 5-43 *passim*.
[60] Bank L, *Home Spaces…* op. cit. p. 121. See also the personal archive of Phil Bonner: Callinicos Luli (n.d.), 'The Story of Sam Ntuli'; Labour and Community Resources Project, *Comrade Moss…* op. cit. pp. 63-6, 76-81; Qabula A., *A Working Life…* op. cit.

comrades and remained in the union movement, eventually rising to become one of the leading union officials in KwaZulu-Natal.[61]

Figure 4: Personal incomes by racial group (billions of ZAR – 2000 prices)



Sources : Leibbrandt Murray, Ingrid Woolard, Arden Finn and Jonathan Argent (2010). 'Trends in South African Income Distribution and Poverty since the Fall of Apartheid', OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, no. 101: OECD Publishing, p. 13; '*Census*', *Department: Statistics South Africa* (StatSSA). Online, 8 December 2024. URL: https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=3836

Note: Black African consumption as a share of the total increased from 20% in 1951 to 43% in 1996 and 44% in 2011. During the same period, white consumption diminished from roughly 70% to 45%.

If Paulos Ngcobo remained true to his socialist principles, other leaders in the labour movement took a more cavalier approach to the increasing union resources that passed through their hands.[62] As small, scrappy unions metamorphosed into more substantial bureaucracies – membership numbers and subscription fees exponentially increased across the 1980s – that could afford union vehicles, secretaries ,and expense accounts, the patriarchal appetites of (some) union leaders emerged. The misuse of trade union vehicles seems to have been a particular problem, given that apartheid's sprawl put a premium on private transportation.[63] Shop stewards in Pinetown's textile factories complained that one union organiser 'borrowed' union cars for friends' weddings (to this day, wedding cortèges proceed through township streets at weekends, with convoys of cars honking their horns in joyous celebration). Factory managers spread rumours that selfish union

[61] N.A. (1995), 'Profile: Paulos Ngcobo', *South African Labour Bulletin,* 19 (6) pp. 94-6. It was only after 1994 that Paulos Ngcobo cashed in on his union credentials, becoming one of the leading black economic empowerment property developers in post-apartheid Durban – an archetypal example of a politically-networked 'comrade in business'.

[62] Author interview, Jenny Grice, Johannesburg, 28 September 2011.

[63] WHP, Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), C1.13.6.6.2, 'Report to the NUTW Branch Executive Committee (hereafter BEC) on meetings with shop steward council in Pinetown'; FOSATU, C2.1.3.2.2.2, M. Sineke to GS NUTW, 18 July 1983. South African Clothing and Textiles Workers Union (hereafter SACTWU), D13.2.1.1, NUTW BEC, 8 November 1980.

officials were 'eating' the fees paid by ordinary members: 'drinking in shebeens [taverns] and driving around with many girlfriends'.[64] A series of internal investigations failed to stamp out the abuses of power. There is a tendency 'to want to forgive and forget', explained one official.[65]

The relatively low pay rates of union officials also fuelled the racialized resentments and gossip that eddied around shabby trade union offices. For many 'white intellectuals', the years they worked with the trade unions was a relatively brief rite of passage, after which they moved into better-paid 'progressive' professions, training as labour lawyers or university labour sociologists.[66] Even the white officials who stuck with the trade unions throughout the 1980s were suspected of having their meagre union wages topped up with financial help from their suburban parents. 'How could [union leader] Johnny Copelyn live in a house and buy a car?' complained one black trade unionist; 'We didn't have things we could fall back on'.[67] Exhortations that trade unionists – black and white alike – 'had to set aside their petty-bourgeois [selfish] interests in order to help the organisation of the working class' all too easily smacked of sanctimony.[68]

Some flavour of the changing values inside the more bureaucratically organised unions at the turn of the 1980s comes across in the wryly written memoirs of Johnny Copelyn, one of the leading union figures in Durban. He recalls how the pricey labour lawyer Martin Brassey, who masterminded crucial court victories that entrenched union power in the textiles factories, made a habit of arriving at union meetings in a rented Mercedes Benz. A number of radical university intellectuals – the sort of comrades who drove battered VW Beetles – were mortified to see union money being squandered on expensive hire cars. 'How little I understood the outlook' of the rank-and-file membership, Copelyn recalled. '[Our working-class members] were madly impressed... The [luxury] car demonstrated we had hired a top advocate who would fight the bosses and win'.[69] For Copelyn, this moment marked a coming of age: for all the time he had spent in idealistic student circles theorising the utopian post-apartheid socialist city, what if the black working class simply wanted their share of the goods of a capitalist society? A decade later, Johnny Copelyn would leave his job as a labour organiser to make his fortune running a union-linked investment fund in post-apartheid South Africa.

Across the wider South African trade union movement, these intersectional tensions of race, class, consumption, and aspiration came to a head in 1984/5, as a rising generation of working-class African activists challenged the white suburban university-educated intellectuals who had controlled the independent unions since the Durban Strikes. The debates inside the unions turned on complex technical issues of organising and political strategy. Nonetheless, racialised resentments simmered close to the surface. One protagonist struck a jarring resonant chord when he referred to the privileged university-educated intellectuals who held key posts in the union as 'a tiny white bureaucratic elite' who had outstayed their welcome.[70] The formation of COSATU in 1985 – an amalgamated super-union of 460,000 members – marked a watershed. Described as 'a rising giant', its senior ranks would be dominated by this rising generation of black male working-class leaders who had risen from the shop floor into positions of power.[71]

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Some years ago, Deborah Posel pointedly suggested that struggles for freedom in an apartheid consumer society played out as 'a race to consume'.[72] In this paper, I hope to have offered a slightly more sympathetic perspective on how these fraught questions of social mobility, consumption, and patriarchal aggrandisement

[64] WHP, SACTWU, G45.12.5, 'Affadvit of Dorothy Budokwe'.
[65] BC1288, A1.D2, 'Outcome of special Regional Executive Committee meeting', 15 October 1979.
[66] Copelyn J., *Maverick insider…* op. cit, p. 55-9.
[67] BC1288, A2.EF, interview with Alpheus Mthethwa, 23 November 1979.
[68] Albertyn letter... op. cit., postscript.
[69] Copelyn J., *Maverick Insider…,* op. cit.
[70] Forrest K., *NUMSA…*, op. cit. p. 197 and pp. 533-47. See also interviews with Enoch Godongwana and Richard Ntuli, Katlehong, 16 September 2011; Andrew Zulu, Tsakane, 19 September 2011. These tensions exploded into the open on the Witwatersrand; various memoirs detail the stresses inside the KwaZulu-Natal unions.
[71] On COSATU, see Baskin Jeremy (1991), *Striking Back*, p. cit., pp. 66-9. On the intersectional tensions of race and class, wee Buhlungu Sakhela (2006), 'Rebels Without a Cause of their Own? The contradictory location of white officials in black unions in South Africa, 1973-94', *Current Sociology* 54 (3), pp. 427-51; Maree Johann (2006), 'Rebels with Causes: White officials in Black trade unions in South Africa, 1973-94: A response to Sakhela Buhlungu', *Current Sociology*, 54 (3), pp. 453-467.
[72] Posel Deborah, 'Races to Consume'…, op. cit.; Posel Deborah (2013), 'The ANC Youth League and the Politicization of Race', *Thesis Eleven*, 115 (1), pp. 58–76.

played out in the labour movement. The 1980s were a decade of upheaval, as a rising generation of trade union activists and militants from the poorest margins of South Africa staked out their claims to the mass-manufacturing industrial conurbations of late-apartheid Natal. These working-class trade union leaders have not written a fraction of the memoirs produced by university educated activist intellectuals, whose outpourings dominate much of the recent debate about 'the Durban Moment' and South African anti-apartheid dissidence. However, the journeys this cohort of African working-class militants made from the margins of South Africa to the industrial centres of the country would leave a far more permanent mark, given the prominent role that many have subsequently played in post-apartheid public life. They, too, symbolise the rising new generation as the strong economic growth characteristics of the post-war decades transformed the peasantries of the Global South into the industrial workshops of the world and flourishing consumer societies.

Finally, a focus on how South Africa's trade unions were entangled in the world of late-apartheid consumer capitalism helps us understand what at first sight seems to be their sudden embrace of conspicuous consumption in the post-apartheid era. In the mid-1970s, when the trade unions were small, scrappy organisations living hand-to-mouth, idealistic young labour organisers had taken a certain pride in their spirit of socialist self-sacrifice. The growing, more financially secure, union bureaucracies of the 1980s tenaciously retained much of this political culture in their egalitarian insistence that their most senior organisers should be paid the same as the average blue-collar worker. However, if we look carefully, we can see many of the institutional tensions emerging in the 1980s that would explode in the 1990s and 2000s, when by now middle-aged union officials in the increasingly well-padded post-apartheid union bureaucracies would cash in on the high salaries and preferential share deals that characterised financialised, consumer-driven post-apartheid capitalism.

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