

Twenty years of the Bulletin: *a view from within*



EDDIE WEBSTER* a member
of the *Labour Bulletin* editorial
board from the beginning,
reflects on its achievements
and its future.

For a left-labour journal such as the *South African Labour Bulletin* to survive for 20 years in the hostile climate of South Africa is indeed an achievement. This anniversary provides an opportunity to celebrate and also to reflect on the origins, achievements and future of the *SA Labour Bulletin*.

Origins

The origins of the *South African Labour Bulletin* lie in the wave of collective action and mobilisation in Durban in the early '70s. Shortly after the strikes a group of sympathetic trade unionists, students and academics from the University of Natal met in the James Bolton Hall in Durban to inaugurate the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE). Harriet Bolton, secretary of TUCSA's Garment, Textile and Furniture unions opened the meeting. She said that workers lacked formal knowledge of trade unionism as they had neither the time nor the money to study. She suggested "a school" be formed which would educate workers about their rights.

This led to a proposal that a correspondence course be established to help workers understand the social and economic situations in which they operated, and that a resource centre be established to provide unions with background material and information.

It was from this second component of the IIE project that the idea of a journal on labour was to emerge. It was proposed that a newsletter be published "tentatively called the *Labour Bulletin* – containing general information on trade unionism at home and abroad, book reviews, topical discussions and analyses of economic trends."

A working committee was set up to run the day-to-day affairs of the IIE. It was this committee, consisting of Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle, Foszia Fisher, David Hemson, Harriet Bolton and myself, that was to undertake the initial planning of the

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Pic: Natal Room, University of Natal

The Institute for Industrial Education: a school for trade unionism. Note Eddie Webster with cap, and Alec Erwin in back row

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Bulletin, appoint the first editor and solicit material for the first few editions.

Appropriately the first edition, published in April 1974, was on "the case for African trade unions". At this stage trade union recognition, which had been denied under the Industrial Conciliation Act, was the central issue for the new unions that had emerged in the wake of the Durban strikes. The next four editions published regular reports on the organising activities of the new unions and accounts of struggles for recognition. It was perhaps an indication of the close links with these unions that the editors debated whether some editions should be introduced in Zulu.

Most people at the time felt that the *Bulletin* would not survive. Others tried very hard to ensure it didn't. They nearly succeeded.

- ❑ Two of the first five editions were banned by the Publications Control

Board. The reasons given were that the *Bulletin* was promoting "worker unrest" and opposition to the liaison committee system, the government's alternative to trade unions for black workers.

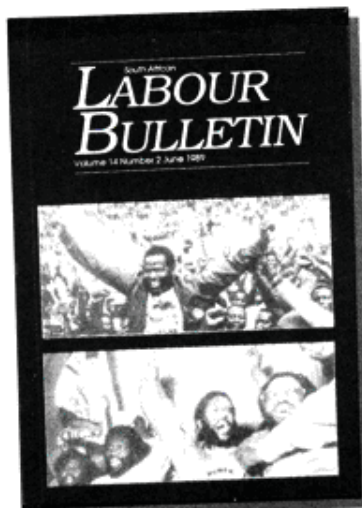
- ❑ In 1974 a member of the Editorial Board, Halton Cheadle, was banned. In December 1975 two members of the Editorial Board, Beksisi Nxasana and Eddie Webster, were arrested under the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Acts.
- ❑ On 8 January 1978 Richard Turner, the originator of the IIE project and the *Bulletin*, as well as a contributor to many of the early editions, was assassinated.
- ❑ In 1981 Merle Favis, managing editor at the time, was detained for five months under the Internal Security Act.
- ❑ In 1987 Jon Lewis, managing editor of the *Bulletin* and a British citizen, was deported.

- ❑ In the same year shadowy 'Third Force' type agents burnt down the house of *Bulletin* writer Jabu Matiko.

These were tough and dangerous times for those who were committed to a democratic labour movement. But we survived. Over 100 editions have been produced over the past two decades. The creation of Umanyano Publications has enabled the *Bulletin* to expand its publishing activities to include the highly successful *Shopsteward*, as well as the publication of key books such as the first edition of the Reconstruction and Development Programme and various newsletters and shopstewards' handbooks.

Achievements

In the last 20 years the *Bulletin* has provided a mirror of the labour movement. We have produced the most comprehensive public record of the activities of the democratic



labour movement. Strikes that are now largely forgotten are recorded in minute detail in the *Bulletin*. Key demands are noted, unknown personalities in the union movement were interviewed and organisational gains documented. The re-emergence of the stay-away as a tactic of black worker resistance in 1984 – and every stay-away since then – has been recorded through publication of the complete

reports of the Labour Monitoring Group (LMG). However, what excited our readers most (and annoyed some union officials) were the debates on union strategy. The so-called workerist/populist debate is one example; the registration debate is another.

In November 1979 we received a memorandum from the Western Province General Workers' Union strongly critical of the decision of some groups, such as the Federation of South African Trade Unions

DIE FEDERASIE VAN
SUID AFRIKAANSE
VAKBONDE



THE FEDERATION
OF SOUTH AFRICAN
LABOUR UNIONS

FEDSAL congratulates the SA Labour Bulletin on its 20th anniversary.

As a federation FEDSAL has only become involved with the SA Labour Bulletin in recent years, although most of our affiliates were established in the early part of this century. During recent years it was heartening that some of FEDSAL's ideas were published by the Bulletin.

The Bulletin is congratulated on its seemingly increased pragmatism and indeed for its informative content and its high profile in the industrial relations arena.

FEDSAL and its affiliates in the different sectors of our economy will continue to play our unique role in both the workplace and at macro level in our great country. FEDSAL as a truly independent trade union federation is here to stay. We believe we have an important role to play, and that we have excellent growth potential – amongst all workers.

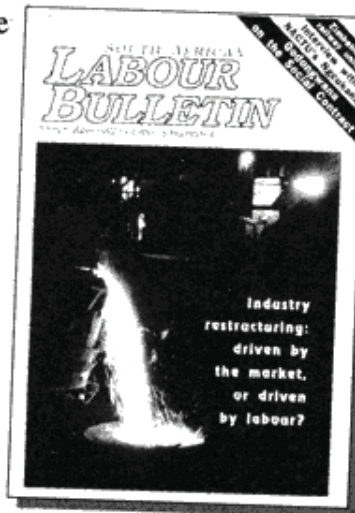
FEDSAL also believes in an improvement of relations regarding issues of mutual interest between the different unions and federations that represent the proud workers of South Africa.

FEDSAL believes that management, workers and all other citizens should each do their part to make the RDP the success story of an EFFORT OF NATIONAL UNITY.

Let's make South Africa a winning nation!

(FOSATU), to register under the newly amended Industrial Conciliation Act. We successfully resisted the dominant view in FOSATU at that time, that arguments in favour of registration were too sensitive to be published. After considerable debate inside the editorial board we decided to publish the memo. This was to trigger off an acrimonious debate in the pages of the *Bulletin*. Two positions were reflected in the eight articles published – those who saw the decision to register as tactically wise and those who saw it as surrendering to state control.

This was to prove a turning point for the *Bulletin*. Not only did we provide the only written record of this important debate, but it was to establish the journal as a genuinely independent forum for the emerging trade unions. In successfully resisting the attempt to bow to a particular tendency in the labour



movement, we established an alternative approach to the subordination, that has all too often characterised the relationship of left intellectuals to the workers' movement.

This alternative approach, which could be called critical engagement, makes no pretence at 'neutrality', clearly supporting the cause of labour. Yet the *Bulletin* has not shied away from being critical of the labour movement or bringing into the open uncomfortable facts.

One achievement of the journal has been to introduce new ideas and information to the trade unions. One of the first activities it undertook was to commission articles on the history of the labour movement.

The articles were written with an eye to the present in their emphasis on the relevance of class in the South African past. Jon Lewis, for example, investigated the origins, and argued for the advantages of,

COSATU



For twenty years your journal has helped to give the working people of this country a voice, when many attempted to stifle it. The *Bulletin* is a critical journal which has engaged the movement in rigorous debate about its strategies, perspective, its vision.

Your twentieth anniversary comes at a time when the labour movement faces unprecedented challenges. The *Bulletin* remains an invaluable forum, particularly given the continued absence of worker perspectives in the mainstream media. Your journal together with the Independent Magazine Group, is a fountainhead of independent, critical journalism which must be maintained and expanded.

Our new democracy needs to nurture the development of this sector. The existence of journals which empower those who are otherwise denied a voice is a critical element of advancing the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

We trust that the *Bulletin* will remain true to the vision and mission which guided you during the last two decades.

On behalf of our 1.3 million members, COSATU congratulates you, and wishes you continued success during the next 20 years of publication.



1973 Durban strikes: the *Labour Bulletin* helped legitimise trade unions

industrial unionism. Philip Bonner's article on the ICU of the '20s castigated that organisation for failing to organise the small nucleus of workers in the towns, and warned about the dangers to organisation of a vague populism.

The *Bulletin* also introduced new ideas to the labour movement through its coverage of international labour news and events. With correspondents all over the globe the *Bulletin* has been able to keep labour activists informed of issues as diverse as the current strikes in Nigeria and the new labour internationalism emerging in response to 'globalisation'. Many labour intellectuals see the *Bulletin* as the leading journal in promoting what some have called the 'new labour internationalism'.

Our most important achievement has been to help legitimise the idea of trade unionism and to promote the need for a strong and independent union movement. As noted above, our first edition was devoted to 'the case for trade unionism' and was addressed to the key actors at the time: African workers, employers, registered trade unions, white

parliamentary opposition, homeland governments and the central government.

In 1978 I, together with editorial board member Johann Maree, gave 50 pages of written evidence on behalf of the *Bulletin* to the Wiehahn Commission, set up to investigate the crisis in the industrial relations system. In addition to our argument for recognition of trade unions for black workers, we stressed the importance of greater participation of workers at plant level and the need to draw the newly emerging shopstewards into the system. Current debates on the need for greater workplace representation underline this argument.

Yet our greatest contribution to the legitimisation of the labour movement was through our systematic recording of the strategic use of power by the labour movement. The *Bulletin* has always been read closely by the industrial relations departments of large companies and by the Department of Labour and security police. We would like to think that our interpretation of the innovations introduced by labour, such as the Shopsteward

Public Services International
Internationale des Services Publics
Internacional de Servicios Públicos
Internationale der Öffentlichen Dienste
Internationalen för Stats- och Kommunalanställda



The Public Service International congratulates the SA Labour Bulletin on its 20th anniversary and wishes it many more. The past 20 years in South Africa have been a trying time for both the labour and the broad social movement of which it was an integral part. With numerous strategies now being devised and implemented against workers and their organisations by anti-working class institutions like the IMF, World Bank and other financial institutions – the role of journals like the Bulletin in analysing the hidden motives for such “development aid” would be invaluable and challenging – especially in this new unipolar world. This challenge will have to be faced by all who hold the interest of workers and their allies dear.

PSI is committed to independent trade unionism and has over the years made representation for public sector workers in various international forums, on such diverse issues as the environment, third world debt, labour standards etc. PSI believes that workers and their unions are making and have a major contribution to make in discussions and negotiations aimed at “re-inventing government”. We see this role as one that we would have to walk hand-in-hand with journals like the SA Labour Bulletin.

PSI is one of the oldest trade union organisation in the world. It was founded in 1907 to develop bonds of solidarity between workers in public utilities in Europe, but over the years has expanded to cover almost all the areas of public service, in countries throughout the world. PSI today has many African trade unions as affiliates and several offices to support their activities.

The Southern African office based in Johannesburg, opened recently. Today PSI has over 16 million members worldwide.

For more information on PSI – contact the sub-regional office at the following contact number: ☎

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Committee and the recognition agreement, helped legitimise these practices.

The future

The key issue facing the labour movement over the past two decades has been collective mobilisation – in other words, the relationship between trade unions and workers. However, since the early '90s the labour movement has been faced with two new challenges.

The first challenge arises from the creation of a democratic state and COSATU's alliance with the dominant party within it, the African National Congress. This new challenge has already been reflected in the columns of the *Bulletin* through debates on 'social contracts', accords and the trend towards corporatism in our industrial relations system. To make best use of their direct influence over state policy the unions will not only have to shift from antagonism towards the state to purposeful protagonism, they will also have to develop a workable system of democratic accountability inside the labour movement. However, as in the past, the labour movement's influence within the state will depend on its organisational strength and its ability to use its collective power strategically. The *Bulletin* must therefore continue to record the day-to-day struggles on the shopfloor and the debates inside the trade union movement around democracy.

The second new issue facing labour is its changing relationship with management. As changes in the nature of work become globalised and national economies are faced with 'flexibility' and the ravages of international competition, the relationship with management must change from one based predominantly on conflict to one based increasingly on cooperation. The article on co-determination in this edition of the *Bulletin* by the internationally-known sociologist Wolfgang Streeck introduces

exciting new ideas into the discourse of the labour movement and points towards a possible institutional arrangement at the workplace level.

The need for a productivity-enhancing route for our economy – what some have called an 'intelligent production strategy' – is the central challenge facing labour and management in the workplace. The *Bulletin* has already begun to contribute to this debate. An example is the article by two union officials on the concept of 'adversarial participation', the first attempt by workers to put their stamp on the restructuring of work.'

But many more articles of this kind need to be published in the *Bulletin* if we are to play the role in the future that we have so successfully played in the past.

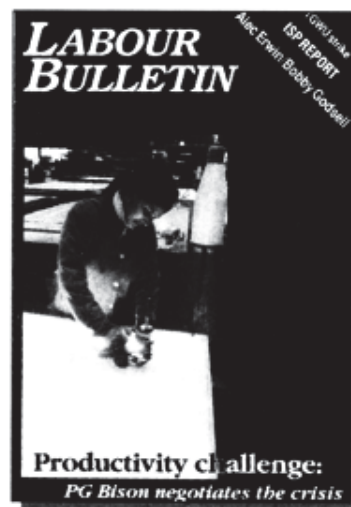
In advanced capitalist economies these three challenges – collective mobilisation, corporatism and flexibility – appeared at different times, and the labour movement was able to consolidate its response to each before responding to the next. In South Africa we are faced by all

three simultaneously.

The *Bulletin* is well placed to help the labour movement meet these three challenges. It has access through its editorial board to university-based research; its format, through the outstanding editorship of Karl von Holdt, is accessible; and it is being taken increasingly seriously by all actors in the industrial relations arena; including those former trade unionists now in government.

My only regret, as we celebrate 20 years of the *SA Labour Bulletin*, is that Richard Turner is not with us. His untimely death by an assassin's bullet deprived us of a remarkable colleague. Our best tribute to Rick is that his commitment to a non-racial democratic workers' movement lives on the pages of the *Bulletin*. ☆

Ntshangase and Solomons 'Adversarial participation: a union response to participatory management' in *Labour Bulletin* Vol 17 No 4





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The International Metalworkers Federation, representing 18 million metalworkers from 165 unions in 82 countries world-wide extends sincere congratulations to the SA

Labour Bulletin on the occasion of its 20th anniversary.

The IMF, in an action oriented programme, aims to develop new approaches for trade union work in a changing world. In particular the IMF concentrates on three areas:

- i. assistance in creating global well-being through participating in international policy-making on issues relevant to metal unions, such as world peace, the environment, trade and the promotion of democracy;
- ii. solidarity action to support unions in their organising, training and industrial activities;
- iii. co-ordination between different regions and industries and between the unions affiliated to the IMF.



CUT CENTRAL ÚNICA DOS TRABALHADORES

Fundada em 28/8/83

Cut-Central Unica dos Trabalhadores of Brazil congratulates the editors of South African Labour Bulletin for its 20th anniversary. The SALB has been responsible for the diffusion of issues related to the labour world and trade union movement, not only in South Africa but in many parts of the world as well. We congratulate you mainly for the important role developed this publication in pushing, reporting and supporting the international co-operation and solidarity activities between CUT and South African trade union movement.

Long Live SALB!