

20 Years in the Labour Movement: The Urban Training Project and Change in South Africa: 1971-1991

For millions of South Africans, young and old, the last three decades of the 20th century will remain one of the most eventful periods in the history of resistance in South Africa.

The role played by the trade union movement during this time remains etched on the collective memory of all who lived during this time, not least among them the employers and government officials of the time. But many of those struggles and experiences remain unrecorded in any form, either because the makers of that history are unable to record it or because those that can do not have the time and the resources to do it. For these reasons, Donovan Lowry's book on the Urban Training Project (UTP) and its contribution to the development of black unions, represents a timely contribution to the history of the union movement in South Africa.

The UTP was formed in 1971 as a project aimed at promoting trade unionism among black workers through education and training, and it continued performing this role until it closed down in 1991. In those 20 years, the organisation provided education and training to over 51 000 workers and worker leaders, a very significant contribution indeed given the conditions under which it operated. In addition, the UTP helped establish and/or provide support to several unions, some of which later became affiliates of the

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20 Years in the Labour
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Donovan Lowry.*

Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (CCAWUSA), Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union (SEAWU) and Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PWAU) are some of the unions it helped establish

Historical marginalisation

The formation and work of the UTP was inspired by individuals from very diverse social and political backgrounds. Lowry shows that those who established the organisation came from the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), the Young Christian Workers and the Catholic Church, other religious denominations, the Black Consciousness Movement, the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress.

The UTP also pioneered several strategic approaches to union organisation which others adopted later, such as the

emphasis on black leadership of the new unions, the economic strategy to ensure survival, the tactical establishment and use of statutory works committees (instead of liaison committees) as part of the strategy to revive black unions and the working with Wits University to set up a legal clinic which eventually led to a new course in Labour Law for students

Why, then, does such an organisation and its work receive such negligible coverage in accounts of the union movement's history?

Lowry argues that this is because of a deliberate strategy of 'historical marginalisation' by those who want to write the UTP out of the story' (p3). In his account, the main culprits are 'white university people', young white intellectuals 'based in, or emerging from, the English-language universities' who 'followed UTP into the field - some helped by it' (pp2-3)

Lowry's attempts to trace this rivalry within the union movement broaches a subject that many have chosen to avoid in their versions of union history during this period

The book is scathing of the 'cultural hegemony' of these neo-Marxist intellectuals who had FOSATU as their organisational base, and it cites two examples where their networks were used to try and limit, or even close, the space for the UTP to operate. 'There is evidence of monopolistic and manipulative endeavours at least on the part of some of the FOSATU people.

The dismissive treatment of UTP in the story suggests this: there was, for example, the partisan coverage of union affairs meted out in the *Labour Bulletin* that this group staffed and controlled, and other writing. But something more manipulative was attempted.

At the end of 1979 the UTP committee

became aware of attempts to stop its funding from the British Trade Union Council (TUC). The TUC informed UTP that FOSATU wanted all funding for black unions to be sent to it' (p197).

This theme runs through the entire book and it is quite revealing about the rivalry between the different political and ideological currents within the union movement during this period. It is the first time that these issues have been addressed from the other (non-FOSATU/COSATU) side of the political divide. This attempt to contest received versions of the union movement and to highlight the contribution of those working under the auspices of the UTP represents the most important and interesting contribution by the author

Disappointments

However, the book is disappointing in several respects. Firstly, the presentation of rivalry within the union movement is too conspiratorial and thus fails to acknowledge that 'manipulative' actions and conflicts were widespread between (and within) all the different currents in the union movement.

Secondly, although the book presents a good account of the contribution of UTP and its activists, it fails to deal with conflicts and contestation within the UTP camp itself. Surely, UTP was not just a happy family of activists whose only problem was to ward off hostile attacks by others.

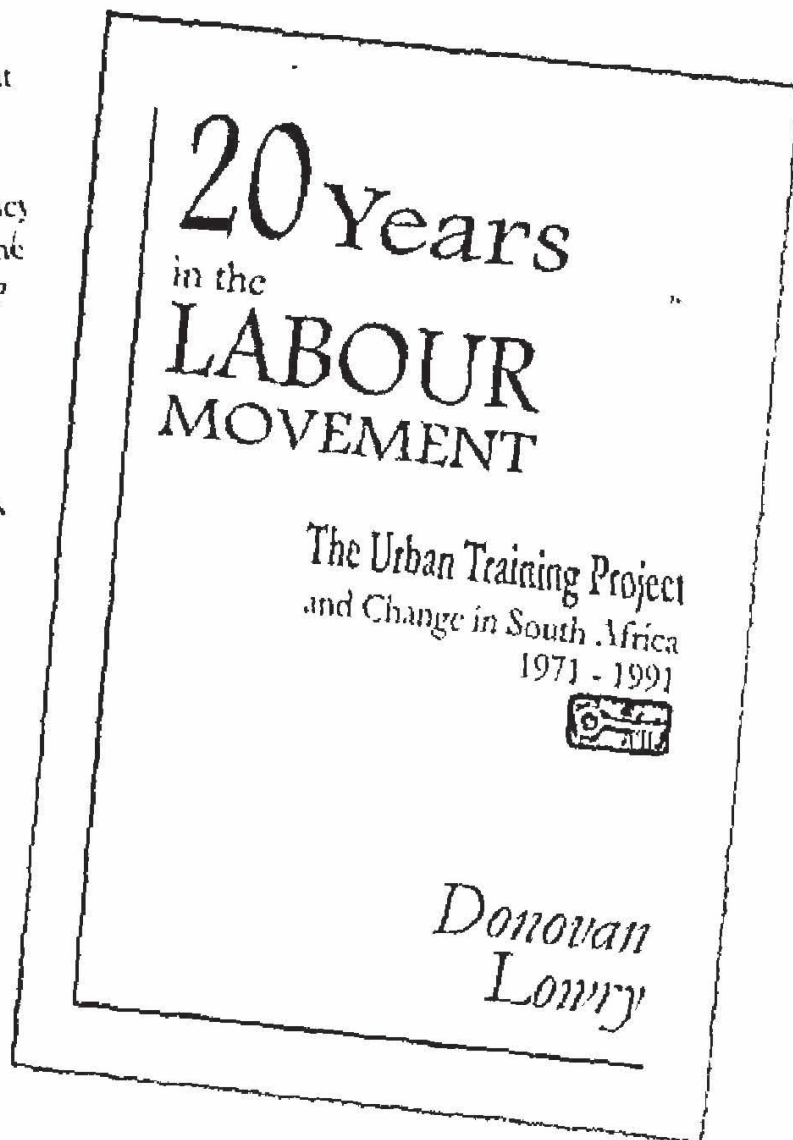
In his autobiography, *My Life Struggle*, Petrus Tom suggests that his parting ways with UTP was acrimonious, and one also gets the impression that he feels there was political manipulation within the UTP-aligned union that he worked for. The book would have been immensely enhanced by a discussion of political tensions within the UTP and its unions,

particularly given that it contained so many different currents and tendencies within itself.

Thirdly, there is a tendency in the book to want to blame everybody else but the UTP for its marginality and ultimate collapse. It would have been useful to have a discussion of issues on which the UTP made errors of judgement or where it failed to position itself adequately, particularly during the period of consolidation within the union movement in the mid-1980s. It is true that many worker leaders who later became prominent unionists in COSATU came through UTP training seminars and workshops.

Why did the UTP fail to maintain links with these leaders when they had moved over to FOSATU and, later, COSATU? Finally, the book makes a convincing point that white intellectuals played a dominant role in the affairs of the FOSATU and COSATU unions. But this cannot be said for the entire period of the UTP's existence. A closer examination of developments in the unions will show that the power of the intellectuals began to wane after the formation of COSATU. If the chief problem for the UTP was the presence of these intellectuals in the unions, then they should have noted this change and started to reposition themselves for closer working relations with workers in COSATU.

Notwithstanding the above, the book is a welcome contribution to the literature



on the history of the trade union movement. It is well-written and well-researched and the price is reasonable. It's a great pity, though, that a book of about 343 pages does not have an index! ★

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