

review

Struggle for workers' rights:

A history of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union

Written and produced by Umanyano Media Services and the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) for the CWIU.

Reviewed by *JENNY GRICE**

Almost 21 years ago, chemical workers from factories around Durban launched the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU). This book was written last year to mark the union's 20th Anniversary and to record "the important contribution of CWIU to the worker's struggle and the fight for democracy."

When unions like CWIU were formed, it was an offence for an African worker to belong to a trade union. Even once unions were legalised, union members, officials and leaders were still harassed, detained and sometimes even killed for belonging to trade unions. Today trade unions are legal and even respected institutions in South African society and many key union leaders who were detained and harassed are now in key positions in government. Just how and why has the situation changed so much? These are the key questions that the book tries to answer.

The book at first takes a chronological approach to history. It begins with a very brief description of the economy before the 1970s and the

unions that organised in those times. It then describes the conditions leading to the birth of CWIU in 1974 and how it struggled to grow during the late 1970s. The union was party to the formation of FOSATU in 1979 and together with other FOSATU unions took a decision to register as a non-racial trade union. By the end of the decade, it still had only 460 paid-up members, but by 1986 paid-up membership had reached more than 20 000. The union had become a national union and a number of other unions had merged with CWIU to swell its ranks.

Key struggles

The thread of the book then changes to reflect on a number of issues:

- battles over union recognition
- the struggle for one union in the chemical industry
- CWIU's contribution to the formation of one trade union federation
- the repression of the 1980s and its effect on the trade union movement
- the effects of the stayaway

on SASOL members.

Focusing on the union itself, the book describes how the union has restructured in the light of changing circumstances; organised and taken up women's issues and waged campaigns within its own ranks and in COSATU. The final section takes us to the present and covers the new issues facing the union.

This very brief precis of the outline of the book does not do justice to its contents. Overall it provides a very good picture of the major events which shaped unions' growth over the last 20 years. It does not claim to provide all the information and indeed refers to other booklets that will give more information.

Given this, there are some sections which could have benefitted from more information.

The introduction to what life was like before CWIU deals rather too briefly with the "death" of SACTU. Perhaps an interview or two with the likes of Billy Nair or Harry Gwala would have given a better taste of how difficult it was to organise in the 1950s.

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Likewise, in the second chapter, a few interviews with 1973 strikers and photos of those strikes would have given a better picture of the frenzy of the time, the spontaneity of the strikes and the general lack of organisation behind them

action Increased membership gave unions increased political legitimacy Because union leaders were democratically elected and represented a large part of the population in a country where the black majority were denied political

Other devices that assist the reader are introductions at the beginning of chapters to help a reader move through the booklet, while each chapter is broken up into short manageable chunks. Text in boxes provides background information where needed Further reading is also included

Linking with the community

I also found the section on the stayaway of October 1984 a bit lacking in detail. This was the first national stayaway since the SACTU stayaways of the 1950s It reflected the growing debate within FOSATU on how to relate to and support community organisations, especially the United Democratic Front (UDF) Some union members were in favour of support, saying that when they went home from work they were part of the communities that were suffering from appalling living conditions, poor transport, unrepresentative council structures and useless education. Communities were on fire, schools were being burnt and the cry was to make the country "ungovernable".

Others feared that supporting community organisations through stayaways and other actions meant opening up the unions to increased harassment by the state. The result would be another dying federation like SACTU.

This debate is not clearly brought out in the book, and covering it would have deepened readers' understanding of those difficult times While the book describes the unions' growth on the shopfloor, it does not show how this was linked to unions' growing confidence to take up political



rights, unions became a political mouthpiece of the oppressed and therefore a real threat to the illegitimate government.

Spirit of the time

Despite these gaps, *Struggle for workers' rights* is a very readable book. It is well-written in accessible English, and interviews and photographs help add life to the text. The use of photos is generally good and brings out the spirit of the time. A small point: not everyone knows that Piet Pheku is still an organiser now and in the 1950s was a SACTU organiser. The photo of Pheku would have meant more if it had been included with a small story about him and his experiences.

The book goes a long way to providing an answer to children of trade union members "What did you do in the struggle mum/dad?" In these times of rapid change, it is not easy to remember the detail of what happened "in those days". This book not only gives insights into what the struggle was about but also triggers off one's own memories of events. It succeeds in bringing out the character of the CWIU as a well-organised, and administered union that has run a number of successful cam-

paigns to consolidate organisation, has concentrated on education to keep worker leaders informed of issues, has added its might to COSATU campaigns and has worked hard on women's issues. These details give insight into why CWIU, despite being one of the smaller unions in COSATU, remains "one of the most respected unions in COSATU"

The book should become prescribed reading in high schools and tertiary institutions. It should help to put a damper on the notion that "great men make history" for in the case of the trade unions like CWIU, it is not "great men" but men and women collectively who have changed the course of our history. ✘