



Threads of Solidarity: women in South African industry 1900-1980 by *Iris Berger* (Indiana University Press and James Currey Ltd, 1992)

No Turning Back: fighting for gender equality in the unions by *Lacom (Sached), Speak and COSATU Wits Women's Forum* (1992)

DEBBIE BUDLENDER looks at two new books on women and labour

Both these books are about women workers in South Africa. Both push a strong feminist line and make important, interesting and enjoyable interventions. But the books are very different from each other.

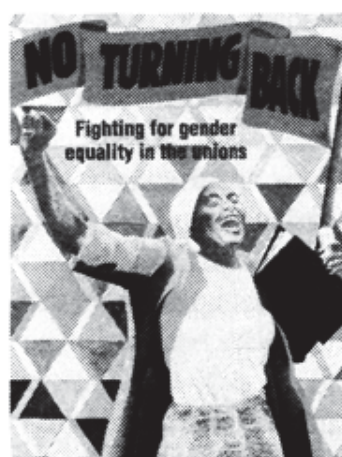
The Lacom, Speak & COSATU book was written by a group which included staff and workers from COSATU unions and women from organisations (Lacom and Speak) who have worked with COSATU women over the years. It is aimed primarily at a worker readership.

On the other hand, Berger is an American historian. She has obvious sympathies with, and understanding of, South Africa, particularly workers and women workers. Her book will appeal mainly to academics.

No Turning Back

The COSATU book is a 100-page paperback of discussion and pen-sketches based on interviews with 40 union women and four union men from Natal, Transvaal and Eastern and Western Cape.

There are five chapters. The first looks at the obstacles to women's participation in the unions. The second identifies specific problems of working women. The third traces the "roots" of



gender inequalities in childhood. The fourth deals with past successes, including both gains in the workplace and union and those made on a more personal level. The final chapter makes suggestions about "the way forward".

The book is a pleasure to read. The language is clear and simple, without being patronising. The tone is optimistic. The layout is attractive. Every chapter is illustrated by large, clear and telling photographs.

The COSATU group workshopped every page and picture. Writing "by committee" is not easy. The group writes: "We know not everybody will agree with all the ideas in the book. We ourselves may not agree with each and every quote. Between us there are differences of opinion, and we believe this is healthy."

Nevertheless there is a common understanding and approach. The book is openly feminist. It speaks frankly about past criticisms

and hesitations of many organisations in accepting this ideology in South Africa. It states boldly: "now many women in the struggle have seen it is time to fight their own battles. A new South African feminism is developing."

As part of the development of this ideology, the book includes some "theory", slotted easily and digestibly into the rest of the text. Concepts such as gender oppression and socialisation are introduced and explained.

The editors do not hesitate to raise difficult, often personal, issues. For example the regional secretary of a union describes the effect of her union work on her family. Her child accuses her: "You don't care - you only care for your job."

On the organisational level, the book raises the gender oppression faced by many union administrators who have played an active role in COSATU women's structures but are subjected to male domination within union offices. The book questions whether unions, and COSATU as a whole, have given womens' structures and initiatives a fair chance to prove themselves. One woman challenges the criticisms levelled against the NUMSA Women Workers' Committee: "We argued that the structure is still new, hardly two years old, but you people are talking about us disbanding. What about the education committee? It was set up at the launch of NUMSA, but up until now it's not clear what they are doing."

My one criticism of an otherwise wonderful book is that it does not go far enough in questioning gender roles at work. In writing of "fighting for women's issues", the book says women need to raise "equal pay for equal work, the need for special women's health programmes, sexual harassment, adequate maternity benefits and pay". But it ignores the way the majority of women are ghettoised in certain (low-paying) sectors and certain (low-paying) jobs. Nor does it express the need to re-evaluate the relative worth of jobs usually done by men and those usually done by women.

Threads of solidarity

Iris Berger's book is equally impressive. It is the result of more than a decade of dedicated research and writing.

Berger too used interviews as one of her sources. She interviewed 28 women - union officials and ordinary workers - in three visits to South Africa between 1979 and 1989. She consulted many hundreds of books and documents and shows a thorough knowledge of work of previous labour historians and sociologists. Her book also explores areas not previously covered.

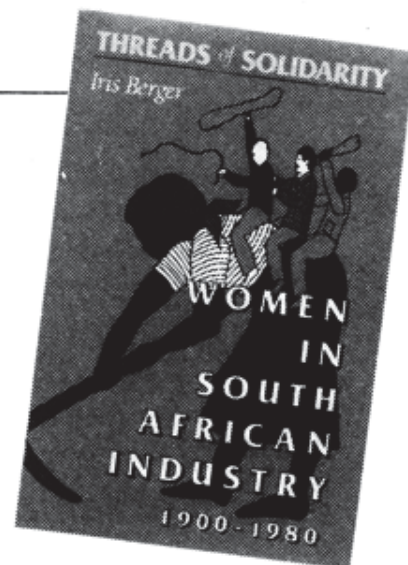
Berger divides the 15 chapters into four periods. These follow each other chronologically, and are arranged and argued on the basis of what she sees as the defining characteristics of the period.

The first section on gender and industrialisation covers 1900-1925 and describes how white women came into the cities from the poorer rural areas to look for work. It sets the scene for a recurring emphasis - the links between gender, community and working-class history.

The second section, titled "Women in the new industrial unions" deals with 1925-1940. These were years of depression and hardship, but also of the entry of black men into industry and the growth of unionism. Berger describes the effects of the depression on the white women of the earlier period. She also looks at how their emergent organisations interfaced with those of black men and of white men.

The third section, "A new working class and the challenge of diversity", covers the war years and beyond. Berger continues to concentrate on the garment workers focused on in earlier sections. She introduces the other industry central to her study, the food industry - particularly in the Western Cape where workers were organised by the Food & Canning Workers Union. She also looks at the women who were recruited to take the place of men absent on military duty.

The final section is "Decentralisation and the



rise of independent unions". It takes the story from 1960-1980, through the years of repression and the re-emergence of strong black unions.

Like the writers of the COSATU book, Berger persistently points out the links between the personal and the political, between the domestic and what happens at work and in the union. Her evidence of early attempts in organising around the problems of women workers is sobering in showing how slowly we have moved. She describes how in the SACTU pound-a-day campaign of the mid-1950s, guidelines for speakers asked that housewives be recognised as workers and that household tasks be shared where women were employed in waged work.

She also describes the formation of a Federation of Women Workers, established at a conference in Johannesburg in August 1938 "to co-ordinate the activities of the trade unions, which have large numbers of women members, for the purpose of championing specifically the cause of the women workers". (The success of the venture is somewhat doubtful. Berger could not find evidence of much activity after its formation). She describes the formation, activities and reaction to the Women's Engineering Workers Union during the war.

In the course of her history we find all the issues which are still of concern today - deskilling, training, pay equity, and so on - some of which are not raised adequately in the COSATU book.

Berger's focus on the clothing and food industries allows her to explore the interplay of class and race, and the changing composition of the labour force over the years. She tackles racism, deskilling and the increase in the numbers of African workers, both male and female in industry. Not all the information is new, but Berger both introduces new original research, and brings the findings of previous work together in a way which is coherent and sharply focused on women workers.

Berger is skilled in extracting patterns and arguments from the little available statistical evidence. She points out the position of women has been virtually completely hidden in previous analyses and descriptions of the 1973 strikes.

She presents evidence which suggests women formed a large part of the workforce in many of the most active factories. She also describes how their objective position was worse than that of men. In 1973, 62% of African women earned less than R10 per week, compared to 13% of African men. There were, however, fewer African women than men in the lowest skilled group, suggesting wages were determined more by gender than by skill.

Berger includes discussion of failures and problems in the history of the organisation of women workers. She describes a situation in the organisation of women remarkably similar to the 1922 male mineworkers' "Unite for a white South Africa" strike. In 1935, members of the Garment Workers Union went on strike against their displacement by lower-paid black workers. A Labour Party conference resolution urged all other workers to "support these women workers who are defending the great principle of a white South Africa".

Berger does not confine her discussion of ambiguities to white workers. She quotes a black shopsteward in the garment industry: "The shopstewards are there to see everything goes right in the factory, that the girls do not fight. They must try and help the boss to see that they don't steal, they must try and get the girls to live like friends, not enemies, and things like that because some girls can be very nasty, like fighting over the work."

Berger notes male antagonism wherever she finds it. I have no quibble with this but do find her lack of acknowledgment of men disturbing. She writes of Solly Sachs and Oscar Mpetha. But how can one write a history of clothing and food workers in South Africa without mentioning John Copelyn and Jan Theron? Women have often been left out of histories in the past. Are we now turning the tables on them?

The book is nearly 400 pages long, with more than 50 pages of endnotes. The typeface is small. There are no pictures. It is much harder work for the reader than the COSATU book, albeit as fascinating, absorbing and well-rewarded.

My biggest criticism of the book is the price. R66,50 is a lot of money! ☆