

## *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997*

**T**his publication is an important, timely contribution and a valuable resource with a wide range of respected commentators. We should acknowledge the efforts of the editors in getting this book out at a time when labour's interests are increasingly portrayed by its detractors as partisan and selfish and when the production of relevant academic work of such a nature seems to be increasingly unfashionable

### **Key issues**

The book raises key issues that confront trade unions and particularly the future of trade unionism. The main reference is to the participation of unions in institutions and processes of social dialogue. The editors suggest a framework of phases or stages of political and social transition, namely the initiating of democracy, the transition period and the period of consolidating democracy, within which to analyse the radical reform strategy of labour in the South African transition to democracy.

Implicit in the enquiry undertaken, although it cannot be reduced to analysing the strength or weakness of trade unions, is the maturation of particular class agendas during transitions. One is inclined to suggest that the format of the book, that of essays, inhibits the detailed, rigorous analysis we so urgently need in this regard.

*Phillip Dexter reviews Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985 -1997, edited by Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster.*

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The book deals in a helpful way with the tension between revolution, radical reform, and reformism. This is most effectively dealt with by considering the difference between negotiations as moments in struggle versus negotiations as a continual process. The notion of concertation suggested by Jeremy Baskin helps to grasp the tension and contradiction within the choice that unions have of either being isolated on the periphery of society or trapped and co-opted in its central institutions.

In this regard the relationship between institutionalised social dialogue and mass work or building organisations is suggested but not brought to the fore by any of the contributions in a manner which gives strategic direction for this period

### **Challenges**

One of the most creatively titled but also creative in terms of analysis is Graeme A. Gotz's contribution which deals with the much mourned life and death or eternal



existence cycle of the ever fashionable but often elusive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Like most negotiated phenomena, the RDP lives in a dimension all of its own, where some see it, some do not, some feel its effects and others bemoan its lack of tangibility. Gotz deals with this issue in a manner that demonstrates the contradictions facing organised labour, but COSATU in particular, as our society is pressured by the dictates of capital.

Other contributors provide a solid array of essays, including those by Karl von Holdt, Sakhela Buhlungu, Steven Friedman and Mark Shaw. These range from micro aspects of the transition and its effects in the workplace to broad strategic issues facing labour in this period. Friedman and Shaw provide a comprehensive survey of Nedlac's role and its functioning in an important manner that highlights both the fragility and immaturity of social dialogue in our country.

While the maturing, or expanding, social dialogue culture is one that is obvious, Friedman and Shaw challenge any simplistic notion of co-determination as being a current or possibly even future reality in South Africa.

South Africa as a new democracy and the need to advance, deepen and defend the revolution raises the issue of the relationships in the tripartite alliance and thereby the relationship between race, class and gender.

Again these are hinted at but not dealt with in a substantial way. Perhaps the weakest offering in the publication is that of PG Eidelberg who deals with the Alliance in a mechanical and crude fashion, reminiscent of the analyses offered by the hysterical anti-Communists that passed for academics under the apartheid regime.

A key issue raised by a number of the

contributors is that of South Africa as a peripheral developing country in this period of globalisation. The effect of the global economic processes and the massive restructuring of production are recognised as having a major impact, including in terms of the gap between rich and poor, the changing nature of work, casualisation and unemployment. However, other than critically analysing the perceived performance to date of unions and their leadership, this is often too simply described as a factor to be taken into account, rather than analysed and suggestions made for grappling with this strategic context.

### Temper criticism

It is in this regard that one has to take serious issue with a number of the contributors and the editors. Unions may be fragile, but they have proven to be resilient as well.

Criticism of trade union leadership in the current period should be tempered with a respect for the challenges of leadership during what is recognised by all the contributors as being a complex period. It cannot be denied that what is required at this period in our country is an intelligent and strategic, but militant trade unionism. Unions do need to rekindle the traditions of cadre development and developing class-consciousness as well as focusing on servicing members.

But to suggest that there was a time when there was a particular trade union leadership that led the workers in a manner that brooks little criticism is too romantic, not to mention unfair. It is patronising to suggest that the often-mentioned 'brain drain' from the unions has drastically affected union ability to defend members' interests.

Today's trade union leaders are the products of these very 'brains'. If they are



a weak leadership, which is not the case, then it is because these same 'brains' had not built the current leadership to the required calibre.

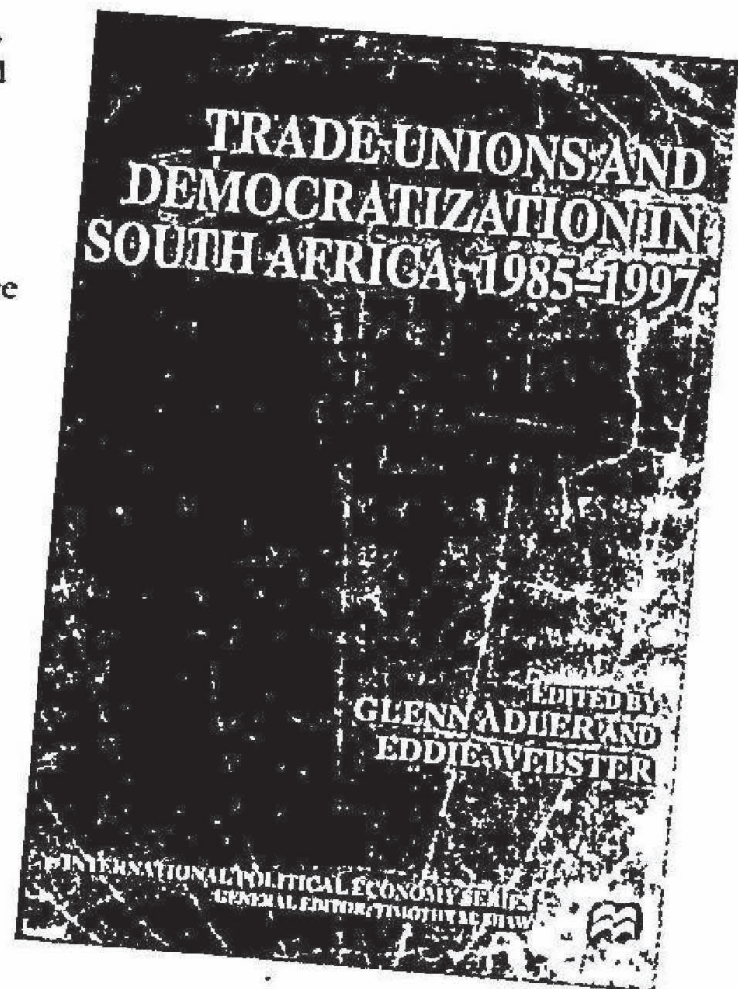
Under the circumstances the current trade union leadership have acquitted themselves as honourably as those before them and we should recognise their contribution. There have always been incidents such as that recently of Volkswagen in the Eastern Cape, the Madoda five and others.

For as long as there are contradictions in the economy, in other words as long as there is a capitalist system, there will be such incidents and tensions. We should not make light of such incidents, but we must also not suggest that they are because of some excessive weakness in the union leadership. This subjective tendency, not confined to the editors or contributors, is little more than political opportunism dressed up as revolutionary wisdom.

### Value of the book

The book makes a few if any predictions, but one can glean some themes from the contributors. Institutions and the process of social dialogue are central to good governance, economic growth and to ensuring democracy is more than just a vote every few years. The challenge is to manage the maturation of social dialogue and strengthen these processes and institutions.

Clearly this requires building capacity in the key constituencies that engage in social dialogue. Trade unionism is here to stay. Our country and the union movement will go through radical changes, as there is a realignment of class forces with new class agendas, new alliances and networks. But unions are the only coherent strategic response to the capitalist system by the



working class at the point of production. Unionism is, of course, much like the labour of Sisyphus, but then isn't all organising! It is no less important for this, but requires dedicated and selfless individuals who are prepared to do what seems impossible to change the world, beginning with the world at work. This book will assist them in locating themselves historically and will introduce and hopefully encourage the debate we need to build stronger, more effective trade unions and thereby contribute to transforming our society. ★

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