

Review

Weaving our stories, together: Sactwu twenty years 1989 – 2009
South African Clothing & Textile Workers Union (Sactwu, 2009)

Reviewed by Jonathan Grossman

This volume is a set of life stories of Sactwu shop stewards. It is part of a Sactwu programme involving interaction between the researcher who compiled the stories and workers who shared and made them real and available. A quote at the end of the book reflects the thrust of what shop stewards are saying: 'Trade unions are important. They help workers fight for their rights. They help workers become strong because we come together and give each other support. That is what a trade union is.'

A worker captures the ethos of the book: 'I think it is important to share your experience with other people... that is something the workers' struggle has taught me: we are only truly strong when we come together and share with each other.'

Like much else in the book, these statements are part description, part reflection, part challenge, and part call to action.

We read accounts of humiliation, denigration and pain, the concretisations in everyday life of oppression and exploitation. It is common for these workers to speak of their parents coming from a tradition of organisation and mobilisation against racism and exploitation, of forced removals often in childhood, of daily encounters of degradation with employers and of gender violence and oppression.

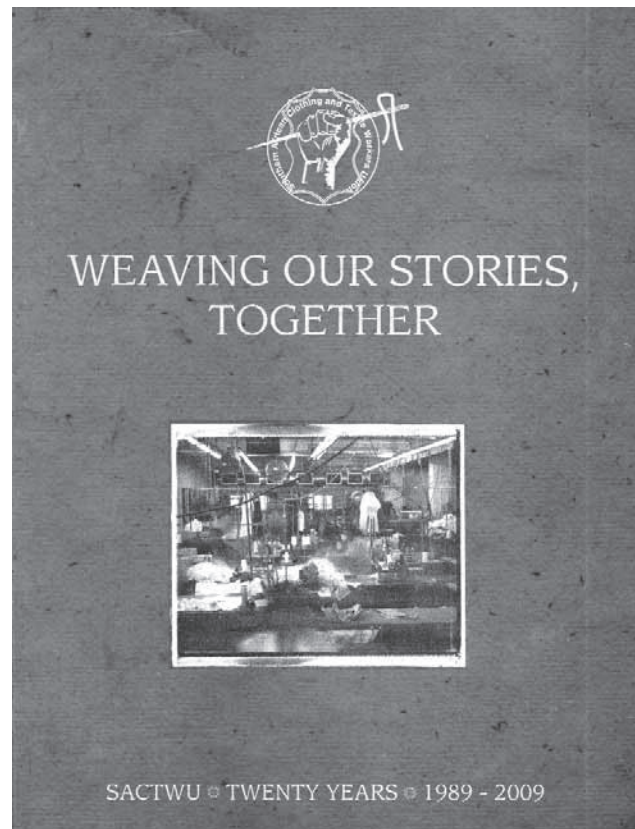
Recent studies speak of a shop steward layer removed from the experience of 'the struggle' and from rank and file. Not so in this volume. These are accounts of shop stewards in whose stories ordinary workers would see themselves.

'I grew up in Umlazi Reserves and life was very difficult. There is really nothing good to remember about those days. My father was earning peanuts, much too little money to support his family of ten children!'

'We had to hide that pride we had in ourselves. We were oppressed people and we had to do what the racists told us to do – or we would be in trouble. We had to act like small people, like scared people.'

'If you look at me when I walk, you will notice that I have a limp... the Chief and his men came to my house early one morning in 1993. They came with guns. I tried to run away but they shot me and I fell down.'

'The beatings [from a husband] only stopped when I decided I had had enough!... If you want to be free, you



must free yourself. The people who oppress you will not let you be free..'

The shop stewards are the 'hero' of the story. They matter because workers give them their strength. Strikes matter because they are moments in which workers discover and use a strength which is suppressed and denied inside themselves.

If Sactwu is not always high on industrial action, the experience of action is high on the agenda of shop stewards recounting their learning and political development. Strike action is a vivid part of what shop stewards carry with them into the present: 'I wasn't always as dedicated to the union as I am now. The thing that changed me was the 1996 National Clothing Industry Strike.'

When it comes to facing the future, shop stewards highlight three interlocking issues:

- insecurity of employment;
- importance of the union; and
- warnings about the current government

Shop stewards repeatedly raise the pain of job losses and often express the hope that national competitiveness and/or 'buying South African' will provide a solution. 'I know the pain that workers feel when we lose our jobs because a few years ago my company... closed down.'; and 'I remember when the job losses started in the early 1990s. I remember beginning to be worried about this new monster... Soon many workers began to feel the pain of job losses, and the workers in our industry and in our union began to lose their spirit; that fiery spirit that we worked so hard to build in the 1980s. You could see workers were beginning to live with fear again. Now companies are closing left and right!.. But Sactwu does not give up fighting.'

There are repeated statements of deep commitment, pride and gratitude towards the union.

'In my going-out years I thank Sactwu so much for making me the woman that I am... Sactwu brought out in us what we didn't know we had.'; 'Sactwu has made me into the person that I am today; confident, strong and militant. I can handle anything that comes to me... Any issue about the workers...'; 'Working as a steward can be hard and it can take you away from your family. But I love Sactwu. Sactwu has taught me to be a woman in power... The union can empower you if you want to be empowered.'

Statements of support for the ANC are often qualified with a warning. 'So, there have been some changes. But there has also been little change. That's why Mbeki was fired; he didn't want to listen to the poor anymore. Just look at the price of food! We can't cope.'; '... we said

that we will work together, but if this government won't listen, we will use the same methodology we used to overturn the last government.' and 'I am an ANC member... You could say that my dream has come true by seeing the ANC come to power... But this is not the end of the road. We still have a long way to go until we are free.'

Underlying this is a search for solutions. Is there a power that can solve the problems of everyday life? Can workers and their organisations be that power when powerful social forces are deployed against an independent working-class vision and programme? The accounts express the tensions of conflicting messages of the politics of class collaboration.

Employers are viewed as the exploiting class but also as 'social partners'. Working-class solidarity is upheld but union policies promote national competitiveness. There is loyalty to the ANC but it is experience of a government that serves employers and the rich. There is pride and confidence in what workers can do, but at the same time the search for an outside agent to solve problems.

Confronting these conflicting pressures is part of everyday working-class life. Job insecurity is grounded in the reality of thousands of workers who have been retrenched in capital's search for profits. The gratitude to the union and support for the ANC come with expressions of confidence and determination in workers' strength. But in a contradiction, they are often framed within a search for a more powerful, external agent. Sometimes this is the government or union leadership, sometimes a 'clever' policy and sometimes it is located in God. I would have liked to see more on how shop stewards deal with such everyday pressures

pushing in different directions.

For some, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a collective effort to come to terms with gross violations. But in practice, it excluded the ordinary gross violations of everyday working-class life. Workers, talking about their lives, do not make the same mistake because the pain did not come and go according to requirements of 'national reconciliation'.

This book gives accounts of gross violations which the TRC excluded - of systematic abuse in everyday working-class life. That they are recounted as everyday stories, not dramatic abnormalities, simply emphasises the enormity of the crime through which people survived and struggled for something better. They are the extraordinary crimes of everyday life, made ordinary because they were perpetrated against millions.

It is common to welcome a work like this as 'breaking a silence' or 'giving voice'. There is systematic silencing of workers' voices in capitalism. But this misses a fundamental point of which the book reminds us: these are stories of everyday life, known by millions of people, speaking from the experience of working-class life. Millions of voices can speak like this. The problem lies not in their silence, but with those who choose not to listen.

There is no end of declarations and theorisations on the issues raised in this volume. This book invites us to search for answers in the everyday lives, practices, visions, resistance and struggle of workers and working-class collectives. LB

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