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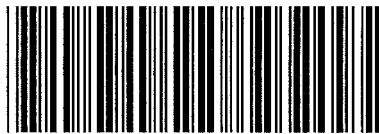
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To this day there is competition between the sugar unions in KwaZulu-Natal. **Jason Hickett** traces this rivalry from the early '80s and explains their different traditions and their contributions to unionism in this sector.

When African unionism was finally able to make use of the labour relations system through the recommendations and laws that emerged from the Wiehahn Commission in 1979, workers in Natal seized the opportunity to join unions in large numbers. In some cases in the early 1980s this led to competition between different traditions of unionism that can still be witnessed today.

Such union competition developed between the National Union of Sugar Milling and Refining Employees (NUSMRE), the first registered African independent union in Natal, and the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU), a founding member of Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions).

LIAISON COMMITTEES AND UNIONS

The Industrial Council for the Sugar Industry was founded in 1946 as one of the first of its kind in South Africa, and today remains the oldest bargaining council in the country.

At its birth, four trade unions signed the industry's first collective agreement. Three of them represented only white workers, while the fourth catered solely for Indians. Africans were denied representation. Using the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, the industry denied official "employee" status to African workers and so they were not able to take advantage of the

labour relations system and for example engage in a legal strike.

In lieu of unions, employers encouraged Africans to join plant-level "liaison committees", which were established as a release valve for workers' grievances. In reality these committees were toothless, a paternalistic gesture by employers to prevent unrest. But as we shall see, they also created a crucial template for later black unionism.

When the 1973 strike wave hit Durban, employers in the sugar industry worried about workers' growing militancy, and rushed to expand the liaison committee system in an effort to manage discontent. They transformed many of the liaison committees into "works committees", which had more autonomy but were still subject to company control.

The idea was to secure docility among workers by keeping them "within the family", protecting them from the influence of revolutionary agendas that would render them impossible to manage. But these measures were too little too late.

During the 1974/75 cane season, thousands of mill workers downed tools in a string of wildcat strikes which attracted national attention. Responding to the strikes, the industry's employers implemented even more reforms in their attempts to tame worker unrest. They raised the minimum wages of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and gave

Africans observer status at the bargaining table. But the Nationalist government outpaced them in a surprise move.

In October 1979 a letter appeared on the Council Secretary's desk that instantaneously revolutionised industrial relations in South Africa. It was from the Department of Manpower, and announced that the Wiehahn Commission had permanently amended the Industrial Conciliation Act, extending the definition of "employee" to "all residents of the Republic", regardless of race, and allowing "black trade unions to be admitted as employee parties to industrial councils".

The already-anxious employers rushed to convene an emergency meeting to discuss this news. Fearing an increase in worker radicalism, they decided to form a Black Caucus Body that would consist of two representatives from each works committee, and immediately grant it a seat at the bargaining table. The works committees gathered to discuss this prospect and agreed to form the proposed caucus, electing Selby Nsibandé, a well-educated, 30 year-old from Nongoma with close ties to the Zulu royal family, to lead them.

As a Cane Tester, Nsibandé was formally employed by the South African Sugar Association but stationed in a laboratory at the Amatikulu mill. Highly skilled and

outside the formal control of the mills' managers, he was ideally positioned to agitate for workers' interests.

Contrary to the hopes of management, the Black Caucus Body had no intention of allowing the employers to control them.

Instead, within weeks of convening, the Body penned its first letter to the Council demanding an immediate wage increase "so that our workers will be able to contribute to the 'National Union of Sugar Milling and Refining Employees', which is in the course of formation." Flouting the employers' intentions to prevent black unionisation, in 1980 the Black Caucus Body registered the first black independent union in the industry, indeed, in all of Natal.

But the employers had anticipated this move. Ever since rumours of Wiehahn's reforms, they had been planning to sponsor the creation of a legal black union themselves. Reverting to this strategy, they met Nsibande's union halfway, and offered him a loan of R10 000 to get the project off the ground. By financially supporting the union, employers thought they could keep it within the family and tie it legally to the Council which they controlled, thereby using it to defend against outside unions with political agendas.

The employers eagerly but cautiously embraced Nsibande's presence at the table. He was a powerful man, influential and highly popular among his African colleagues, and amenable to the pro-capitalist views held by Inkatha, his political party of choice. But Nsibande turned out to be a troublesome opponent.

In 1981, he rejected the works committee system through which management had wanted him to operate. He also made a number of forceful wage demands, and threatened employers that, if they refused to negotiate, "they must be prepared to meet the challenge of the 'Black Union'."

If the employers' plan to co-opt African unionism was intended to forestall radicalism, they succeeded to an only limited degree. The wildcat strikes of the early 1970s stopped, but the Council now had to deal with the steady, assertive force of an African union whose official registration only partially tempered its activism. Before the end of his first year as general secretary, Nsibande had acquired a membership of over 4 000 workers, which was 58% of the industry's African workforce.

SWEET FOOD AND POLITICAL UNIONISM

Meanwhile, outside of the Industrial Council, a different form of unionism had been secretly developing.

From as early as 1973, Tom Nkwanazi, a pioneering unionist from Matubatuba, had been secretly organising mill workers into a loose, underground network through the Tuacc (Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council) in Natal which was carefully avoiding the leaders of the liaison committees for fear of being betrayed to the employers. This network finally merged into a fully-fledged union when "Sweet Food" as the SEAWU was known, moved into Natal in 1979, and instantly absorbed Nkwanazi's covert network in the sugar industry.

Sweet Food's Transvaal

headquarters selected Willie Manthe, who had close ties to Mangosuthu Buthelezi, to lead the Pietermaritzburg office. When the ANC split from Inkatha in 1980, Manthe colluded in a plot by Ulundi to hijack the Natal branch of Sweet Food as part of Buthelezi's attempts to appropriate the province's labour movement. Buthelezi however also tolerated Fosatu's successor to Tuacc organising attempts in Natal as Fosatu deliberately wooed his support so that Inkatha would not interfere with its democratic union project.

When Manthe was eventually fired for insubordination he splintered off into a rival union, taking with him as many members as he could muster and creating chaos in the factories.

In a bid to rescue the Sweet Food union, Fosatu dispatched activist Jay Naidoo (later first general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions) to work with Sweet Food's president, Chris Dlamini (later first vice president of Cosatu), to reorganise the fractured factories.

Most of the sugar mill workers were stalwart members of Inkatha, and many had followed Manthe out of the union. But Naidoo and Dlamini worked hard to regain their support by organising solely around bread-and-butter shopfloor issues, diligently demonstrating their commitment to workers.



Selby Nsibande (right), the first general secretary of the National Union of Sugar Milling and Refining Employees with Glyn Taylor the chair of the Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Employers' Association after the admission of the union into the industrial council



Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union sent Jay Naidoo to assist the union's president, Chris Dlamini, to reorganise factories that organiser Willie Manthe was trying to move into Buthelezi's Inkatha movement

In keeping with this pragmatic workerism, the union coexisted with Inkatha. Sweet Food organised the workplace whilst Inkatha organised in the community. But Sweet Food's split with Manthe was the first step in its rejection of Inkatha's agenda and the beginning of its dramatic shift to the (ANC) Congress-led liberation struggle.

Riding his immense popularity, in 1983 Nsibande renamed his union National Sugar and Refining and Allied Industries Employees Union (Nasaraieu), and changed its constitution to include workers in the building, steel, food distribution and maize-milling industries. By the end of the following year, Nasaraieu claimed a paid-up membership of 25 000 workers throughout Natal. Buthelezi noticed its strength and agreed to make it "the labour wing of Inkatha" in order to counteract the growing influence of Fosatu.

Meanwhile, Jay Naidoo and Chris Dlamini had been consciously reorienting Sweet Food and attempting to shift Fosatu from workerism towards popularism, and were cultivating loyalties to the ANC-sympathetic United Democratic Front (UDF).

For them, the struggle on the shopfloor could no longer be separated from the struggle for the national democratic revolution, and they began rallying their members around this principle. Sweet Food's philosophy therefore diverged significantly from that of Nasaraieu which continued to resist participation in the mass democratic movement. The balance

of power between the two unions remained in the Sugar Union's favour until 1985, when, at the height of his popularity, Nsibande was deposed for misappropriation of the union's funds, leaving the union in the hands of his colleague Stefanos Nhleko.

Inkatha, fearing the negative publicity generated by the corruption scandal, withdrew its support from the sugar milling union. In 1986 it launched Uwusa (United Workers Union of South Africa) as its trade union federation in direct competition with Cosatu, which had aligned itself with the ANC. Capitalising on this moment of disarray, and noting Sweet Food's democratic shop floor unionism and strong track record on workers' issues, milling workers joined SFAWU in large numbers and its membership swelled.

That same year, the leaders of Sweet Food formalised the union's shift towards the popular struggle led by the ANC and participated in the unity talks which led to the formation of Cosatu in 1985. Cosatu however also advocated an ultimate move towards a socialist state.

In 1986, Sweet Food finally joined the Industrial Council. It also followed Cosatu's "one industry, one union" mandate and merged with three other food sector unions to form Fawu (Food and Allied Workers Union), which has since supported the political programme of the ANC/SA Communist Party/Cosatu Alliance.

Today, Fawu and Nasaraieu continue to compete bitterly for

members among the rank-and-file of the industry's African workers. Although Fawu now claims a strong majority of the workforce and exercises superior bargaining power, Nasaraieu maintains a core membership among workers that reject the political agenda that Fawu advances alongside Cosatu and the ANC. Nasaraieu members feel more comfortable with the shopfloor philosophy that does not require them to embrace the values of any specific political outlook.

CONCLUSION

The story of unionism in the sugar industry carries many important lessons that help us understand the complexity of South African labour history.

First, it shows that employers' self-interested reformism ended up providing an important foothold for organisation among black workers.

Second, it shows that the unions that emerged from the liaison committee system were not simply "collaborationists" as Cosatu continues to claim, but helped fight for crucial early gains in workers' rights.

Third, it shows that, despite being officially non-aligned, Fosatu unions played an important role in mobilising cadres for the Congress-led liberation struggle.

Finally, it suggests that in industries such as sugar that employ a high proportion of workers from InKatha areas, Cosatu's automatic support for the ANC reduces its ability to appeal beyond the party faithful, and prevents workers from uniting to push for the economic policy changes that South Africa so desperately needs. LB

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