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Subaltern Consciousness in South Africa's Labour Movement: 'Workerism' in the KwaZulu-Natal Sugar Industry

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Abstract

The liberation struggle in South Africa that eventually brought the apartheid state to its knees had its roots in the workers' movement that emerged in the early 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s, this movement shifted from a 'workerist' orientation around shop floor issues to a 'populist' articulation with the broader liberation struggle – a shift embodied most fully in the transformation of FOSATU into COSATU in 1985. In the sugar industry of KwaZulu-Natal, this ideological shift opened up serious conflict among workers who had previously co-existed without quarrel. Workers from rural Zululand tended to reject the liberal-egalitarian tenets of the 'national democratic revolution' promoted by Sweet Food, the sectoral COSATU affiliate. Instead, they sought refuge in an organisation known as National Union, which – following elements of the workerist tradition pioneered by FOSATU – created space for them to operate as activists without having to fit within the mould of secular political modernity. This history provides clues about the tenets of political consciousness among migrant workers, helps explain ongoing conflict between Inkatha and the African National Congress, and forces us to rethink some of the assumptions about workers' politics in the dominant labour historiography.

Key words: South Africa; labour; trade unions; Zululand; workerist; subaltern; political consciousness

Introduction

The liberation struggle in South Africa that eventually brought the apartheid state to its knees had its roots in the workers' movement that emerged in the early 1970s. After the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other resistance organisations in 1960, South Africa entered a period of violent state repression. The quiescence of that period was broken by the rolling strikes that happened in Durban in 1973, when over 100,000 workers downed tools in what became the broadest display of resistance in more than a decade, marking the beginning of the end of apartheid – the

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death knell of minority rule.¹ Most of the independent trade unions that developed in the wake of the Durban strikes were organised along the lines of a strategy known as 'workerism', which focused on basic shop floor issues and avoided affiliation with the political struggle against apartheid. This position of non-alignment was the hallmark of the FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) when it formed in 1979, as it sought to avoid the fate of its predecessor, SACTU,² whose association with resistance politics earned it state repression and a debilitating banning order in 1961. After a few years of operation, however, FOSATU had begun to shift into a more political, or 'populist' vein, and by 1985 – when it reorganised into COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) – it emerged as fully devoted to the mass democratic movement led by the ANC.³

For most unions, the shift from workerism to populism happened seamlessly. But in many sugar mills across KwaZulu-Natal, this transition generated serious conflict between workers who identified with the 'national democratic revolution' and workers who rejected it. From 1979, these two camps began to bifurcate between two unions: 'Sweet Food', which was built under the auspices of FOSATU, became populist and linked up with the ANC; and 'National Union', which developed out of the works committee system and remained workerist, albeit while maintaining loose ties with Inkatha for a short time. The tensions between these two unions, whose development I will trace over the past five decades, exactly paralleled and contributed to the broader civil war that began in the 1980s and took the form of rivalry between the ANC and Inkatha. The demographic fault lines of this conflict fell largely between workers who lived permanently in the urban townships, on the one hand, and workers who retained deep ties to rural homesteads, on the other.

Unfortunately, the archival record reveals little about the meaning of this conflict and the experiences and interpretations of those involved. I attempt to move around this silence by drawing on data from interviews I conducted in the sugar mills, which suggest that rural, IsiZulu-speaking workers rejected the national democratic revolution because it sought to enforce and reproduce a form of political subjectivity rooted in liberal, egalitarian values which they considered deeply problematic, given their assumptions about ontological difference and hierarchy. Many of them left Sweet Food/FOSATU when it shifted to populism and instead sought refuge in National Union, which eschewed political commitments of this sort. The interesting historiographical point here is that workerist unions created space for subaltern workers to operate as activists without having to fit within the ontological mould of secular political modernity. In this sense, I argue that the labour movement can be understood as characterised by a unique structure of duality

1. Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes, 1973: 'Human Beings with Souls'* (Johannesburg: The Institute for Industrial Education, 1974).
2. South African Congress of Trade Unions.
3. For the general outlines of this history, see: J. Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1991); S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970–1985* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1987); K. Luckhardt and B. Wall, *Organize or Starve: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (New York: International Publishers, 1980); R. Lambert, 'Political Unionism in South Africa: An Analysis of the South African Congress of Trade Unions' (PhD dissertation, 1989); R. Lambert and E. Webster, 'The Re-emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa', in W. Cobbett and R. Cohen, eds., *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1988) 20–41.

whereby subaltern politics sometimes operate beneath the surface of formal revolutionary ideologies. This history of radical variation in the form and content of workers' political consciousness opens up difficult questions about the validity of the notion of 'the working class' as an analytical category.

The history of unionism in the sugar industry has been largely neglected by South African labour historians, who have focused primarily on mining and manufacturing sectors.⁴ I suggest that this partly explains why the labour historiography of KwaZulu-Natal has come up short in its attempts to describe and explain the disarticulation between rural workers and the modern labour movement, which has galvanised a considerable amount of violence over the past few decades. The sugar industry extends along the east coast of the country, with 12 of 14 total mills located in KwaZulu-Natal, plus the refinery in Durban. With the exception of the refinery, none of these mills are located in urban centres; one operates in Pongola, six lie between Tongaat and St Lucia, three operate in the midlands, and two are located considerably south of Durban. Given that it has long drawn a substantial proportion of its labour from rural Zululand, the sugar industry offers crucial insights into the nature of unionism outside of the mainstream political agenda epitomized today by COSATU, and provides hints of the outlines of the political consciousness that informs the interests and motivations of rural Zulu workers.

Liaison committees and the making of 'National Union'

Formal industrial relations began in the sugar industry in 1946 with the founding of the Industrial Council for the Sugar Industry, which was one of the first of its kind in South Africa and today bears the distinction of being the oldest in the country. At the Council's formation, four trade unions⁵ signed on as parties to the industry's first collective agreement with employers. The largest of these unions – the Natal Sugar Industry Employee's Union (NSIEU) – commanded a membership comprised solely of Indians and a few so-called Coloureds. It was the only organisation that represented the interests of non-white workers for the first 30 years of the Council's existence; but it excluded black

4. With the notable exception of David Lincoln's work: D. Lincoln, 'South African Sugar Mill Labour During the 1970s', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 6 (1981), 37–48; 'Employment Practices, Sugar Technology, and Sugar Mill Labour', in W. Albert and A. Graves, eds, *The World Sugar Economy in War and Depression, 1914–40* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), 221–233; 'Manufacturing Browns and Whites Under Apartheid', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 14 (1992), 49–74; 'Flies in the Sugar Bowl', *South African Historical Journal*, 29 (1993), 177–208; 'The Zululand Sore', in B. Guest and J.M. Sellers, eds, *Receded Tides of Empire* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994), 177–198; as well as a comparative piece by Rick Halpern: R. Halpern, 'Solving the "Labour Problem": Race, Work and the State in the Sugar Industries of Louisiana and Natal, 1870–1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 1 (2004), 19–40; and my short synopsis, J. Hickel, 'Not So Sweet History of Sugar Unions in South Africa', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 33, 3 (2009), 68–70.
5. These were: (1) the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU); (2) the Sugar Industry Employees Association (SIEA); (3) the South African Electrical Workers Association (SAEWA); and (4) Natal Sugar Industry Employee's Union (NSIEU).

Africans entirely.⁶ At the time, industrial relations in the sugar industry were governed by a two-tier agreement split between skilled and semiskilled/unskilled labour.⁷ While skilled and semiskilled workers enjoyed representation by the white and Indian unions, policies related to unskilled workers – the vast majority of whom were black – were determined entirely without their input. A de facto 'colour bar' governed job placement in the sugar mills and kept Africans from accessing the higher graded jobs covered by the skilled agreement, ensuring a formidable wage gap between the two racialised tiers of the workforce.

Like their counterparts throughout the country, African workers in the sugar industry had no access to direct representation in matters concerning their own conditions of service. Labour relations were governed at the time by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 (later replaced by the Labour Relations Act of 1956), which denied official 'employee' status to Africans and strictly precluded non-white workers from taking part in the industrial relations system. The Act did, however, permit limited franchise through employer-initiated 'works committees' that operated at plant level and provided an avenue for communication with management.⁸ In 1962, the Tongaat mill became the first in the industry to implement this tool – known there as the 'Bantu Factory Works Committee' – as a release valve for workers' grievances.⁹ According to Human Resources Manager Mark Tucker, Tongaat managers 'foresaw dramatic changes' in the political milieu and sought to 'prevent worker radicalisation' by providing channels for the controlled expression of discontent.¹⁰ Under the works committee arrangement, workers would submit their concerns to a Bantu Supervisor, who would then communicate with the Labour Manager, who would in turn convey grievances up the chain of command to the Mill Manager. While these committees provided an early template for black worker organisation,¹¹ they were ultimately toothless – an empty, paternalistic gesture offered by employers in place of meaningful worker empowerment.

By the early 1970s, these racialised arrangements for representation were beginning to erode. The Employers' Association decided to ease the colour bar for the triple purpose of avoiding international sanctions, reducing labour costs by driving down the inflated wages of white artisans, and – most importantly – in order to forestall black worker

6. In 1977, the South African Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Workers, Shipbuilders and Welders Society (known as the Boilermakers Society) became the sixth member of the Council, providing representation for a mixed membership of whites, Indians, and Coloureds. *South African Sugar Yearbook 1982/3* (1983), 35.
7. The unskilled-semiskilled category covered pay rates 1–12, while the skilled category covered rates 13–16; this was before the Patterson grading system was introduced.
8. National Bargaining Council for the Sugar Industry Archives (hereafter NBSIA), Meeting Minutes (hereafter MM) Volume 5, Page 1461.
9. NBSIA, MM Volume 5, Page 1461.
10. Interview 1.1, with Human Resources Manager Mark Tucker at Maidstone mill. All interviews were conducted between June 2007 and July 2009. I have anonymised many of the interviews in order to protect the individuals involved. I translated all interviews that were conducted in IsiZulu, and have tried to retain important Zulu terms where useful.
11. See Alex Lichtenstein's work on the role of works committees in the struggle for industrial citizenship in South Africa: A. Lichtenstein, 'Works Committees or Trade Unions? The Struggle for Industrial Citizenship in South Africa, 1973–1979', paper presented at 'Labour Crossings: World, Work and History' conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 5–8 September, 2008.

insubordination.¹² This latter concern became particularly pressing after 1973, when the Durban strikes ignited the biggest spate of spontaneous industrial actions in South African history. The Durban strikes did not immediately affect the sugar industry – insulated as it was from urban areas – but employers still rushed to shore up, expand, and more tightly control the works committee system in an effort to channel workers' discontent into ready-made and manageable forms.¹³ One strategy was to grant works committees more autonomy, including the power to elect their own leaders and convey demands directly to management. While the works committees more closely approximated plant-level unions than any prior arrangement, they were still cynically construed by management to operate in classic 'sweetheart' style, ultimately beholden to the final word of the employers.¹⁴

In addition to expanding black worker representation, employers responded to the threat of worker radicalism posed by the Durban strikes by abolishing the racialised two-tier system and implementing a single, non-racial industrial relations agreement. They also raised the minimum wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers by 50%.¹⁵ But these measures turned out to be too little too late. During the 1974/5 cane season, sugar producers were beset by pulses of industrial unrest and intensifying worker discontent. The last three months of 1974 saw a series of unprecedented wildcat strikes, with some 2,500 workers downing tools at four different mills, earning the retaliation of armed police with riot vehicles and tear gas.¹⁶ Following these events, sugar industry employers expanded black worker representation even further, in order 'to avoid industrial disputes and unrest'¹⁷ by bringing rebellious elements of the African workforce under the ambit of the Council. The idea was to secure relative docility among workers by keeping them 'within the family' (to use a phrase popular at the time), protecting them from the influence of external revolutionary agendas.

The chairman of the Employers Association was eager to foster a form of black organisation amenable to the interests of the industry. He argued that

Employers may be able to play a support role in developing the organisation, representative and communications requirements of our black workers so that they, in turn, will continue to subscribe

12. Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Employer Association Archives (hereafter SMREAA), Meeting Minutes (hereafter MM) 8 September 1975.
13. *South African Sugar Yearbook 1972/3* (1973), 65–66.
14. The Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 created mechanisms for 'works committees', while amendments in 1973 established the additional option of 'liaison committees', which most companies preferred because they were composed of an equal number of representatives from both sides and chaired by the employer. See W. Gould, 'Black Unions in South Africa: Labour Law Reform and Apartheid', *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 27 (1981) 99–162.
15. 'Sugar Industry Wages', *Financial Mail*, 7 March 1975.
16. '800 Workers go on Mill Rampage', *Natal Mercury*, 16 October 1974; 'Felixton Strikers Dispersed', *Natal Mercury*, 17 October 1974; 'Police at Tense Felixton', *Natal Mercury*, 19 October 1974; 'Police Rush Mill Strike', *Natal Mercury*, 26 October 1974; 'Mill Strikers Face Sack Threat Today', *Natal Mercury*, 15 November 1974; 'Sugar Mill Workers Back Down', *Natal Mercury*, 15 November 1974; 'Strike Mob in Clash with Police', *Natal Mercury*, 18 November 1974. I acknowledge David Lincoln's secondary literature for alerting me to this series of events: D. Lincoln, 'South African Sugar Mill Labour'.
17. Industrial Council records: 5/1525. Industry employers made use of a new amendments made to the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act, which called for an expansion of black workers representation.

to the family concept. I believe that they share the view that this stimulates more meaningful and purposeful relationships than, for example, trade unions whose interests are [broader].¹⁸

At a Council meeting in early 1976, the Employers' Association followed this advice, accepting that, although it was 'most regrettable', 'the time had come for Bantu representatives to join in the matter of wage negotiations'.¹⁹ That April, for the first time in its history, the Council invited black delegates from the works committees to sit at the bargaining table, albeit only as *observers*, and only during wage negotiations that affected them specifically.²⁰ This decision was in keeping with a steady shift in disciplinary practice from coercive control to what they called 'management by the consent of the managed'.²¹ Black workers, for their part, decided to accept the reforms advanced by employers, enduring the patronisation in order to secure a foothold at the bargaining table and training in the principles of negotiation.

The momentum of worker discontent that gathered in the 1970s had impressed upon the industry's employers the inevitability of African unionism, and drove them to consider new ways to co-opt this more powerful form of black worker mobilisation.²² The Industrial Relations Manager of the Hulett's Group expressed this sentiment in warning that

[The] unionisation of Blacks is inevitable – it is just a question of what form it will take. As unions are soon to become a permanent part of industrial life, let us accept them in good grace and learn to live in harmony with them.²³

But the government outpaced them in a surprise move. In October 1979 the Wiehahn Commission published a set of recommendations that instantaneously revolutionised industrial relations in South Africa. It 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'.²⁴

Fearing gains in worker radicalism, employers in the sugar industry decided to intensify their earlier strategy of worker co-optation by forming a Black Caucus Body that would consist of two representatives from each works committee, and grant it a seat at the bargaining table.²⁵ The committees accepted this invitation, and appointed Selbi Nsibandé – a well-educated, 30-year-old from Nongoma with close ties to the Zulu Royal Family – to lead them in negotiations with employers. But 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

18. *South African Sugar Yearbook 1976/7* (1977), 30.

19. NBCSIA, MM Volume 5, Page 1541.

20. NBCSIA, MM Volume 5, Page 1541; NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1632–3.

21. *South African Sugar Journal* (1981), 531.

22. B. De Wet, 'Labour Relations – Trade Unions for Blacks?', *Hulett's Review*, 746 (1979), 1–8.

23. *Ibid.*

24. NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1784. See Gould, 'Black Unions in South Africa'.

25. NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1794.

contribute to the “National Union of Sugar Milling and Refining Employees” (“National Union”), which is in the course of formation’.²⁶ Flouting the employers’ intentions to prevent black unionisation, in 1980 the Black Caucus Body registered the first black independent union in the industry, indeed, the first in all of Natal.

The employers had anticipated this move well beforehand. Ever since rumours of Wiehahn’s reforms began circulating, they had been planning to sponsor the creation of a legal black union themselves.²⁷ Reverting to this strategy, they met Nsibande’s initiative halfway, and offered him a loan of R10,000 to get the union off the ground.²⁸ 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.²⁹ Nsibande’s union accepted the loan and within a matter of months – by August 1980 – had registered with the Department of Labour and organized 58% of eligible black workers in the industry. The employers cautiously but gladly 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. Employers felt more comfortable with him under the purview of the Council than if he were mobilising workers in ways external and illegible to its gaze, or with a more radical political agenda.

But Nsibande turned out to be a troublesome opponent; certainly not the docile accomplice for which the employers had hoped. The first hints of his insubordination appeared in 1981, when he aggressively rejected the works committee system through which management had wanted him to operate. The Employers’ Association sternly reprimanded Nsibande, disappointed that he had stymied their plan to retain the works committees as a tactic of control. They blamed him for fostering chaos among workers in the industry and fomenting insurrection outside of monitored forums.³⁰ Three months later, Nsibande led his members in a strike at Felixton mill in order to demand better compensation for workers.³¹ He threatened employers that, if they refused to negotiate, ‘they must be prepared to meet the challenge of the “Black Union”’.³² Before the end of his first year as General Secretary of National Union, Nsibande had acquired a membership of over 4,000 black workers.

‘Sweet Food’ and the development of political unionism

Meanwhile, outside the purview of the Council and committee system, a different form of unionism had been developing for some time. At the helm of this new movement was one Tom Nkwanazi, who had been organising some of the industry’s workers covertly since

26. NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1813.

27. SMREAA, MM 30 January 1980.

28. Interview 3.2, with Selbi Nsibande.

29. SMREAA, MM 1976 special report titled ‘Labour Relations Philosophy of the SMREA’.

30. NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1900.

31. NBCSIA, MM Volume 6, Page 1903.

32. NBCSIA, MM Volume 7, Page 47.

1973 under the TUACC initiative.³³ Nkwanazi's project was extremely secretive; only those who were directly involved with the TUACC leadership knew anything about it, and even then information was kept strictly guarded. Riding the wave of black worker radicalism emboldened by the Durban strikes, Nkwanazi built an underground network among workers by hand-picking individuals he knew he could trust, operating outside of the ambit of the works committees, which he rejected as complicit with management. To keep the network from unravelling under police interrogation, no member was allowed to know the names of any of the others, and its members did not engage in open bargaining with management. It was a network only in potential, awaiting an opportunity to emerge.³⁴

That opportunity came in 1979, in the form of Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU), or 'Sweet Food'. Sweet Food had been commissioned by its umbrella organisation – the FOSATU – to set up a branch in Natal. The branch office was in Pietermaritzburg, staffed by Willie Mante – an old hand from the transport union scene – and an upstart Indian activist by the name of Jay Naidoo – the young man who would become the first General Secretary of COSATU upon its formation in 1985.³⁵ As the primary organiser, Mante moved into the sugar industry by drawing out and building on the network that Nkwanazi had developed under TUACC. The relationship between the two organisations was exceedingly close; the founders of FOSATU had drawn deeply on TUACC tradition, adopting most of its bylaws and incorporating many of its leaders, allowing for a virtually seamless transition between the two.

Like FOSATU more broadly, Sweet Food was committed to the ideals of workerism – that is, they prized class-based, shop floor concerns over the broader goal of nationalist anti-colonial struggle. Led by white intellectuals influenced by Western Marxism,³⁶ the workerists developed a critique that emphasised the *class* character of apartheid accumulation, and sought to nourish clear working-class identities in the interest of galvanising socialist revolution. Guided by this philosophy, FOSATU was in principle opposed to the option of closing ranks with the broader nationalist movement led by the ANC in exile.³⁷ Indeed, FOSATU's leadership often criticised the nationalist movement for its lack of a clearly defined commitment to working-class issues.³⁸ In addition, they feared that association with the ANC would invite government repression and the swift demise of their organisation, which is precisely what happened to their predecessor, SACTU, when it was banned in 1961 along with the ANC.

Crucially, it was FOSATU's commitment to workerism that allowed it to mobilise so effectively in Natal, where the vast majority of workers were rural migrants and members of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha, and harboured deep antagonisms towards the national democratic revolution led by the ANC. Inkatha was initially supported by the

33. Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council. See N. Ulrich, 'Only the Workers Can Free the Workers: The Origin of the Workers' Control Tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970–1979', (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2007).

34. Interview 2.16, with elder FAWU shop steward.

35. Interview 2.14, with Jay Naidoo.

36. Most notably Richard Turner.

37. A. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 19, 1 (1999), 66–82.

38. J. Foster, 'The Workers' Struggle: Where Does FOSATU Stand?', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 7, 8 (1982), 99–114.

ANC as a front, for it fit the government's definition of a 'cultural organisation' and therefore dovetailed with the state's project of 'tribalisation'. But the leadership of the ANC and Inkatha had a dramatic falling out at the end of 1979. As it became clear that Buthelezi was using Inkatha to leverage his own personal power base, the ANC publicly denied association with the man, much to his bitter dismay. The following year, after an incident where Inkatha had dispatched a vigilante group to violently intimidate striking students back into school, ANC leaders in London issued a stinging repudiation that denounced Buthelezi as a collaborator in the crime of apartheid.³⁹ This rebuke damaged the relationship between Buthelezi and the ANC leadership irreparably, and Buthelezi sought to undermine the ANC-led struggle from that point on.

FOSATU took a different approach. Unlike the ANC, FOSATU elected to cooperate with Inkatha – albeit uneasily – on purely pragmatic grounds. The idea, according to Jay Naidoo, was that 'FOSATU would stick to factory-floor issues and Inkatha would be the dominant player in the political issues'.⁴⁰ In other words, the union was content to ignore Inkatha and its conservative political agenda so long as FOSATU could focus on class-based organisation. Rural migrant workers could be members of Inkatha *at the same time* as they were members of FOSATU unions, such as Sweet Food. FOSATU unions made no demands on workers' political orientation; instead, organisers merely focused on the bread-and-butter issues that concerned workers on the factory floor – an agenda that workers were all too willing to support. This was especially crucial in the sugar industry, which drew much of its workforce from rural Zululand. As Naidoo put it:

[Even though] I was an anti-Inkatha person . . . the reality was that the majority of the workers in the sugar industry were Inkatha, and strongly Inkatha. So [while organising workers] I was very careful not to raise the issue of political affiliation . . . I was careful not to disclose my political background.⁴¹

The workerist approach proved to be effective at bringing a diversity of workers together under the ambit of the unions. But this arrangement began to change dramatically at the end of 1980, when FOSATU's exclusively workerist orientation began to show signs of eroding. Willie Mante – an Inkatha sympathiser and the Sweet Food staff person in Pietermaritzburg – conspired with Inkatha in a plot to hijack the union's Natal branch as part of Buthelezi's attempts to appropriate the province's labour movement. While Jay Naidoo was absent for a month in December, Mante hired Norman Middleton – an Inkatha stalwart – to work alongside him in the Natal office. When Naidoo returned, he found that the two of them had co-opted the union for Buthelezi and linked it to Inkatha's headquarters in Ulundi. Naidoo recalls feeling the need to act swiftly:

We had to take a stand on this issue. And this was very important, because just as much as FOSATU didn't want any links with the popular Congress movement (the national democratic revolution), they also didn't want Inkatha, though Inkatha was very popular among the workers. So the leadership fired Willie Mante, and refused to accept the employment of Norman Middleton.⁴²

39. M. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), 338.

40. Interview 2.14, with Jay Naidoo.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

The relationship of convenience that had existed between Sweet Food and Inkatha was broken at the leadership level, and the political differences between the leaders came rushing into the open. Mante and Middleton splintered off to form their own rival union and attempted to take Inkatha members with them. In spite of their efforts, however, Sweet Food was able to keep most of its Inkatha-affiliated members because it remained formally committed to the tradition of workerism at the level of everyday operations. In Naidoo's words:

In making the choice, workers said 'on the factory floor Sweet Food is the leader; in the community Inkatha is the leader ... Sweet Food has done nothing to undermine us as workers; we are not asking them to join Inkatha – they can have their own political views – but when it comes to union democracy they have been our strongest proponents' ... That's the choice they made. Because they knew us. They knew we were committed to the cause of workers on the factory floor ... so even though Inkatha was against us, workers stayed.⁴³

After Mante and Middleton were fired, Naidoo became a dominant player in Sweet Food, and built a strong relationship with Chris Dlamini, the national president of both Sweet Food and FOSATU. The two men came from very similar political backgrounds. Naidoo had been deeply involved in the Black Consciousness movement and – like Dlamini – was committed to the national democratic revolution long before joining FOSATU, when he put that agenda aside to focus instead on class-based organisation. The partnership between the two men led them to consider how they might link FOSATU to the broader liberation movement, and shift the union federation into a more political dispensation. According to Naidoo: 'Chris and I connected immediately, and we basically had the same political style. We worked exceedingly well together, and we knew that we had to begin to find a way of shifting FOSATU.'⁴⁴ This decision coincided with a dramatic increase in activist collaboration between township civics, student organisations, and workers, led by the United Democratic Front (UDF),⁴⁵ culminating in the mass stayaways of November 1984. This event radically transformed the nature of the resistance movement: according to FOSATU leader Thami Mali, it was 'the first time in South African history that trade unions and militant organisations acted in such dramatic concert'.⁴⁶

The political shift in FOSATU that Naidoo had been pushing for so long finally came about in 1985, when FOSATU's member unions gathered to inaugurate a new confederation under the banner of the COSATU. The birth of COSATU considerably changed the style of working-class politics, heralding a new dispensation of unionism with overt ties to the nationalist movement. This relationship was solidified in 1988 when COSATU formally joined the UDF, forming what became known as the 'Mass Democratic Movement.' The movement's leaders theorized that, because apartheid was predicated on a necessary relationship between racial domination and class exploitation, effective

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

45. J. Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983–1991* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 2000).

46. Cited in J. Middleton, 'Unity of Democratic Forces: The Transvaal Stayaway, ANC online archives (1984) <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2908>, accessed 25 March 2012.

resistance would require an alliance between the nationalist movement (battling racial oppression) and the workers' movement (battling class exploitation).⁴⁷ Following the Comintern's policy of 'two-stage revolution', COSATU saw national emancipation as a *precondition* for socialism, and advocated a temporary shift away from class-based struggle in favour of nationalism as such.⁴⁸ Sweet Food leaders played an integral role in the development of this new form of unionism: Jay Naidoo became COSATU's first General Secretary, and Chris Dlamini became its first Deputy President.

When COSATU was formed, Sweet Food's mandate was broadened to cover the entire food and agricultural industry, and it became the Food and Allied Workers Union, or FAWU. FAWU and other COSATU-affiliated unions became primary sites for mobilising grassroots resistance against the apartheid regime. Many union organisers – some of whom were also politically active in their township communities – considered it their duty to raise consciousness among members about the importance of the mass democratic struggle. For example, Alan Govindsamy of FAWU, in his dual capacity as union shop steward and community organiser, remembers how he sought to bring the two movements together:

I would push [democratic revolution] in the communities, and I would push it in the working class. We were involved in the working class and we were involved in the communities – so we were using both powers. I would invite workers to come to the community meetings. And some of the issues we were not happy about in the communities we would discuss on the shop floor. So [the movement] became a mixture of everything. I forced the working class to go and attend the UDF meetings and listen to the political people and help them realise that we must have a democratic country.⁴⁹

FAWU definitively rejected the works committee system – and National Union – as artificial and undemocratic, and criticised its members for allowing themselves to be controlled by management in typical 'sweetheart union' style. The union's organisers opted instead to skirt and undermine the existing structures of worker representation. A key recruitment strategy for FAWU was to discredit National Union in the eyes of workers by exposing its origins as a brainchild of the Employers' Association, established with management's money. FAWU pushed this story as aggressively as possible, and continues to do so: during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, FAWU succeeded in getting the Employers' Association to sign a statement confessing that they had established National Union in order to forestall worker activism. Even so, in the mid-1980s FAWU commanded a mere 800 members in the sugar industry, with majority representation at only three mills, compared to Nsibandé's 6,600 members – an impressive 80% of the organised workforce – and majority representation at thirteen mills.⁵⁰ During the 1980s, FAWU failed to gain significant representation at any of the mills in Zululand.

Beginning in 1984, Nsibandé had started expanding his organising efforts beyond the sugar industry. He renamed his union NASARAIEU⁵¹ and changed its constitution to

47. I. Chipkin, 'Nationalism as Such: Violence During South Africa's Political Transition', *Public Culture*, 16, 2 (2004), 317–318.

48. See A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

49. Interview 2.2, with elder FAWU Shopsteward Alan Govindsamy.

50. *South African Sugar Yearbook 1982/3* (1983), 35.

51. National Sugar Refining and Allied Industries Union.

permit representation of workers in the construction, steel, food distribution and maize-milling industries, among others.⁵² By the end of the following year, National Union claimed a paid-up membership of some 25,000 workers throughout Natal and KwaZulu. Recognising the force of Nsibandé's following, Buthelezi invited his union to formally affiliate with Inkatha as a counterweight to COSATU. For Nsibandé – given his marital ties to the Zulu Royal Family of which Buthelezi is a part, and the fact that the vast majority of his members were already paid-up members of Inkatha – the alliance only made sense, and he agreed to make NASARAIEU the 'labour wing of Inkatha'.⁵³ NASARAIEU's official association with Inkatha was short-lived, however. In 1985, at the height of his popularity, Nsibandé was deposed for misappropriating massive sums of the union's funds for personal use.⁵⁴ Inkatha – fearing the repercussions of negative publicity – withdrew its formal support from National Union and inaugurated UWUSA as its new trade union wing instead.⁵⁵

Battles over political subjectivity

The split between the ANC and Inkatha and the alignment of FOSATU unions with the national democratic revolution had serious ramifications for unionism in Natal, drawing out latent antagonisms between workers who had previously coexisted quite happily. In the sugar industry, workers who supported the politics of NDR closed ranks with FAWU and the ANC, while workers who rejected the politics of NDR confirmed alliances with National Union and Inkatha. The lines were drawn primarily between residents of urban townships (who tended to support the ANC) on the one hand, and rural migrants (who tended to support Inkatha), on the other. As Naidoo remembers it, after the 1984 stayaway and the formation of COSATU, 'Inkatha went on a rampage ... and open warfare started'.⁵⁶ Organisers on both sides were targeted in a number of assassination attempts.⁵⁷ FAWU organisers in particular allege that when they entered Nsibandé's strongholds they were often met with violence and intimidation, denied the right of free association and employer cooperation that their counterparts enjoyed. According to a number of FAWU shop stewards, National Union's leaders organised a sabotage campaign against FAWU members, framing them for dismissal by planting contraband items in their lockers. National Union was allegedly aided in these efforts by employers, who rigged the disciplinary system so as to justify firing FAWU members for even minor infractions.⁵⁸

52. NBCSIA, MM Volume 7, Page 200.

53. C. McCaul, 'Inkatha's New Labour Wing', *Work in Progress*, 32 (1984), 34–35.

54. 'Official Bought Car With Union's Funds, Court Told', *Natal Mercury*, 7 August 1985. Nsibandé founded a splinter union (NICWU) in the sugar industry that same year. It competed with National Union (the leadership of which was assumed by Stefanos Nhleko) for the same members. NICWU was deregistered and dissolved in 2008, when Nsibandé left the labour movement for the commercial sector.

55. United Workers Union of South Africa. Because UWUSA was artificially imposed instead of emerging organically from among the workers, it lasted only a few years before collapsing completely. For more on UWUSA, see G. Mare and G. Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi's Inkatha and South Africa* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1987).

56. Interview 2.14, with Jay Naidoo.

57. I interviewed organisers from both unions who described attempts on their lives by their rivals.

58. Interview 2.4, with senior FAWU official.

How are we to make sense of this conflict? Why did the labour movement divide at precisely the moment when a united front against apartheid was most urgent? Mahmood Mamdani has offered what has become the most widely-accepted explanation. He argues that as FOSATU linked up with the popular struggle it began to focus more on urban workers and left rural migrants largely marginalised. To make matters worse, organisers gradually abandoned hostels for townships as their primary sites of mobilisation. This coincided with a demographic shift in the workforce, as new patterns in industrial development saw businesses seeking better-educated, more stable workers than the migrant population could provide. At the same time, the students influenced by the 1976 Soweto uprisings were entering the workforce and shifting the focus of union activism toward broader political issues. According to Mamdani, the exclusion of the migrant worker population from the new resistance movement left them 'available for organisation' by Inkatha and its affiliated unions, which 'tried to harvest their alienation from township militancy'.⁵⁹

Mamdani is not incorrect on this point. But his explanation wrongly implies that if the NDR unions had made a better effort to integrate rural workers, they could have worked amicably together toward the goal of liberal democracy. This ignores the fact that NDR unions were often *actively hostile* toward rural workers. As FOSATU shifted to embrace the NDR agenda, the movement became deeply opposed to the so-called 'traditional' values of cultural subjects like rural Zulus. As Ivor Chipkin has described it in the case of metalworkers in Johannesburg, the movement 'drew on a Leninist reading of Marx that deemed the revolutionary class a class in and for itself, necessarily separated from the clan or tribe'.⁶⁰ Their reasoning followed the logic of Eric Hobsbawm's argument that peasant-proletarians are 'prepolitical' – people whose actions are organised along the 'archaic', 'anachronistic' axes of kinship and clan, and involve spirits, ancestors, witches, *muthi*, and other supernatural agents as actors alongside humans. In Hobsbawm's formulation, these 'primitive rebels' have yet to come to terms with the secular logic of power and class, and 'have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express themselves'. Capitalism 'comes to them from outside, insidiously, by the operation of economic forces which they do not understand'.⁶¹

For the NDR unions, the (culturally marked) image of the peasant stood in contrast to the ideal national subject, which they conflated with the (unmarked) image of the educated, urban individual. They could not accommodate workers who hinged their being on the Zulu monarchy, chiefdoms, ancestors, and 'traditional' notions of hierarchy. In the new nationalist movement, as Chipkin has put it, 'freedom' itself became associated with a determinate cultural state, namely, the state of liberal, autonomous personhood.⁶² Migrants, by contrast, were considered backwards, counterrevolutionary, and *unfree* because they failed to embody these traits. In addition, FAWU organisers often denounced rural Zulus as 'traditionalists' committed to moribund cultural values that run counter to

59. M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 255.

60. Chipkin, 'Nationalism as Such', 328.

61. E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1959] 1978).

62. Chipkin, 'Nationalism as Such', 335.

the developmentalist trajectory that underwrites the modern nation-building project. As one of FAWU's top officials put it to me:

The ANC is a national organisation, and has had to take into account so many cultures of different groups in South Africa. [Zulu] culture is shortsighted, it is a culture that does not take into account the vast majority of people in South Africa ... but with the passing of time and the development of things, the support of that culture will begin to diminish. Like polygamy. We are living in times where polygamy is beginning to lose support.⁶³

FAWU attempted (and continues to attempt) to promote 'proper' revolutionary ideology by conducting regular training sessions designed to politicise sugar workers on issues of gender, class, and egalitarian rights. Self-consciously following Marx, the assumption behind this project was that politicisation is a process of enlightenment, of shedding 'false' consciousness in order to arrive at an understanding of the objective nature of social relations, of accepting a secular-material-economic model of agency and causality. One FAWU training consultant accused rural Zulu workers of this kind of false consciousness in the following terms:

This thing of understanding misfortune to be the consequence of broken relationships with the ancestors or witchcraft ... it is a religion they hold as part of their culture ... [But] you can't just sit and slaughter goats and hope you get a job; that is not responsible. You should not hang all of your hopes on the ancestors ... We have to build people's consciousness about how to act on the objective conditions they are in ... We need programs to dispel these beliefs about witchcraft. It all centres around education ... People must realise that they are architects of their own destinies.⁶⁴

Zebon Mbatha, National Union's first president, took issue with this project and pointed out that it constitutes a chief reason for FAWU's failure to organize in Zululand, complaining that: 'They say a person from the rural areas is ignorant and cannot think'.⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, most workers from rural Zululand find this discourse profoundly alienating. It was not just that they were ignored by the NDR unionists, as Mamdani would have it; they were actively rejected, and – inasmuch as they were considered an obstacle to the revolution – often became the object of violence.

But rural workers also had their own prior reasons for rejecting the national democratic revolution and mobilising against it.⁶⁶ After all, data from the sugar industry indicates that National Union was probably more aggressive than FAWU when it came to the conflict in question. One might expect that this animosity was propelled by a sense of 'Zulu nationalism', ethnic separatism, or support for Inkatha's power struggle, as the

63. Interview 2.4, with senior FAWU official, Durban office.

64. Interview 5.1, with FAWU training consultant.

65. Interview 3.1, with Zebon Mbatha.

66. To be fair, Mamdani faced a methodological obstacle: it was difficult for him to gain access to hostels during the time he was conducting fieldwork, given the danger of violence and apartheid-era restrictions on movement. With this in mind, it makes sense that he leaves migrants' emic world largely unexplored. Fortunately, when I conducted my own fieldwork in 2008–2009 I was not hampered by these restrictions.

dominant narrative holds.⁶⁷ But the interviews that I conducted with rural migrants in the sugar industry (specifically with workers who were active in the labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s) offered very little evidence for this; indeed, never once did respondents point to ethnic identity as an issue as such.⁶⁸ Instead, workers explained – almost without exception – that they refused to join the NDR union movement because they did not want to be involved with ‘politics’ (*amapolitiki*), by which they meant specifically the *liberal* politics of NDR and its vision of equal rights for all within an egalitarian social order.

A number of rural workers claimed that they objected to the way that young, often unmarried township men began to assume leadership of the unions in the 1980s and self-consciously cast off the authority of elders as part of their democratic radicalism – even to the point of chastising older men at times, which was considered to be deeply disrespectful. In addition, many rural workers objected to the fact that some of FAWU’s shop stewards and organisers were women. These realities chafed with their conception of authority, which was both generationally determined and heavily gendered. In a similar vein, according to Zeblon Mbatha, rural workers rejected FAWU’s liberal ideas on pregnancy, sexuality, and the rights of women and children:

[FAWU believes that] children have the right not to be punished . . . this is a new thing for the black man . . . it is a formidable thing. And then the other things: if you are pregnant and do not want the child, you take it out. All these things are new to the black people, more especially in Zululand. And then they say a male can marry a male, legally! And a female can marry a female legally . . . which in Zululand is disgusting! Eih! Those are the things that the Zululand people cannot accept.⁶⁹

Workers frequently linked the liberal values of FAWU to the culture of the townships from which the union draws most of its members. According to one shop steward, people in the townships violate the normative expectations of ‘respect’ (*hlonipha*) that maintain hierarchical social differences and govern relationships between men and women, elders and juniors in rural homesteads:

In the townships respect is very low. In the farm the wife respects the husband. It’s very different. They show respect, they are following the rules [*umthetho*] of the family – when you give you must kneel. If you don’t, it’s a lack of respect. It also brings misfortune [*amashwa*]: when you lack respect,

67. See A. Sitas, ‘The New Tribalism: Hostels and Violence’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 2 (1996), 235–248; D. Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); A. Minnaar, ‘Undisputed Kings: Warlordism in Natal’, in A. Minnaar, ed., *Patterns of Violence* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1992), 61–82; M. Sutcliffe and P. Wellings, ‘Inkatha Versus the Rest’, *African Affairs*, 87, 348 (1988), 325–360; J. Aitchison, ‘The Civil War in Natal’, in G. Moss and I. Obery, eds, *South African Review 5* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1989), 457–473; J. Aitchison, *Numbering the Dead: The Course and Pattern of Political Violence in the Natal Midlands, 1987–1989* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993).
68. I conducted about three dozen personal interviews with people of this demographic.
69. Interview 3.1, with Zeblon Mbatha. It bears pointing out that respondents tended to use the present tense when describing their reasons for rejecting FAWU. While they claim that these same reasons applied in the 1980s, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this is accurate.

the ancestors [*amadlozi*] will complain. When they complain you will get a crisis. When you lose your respect . . . that's where the *amashwa* start . . . Because respect is very important.⁷⁰

From the interviews, it appears that many rural workers considered FAWU's liberalism to be socially destructive on the basis of certain theories about the provenance of misfortune. As in the quote above, many claimed that violations of 'respect' (*hlonipha*) – which FAWU seemed to promote – would inspire the wrath of the ancestors and bring about dangerous misfortunes.⁷¹ Another reason for misfortune, suggested by the same shop steward,⁷² is the abandonment of 'culture' more generally, which FAWU allegedly encourages:

If you don't follow culture [*amasiko*] you will get sick, you will have bad luck [*amashwa*], you will lose your fortune, your kids will not do well in school, you will have problems with your money, you will have nothing. You will have to go to a diviner [*sangoma*], and she will tell you that you have these problems because you left the *amasiko*. They stopped doing *amasiko* in the townships. So they get the *amashwa* we're talking about . . . [For FAWU] . . . the problem is that they do not believe in *amadlozi*. So they can't stop *amashwa*, because they don't believe in the things their grandfathers did.⁷³

By highlighting rural workers' collective representations of FAWU I do not intend to claim that they are necessarily accurate. It goes without saying that many of FAWU's members *do* believe in the ancestors and uphold ritual praxis. The point is not to posit a categorical dichotomy between the culture of FAWU and that of National Union, but to show that, at the level of ideology, rural workers found FAWU's liberalism to be problematic. To them, NDR unionism promoted an approach to 'freedom' that stood against the notions of ontological difference, hierarchy, and status that they considered crucial conditions for collective well-being.⁷⁴ From this perspective, liberalism does not liberate; it destroys. In sum, their politics were organised less along the lines of ethnic identity (in both the essentialist and the instrumentalist senses of the term)⁷⁵ than of a

70. Interview 3.12, with a National Union shop steward. Scholars often argue that rural Zulu men seek to promote and defend norms of hierarchy because they have a material interest in maintaining their hold on patriarchal power (see G. Elder, 'Malevolent Traditions: Hostel Violence and the Procreational Geography of Apartheid', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 4 (2003), 921–935); while I am sympathetic to this possibility, I have developed an alternative explanation in J. Hickel, 'Democracy and Sabotage: Moral Order and Political Conflict in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa' (PhD Dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2011).
71. For earlier ethnographic accounts of this phenomenon, see: O. Raum, *The Social Functions of Avoidances and Taboos among the Zulu* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), and W. D. Hammond-Tooke, 'Urbanisation and the Interpretation of Misfortune: A Quantitative Analysis', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 40, 1 (1970), 25–39.
72. I rely here on the words of just a handful of senior organizers and shop stewards, as constraints of space prevent me from citing the full litany of statements that workers made along these same lines.
73. Interview 3.14, with a National Union shop steward.
74. For more on the themes of hierarchy and generational conflict in Zululand, see B. Carton, *Blood from your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000).
75. The majority of African workers in both unions self-identify as Zulu.

moral order through which they read liberalism as not only abstractly anathema to their most cherished social values, but as actually dangerous.

The dual structure of worker consciousness

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the workerist tradition championed by Sweet Food and FOSATU established a public domain where rural migrants could engage with workplace issues in a democratic fashion that did not exclude them on the basis of their cultural values and epistemology. As Chipkin has put it, being a member of a workerist union

did not imply a transformation of their souls, of their beings. It was not necessary for them to become secular [and, I would add, liberal] individuals ... they did not have to become 'modern' in order to become democrats.⁷⁶

When Sweet Food abandoned workerism in favour of NDR unionism, however, that inclusive domain was replaced with a project that privileged and actively sought to reproduce the modern political subject.

As Sweet Food and FOSATU shifted toward politics, Nsibande took up the mantle of workerism that they once upheld, partially – we might suppose – as an attempt to distance his union from its 'sweetheart' reputation and align it with a more legitimate ideology, and one that retained a lot of cache with workers. Nsibande insisted on keeping his union free from involvement in 'politics'. As Nsibande himself put it: 'I am a workerist. I am not prepared to create a space for politics in my union.'⁷⁷ Given that Nsibande was never part of the workerist movement as such, his claim fits uncomfortably with the definition of 'workerism' in the mainstream historiography. But he makes an important point: like FOSATU, National Union did not participate in nationalist politics (albeit for different reasons).⁷⁸ Rural Zulu workers tended to feel more comfortable with this approach because it allowed them to pursue their rights in the workplace without being forced to align with the agenda of social change envisioned by the national democratic revolution. As with FOSATU, National Union's workerist philosophy did not require workers to become secular individuals divorced from their most deeply-cherished cultural values and beliefs, nor did it summon them to join a revolutionary struggle aimed at achieving a liberal social order with which they did not identify. The open, politically-non-aligned democratic space and shop floor-focus allowed

76. Chipkin, 'Nationalism as Such', 327.

77. Interview 3.2, with Selbi Nsibande.

78. As far as I am able to determine, support for Inkatha or 'Zulu nationalism' was never part of National Union's explicit agenda, and Inkatha never exercised power over the actions of National Union; certainly not after Inkatha abandoned National Union in favour of UWUSA. Indeed, all of the leaders of National Union to whom I spoke denied that the union was ever – except for that very brief period – affiliated with Inkatha, and many were openly critical of Buthelezi. According to Zebon Mbatha, an early President of National Union: 'I never forced my members to affiliate to Inkatha. They could join as individuals but not as a union. We even had ANC members in our union. And Black Consciousness. They joined our union' (Interview 3.1).

workers to act *as if* they were a class in and for themselves while retaining other commitments at the same time.

In this sense, worker consciousness in the sugar industry is characterised by an interesting structure of duality. On one level, western-educated leaders claim to represent the masses through the ideology of popularism/nationalism or workerism/Marxism, deploying orthodox paradigms of 'interests' and 'rights' in their confrontation with management and the state. On a subordinate, grassroots level, however, peasant-proletarian politics (as in the specific case of rural Zulu workers) operate beneath the surface of this official discourse, and do not readily partake of the assumptions that underwrite it.⁷⁹ At this level, beliefs and actions may not fit into the grid of 'interests' and 'aggregation of interests' – to use Partha Chatterjee's terms – that constitute the world of bourgeois representative politics.⁸⁰ Their politics do not follow what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called 'the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent in the modern conception of the political',⁸¹ but are shot through with kinship and the agency of ancestors and supernatural forces. These subaltern perspectives rarely surface at the bargaining table, which constrains expression according to a stylized structure of dispute that only admits certain voices; rural workers know that their views – if openly expressed in that forum – would be dismissed as 'backwards'.

The movement holds together in spite of this duality because the unions' subaltern members are able to make strategic use of bourgeois political conventions (and the language of individual, class, and national interests) to better their welfare in the workplace. At the bargaining table rural Zulus may be formally *misrepresented* by this discourse – which makes inaccurate assumptions about their subjectivity – but they are not entirely un-served by it.

Discussion and conclusion: On the politics of representation

The history of unionism in the sugar industry suggests new ways of thinking about workerism in the South African labour movement. Workerism has long been characterised as a tendency that favoured class struggle over nationalist politics.⁸² But workerism also – often perhaps inadvertently – created a unique place for political engagement free from the kind of liberal politics that many South Africans considered objectionable. This helps explain the fact that FAWU, while managing to gain immense traction among workers from urban townships, has long struggled to acquire majority representation at centres in rural Zululand, where National Union's workerist approach has proven to be much more effective. To this day, National Union maintains steady appeal – and in most cases claims a majority – among workers in the mills that operate north of Durban, specifically at

79. Cf. R. Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

80. P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 159.

81. D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 12.

82. See J. Cronin, 'Errors of Workerism', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 12, 3 (1987).

Pongola, Umfolozi, Felixton, Amatikulu, Darnall, and Maidstone – centres that draw their labour primarily from rural Zululand.

This history has important implications for longstanding debates about the workers' movement of the 1970s. The dominant (popular) narrative holds that all documented worker struggle in South Africa has been consciously and intentionally in service of the ANC's project of national democratic revolution. The ANC peddles this story with particular vigour. Addressing the Ninth COSATU Congress in 2006, Jacob Zuma – then Deputy President of the ANC – took the floor with an elegant speech that outlined the history of the ANC's relationship with the working class. In it he attempted to link the trajectory of trade unionism to the political struggle led by the ANC. 'The relationship between the ANC and the working class', he insisted,

did not start with the formation of COSATU in 1985. We can ... never forget the role of trade unions in reviving our struggle during the 1972–73 Durban strikes ... These strikes were led by ... cadres who carried the political influence of the revolutionary trade union federation, SACTU. This indicates the correctness of the approach of political revolutionary trade union movements, as distinguished from those union movements that concern themselves only with factory floor issues.⁸³

This perspective has recently been supported by historians Sifiso Ndlovu and Jabulani Sithole.⁸⁴

Martin Legassick has criticised this historiography for ignoring data that shows the workers' movement to have been 'independent from nationalist orthodoxy' with a 'workerist' orientation to class struggle.⁸⁵ Indeed, he goes so far as to accuse Ndlovu and Sithole of falsifying history 'for nation-building purposes'; he indicts them for following the ANC into its compromise with capitalism, and argues that 'they hate and fear any expression of the political independence of the working class, which began to be manifest in the struggles of the 1970s'.⁸⁶ I am not interested here in whether or not Legassick's allegations are correct, but I appreciate this critique inasmuch as it offers a clear challenge to the ANC's nationalist meta-narrative. The ANC has an interest in representing all varieties of struggle as aligned with the project of national liberation. This nationalist historiography helps bolster the ANC's popular legitimacy, protects it against challenges from residual forces committed to alternative visions for the post-apartheid social order, and justifies the existence of the liberal state by casting it as the teleological end-point of a century of struggle. Paralleling the critique made by the Subaltern Studies

83. J. Zuma, 'Address Delivered by Deputy President of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, at the 9th COSATU Congress', (2006), <http://cosatu-media.wikispaces.com/Speech+of+ANC+Deputy+President+Jacob+Zuma+to+9th+COSATU+Congress>, accessed 29 September 2008.

84. South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970–1980*, Vol. 2 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2004).

85. M. Legassick, 'Debating the Revival of the Workers' Movement in the 1970s', *Kronos*, 34, 1 (2008), 240–266. The single survey conducted among striking workers at the time supports Legassick's claims by indicating that the strikes were spontaneous, leaderless, and focused almost solely on wages and other specific shopfloor issues. See Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*.

86. Legassick, 'Debating the Revival of the Workers' Movement', 266.

historians of India (whom I cited earlier),⁸⁷ we might say that South Africa's elite nationalists – those who piloted the ANC through the apartheid era and into power – deceitfully appropriate divergent histories of mass mobilisation to rationalize bourgeois-nationalist claims to hegemony. Workerist historians bring attention to this move by suggesting that other forms of consciousness may have been operative.

But this critique of the nationalist historiography does not go far enough, for the alternative it offers is yet another imposition of Western assumptions about worker consciousness. Just like its nationalist counterpart, the workerist narrative – which draws heavily on Marxist traditions – ultimately reinscribes universalist ideas about workers' interests and motivations that veil the particular textures of worker consciousness in South Africa. First, Marxist notions of abstract labour, the labour theory of value, alienation and exploitation presuppose the contractual, possessive individual that sits at the centre of Western social scientific thought.⁸⁸ Second, Marxists tend to assume that workers all over the world, irrespective of their specific cultural location, experience capitalist production in the same way; as Chakrabarty has put it, 'their propositions end up conferring on working classes in all historical situations a uniform, homogenized, extrahistorical subjectivity'.⁸⁹ Indeed, South African Marxists often read expressions of worker consciousness as culture-free, universal, utilitarian reactions to the objectively degrading conditions generated by the capitalist mode of production.⁹⁰

As the history of unionism in the sugar industry illustrates, neither approach can stake legitimate claims to this movement, for both sides come at the question of worker consciousness with prefabricated categories that obscure the culturally particular issues at stake. Legassick is correct to warn against the uncritical use of nationalist historiography to bolster the hegemonic project of the state. But he misses the fact that, on a broader level, the workerist historiography falls into a similar trap: it assumes that workers joined workerist unions because they recognised that the national democratic revolution would fail to mount a meaningful challenge to capitalism. But the data from the sugar industry shows that workers rejected NDR for entirely different reasons. In other words, *both* historiographical interpretations ignore subaltern forms of political consciousness in the process of imposing determinate teleologies and social-scientific notions of class, interest, individual, nation, and so on. This is precisely the critique that drives Postcolonial Theory and Subaltern Studies, which denounce Marxist and nationalist historiographies of anti-colonial resistance movements as reading Eurocentric categories into non-European contexts.

When it comes to the labour movement in South Africa, we need to abandon the assumption that all workers hold – or should hold – interests premised on orthodox revolutionary ideology, and instead devote ourselves to investigating the cultural bases of worker activism. Some scholars have made strides in this direction, including Keletso

87. E.g., R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*.
88. M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
89. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 223.
90. E.g., C. Van Onselen, 'Worker Consciousness in Black Miners: Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1920', *Journal of African History*, 14 (1973) 237–255.

Atkins and Thembisa Waetjen.⁹¹ In this vein, we need to actively search out the pillars that frame worker consciousness, not just assume them, and we must reject the claim that peasant political consciousness is ‘prepolitical’, along with the modernist narrative that underwrites it. Instead, we should think of subaltern epistemologies as stretching the category of the ‘political’ beyond the boundaries assigned to it in Euro-American thought. We need to take the distinctive political consciousness of rural workers seriously, as a fundamental part of South African modernity rather than as a ‘backward’ vestige of the past, and accept that they act in the world on their own terms, that their representations are not merely symbolic of some deeper secular or material reality. We have to do the difficult ethnographic work of exploring cultural difference, to render apparently bizarre beliefs comprehensible; not according to some universal rationality, but according to people’s own internally coherent, patterned frameworks of values, goals, and desires. For, to paraphrase anthropologist Daniel Rosenblatt, without some idea of culture, we can only understand the political lives of others in terms of our own projects.⁹²

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91. K. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money!: The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa 1843–1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993); T. Waetjen, *Workers and Warriors: Masculinity and the Struggle for Nation in South Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).
92. D. Rosenblatt, ‘Houses and Hopes: Urban Marae and the Indigenisation of Modernity in New Zealand’, (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2003).