



The 1973 Durban strike: A short history

1973

9 January

On 9 January 1973, workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile factory, outside Durban, came out on strike. Immediately thereafter, workers from small packaging, transport and ship repairs companies also came out on strike.



1973

End of March

By the end of March 1973, close on 100,000 mainly African workers, approximately half of the entire African workers employed in Durban, had come out on strike. South Africa's Apartheid Government and its White capitalist allies were shaken by this event



The strikes signalled the beginning of a turning point in the long struggle of Black, Coloured and Indian workers to build non racial trade unions and to open up the possibility of mass struggle against the Apartheid regime. The Durban strikes marked the first stage of mass action that contributed to the spirit of rebellion in the country. The strike signalled the growth of militant non racial trade unionism; the evolution of an alliance between workers, the broad united front of progressive organisations and the banned underground liberation organisations. Above all, the strike signalled the central role of working class organisations in shaping the ideology, strategy and tactics of the struggle against Apartheid and racial capitalism, which culminated in the fall of the Apartheid regime in the 1990s.

During this period three distinct political traditions appeared in labour movement with different perspectives on broader political issues. The first tradition was from shop floor unions. They developed a cautious policy towards political involvement. The second was a national democratic tradition which argued that labour had an obligation to address socio-economic issues as workers struggles in factories and townships were indivisible and majority of the unions in this category were affiliated with political organisations. The third tradition developed from Black Consciousness and Africanist movements. This category demanded black leadership within the unions.

1977

The 1970s saw the country experiencing renewed industrial and collective mass action, most notably the Durban strikes of 1973 and the student uprisings of 1976. The Wiehahn Commission was established in 1977 to respond to African labour militancy through a reconstruction of the then dual labour relations framework. The Commission's stated goals were the stabilisation of labour relations and the facilitation of economic growth. This reform process led to the liberalisation of labour legislation in South Africa and additionally to the inclusion of African trade unions into the state collective bargaining system, provided these unions registered.

Several the Commission recommendations were accepted with amendments and led the government to repeal the Bantu Labour Regulations Act of 1973. These changes gave all workers the ability to join trade unions and organise themselves, regardless of racial classification.¹²² However, this acceptance came with a number of residual conditions, one among them included that the registering trade unions, in line with provisions of existing trade unions, needed to furnish the government with membership and financial records, which was problematic as these details would have opened up the trade union movement to government intrusion, oversight, and control, including the repression of black trade unionists.

1979

as membership increased in the emerging trade unions, a number of them believed that they would be stronger in the face of repression and have more bargaining power if they were organised into a tight trade union federation.

Talks took place between these unions and this led to the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979 with 45,000 workers. By 1984 it had over 120,000 members and eight affiliated trade unions under its federation



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