FOSATU set itself up as a strong national federation. However, it believed that unity in the trade union movement as a whole was vital to trade union strength. Unity talks began as early as 1981 but were successful only by 1984. FOSATU Archives, AH 2680/B.82

**FOSATU’s unique approach to trade union organisation**

FOSATU was set apart from other trade unions by its unique approach. Aside from championing workers’ control and democracy within the union, FOSATU also believed that unions should be non-racial and independent of political parties. In addition, FOSATU aimed to create a national organisation with international links. It was even prepared to disband if wider trade union unity could be achieved.

It is important to remember that FOSATU was created within a specific context and time. State repression was extreme and hostility from employers was intense and consequently, trade union membership was small and organised into a tight-knit federation. It raises the question as to what extent these democratic traditions have been maintained in the 21st century as unions have had to confront new challenges within a new political dispensation and in a globalised economy.
The FOSATU logo was designed by Franco Frescura. The logo consists of three hands holding three implements, an industrial cog and the name FOSATU. FOSATU and the industrial cog is printed in gold, representing wealth and hope for the future. The background colour is red, which symbolises the international struggle of the working class. The three hands signify the unity of workers in industry, as well as their strength in holding the implements with which they work.
FOSATU’s unique constitution supported the following:

• **workers’ control** – workers, not union officials, control and lead their organisation
• **workers’ rights** – workers’ rights are protected in the workplace through the recognition of the right of shop stewards to be involved in negotiating all changes, grievances and dismissals
• **non-racialism** – the unity of workers without regard to race, sex or creed
• **worker independence** – the federation makes its own decisions independent of political parties or foreign organisations or governments
• **a national movement** – to act on a national level to establish workers’ rights and to remove arbitrary and unfair legislation affecting workers
• **a tight federation** – to combat the possible divisive tendencies of separation into industrial unions. FOSATU linked individual unions together closely in joint decision-making at local, provincial and national level
• **an industrial movement** – as the only effective means to negotiate worker conditions and advance worker control in industry nationwide
• **international worker solidarity** – to create and maintain links with workers on an international level, to act as a counter to multinational corporations
• **trade union unity** – FOSATU ultimately committed itself to trade union unity and was prepared to disband if wider unity could be attained.
Alec Erwin was a founder member of FOSATU and its first General Secretary. While studying at the University of Natal, Erwin became active in the Wages Commission of NUSAS. Later, as a lecturer at the university, he became part of the radical movement spearheaded by Rick Turner. He was regarded as one of the ‘freelance’ intellectuals who were not part of the emerging unions but offered them their time and expertise. In 1976, he became a full-time unionist and played a central role in worker education and communications programmes. In 1994 Erwin left the unions and became Minister of Trade and Enterprise in the Mbeki government.

FOSATU’s constitution set out the direction and purpose of the trade union federation. The original constitution forms part of the FOSATU collection, housed in Historical Papers. FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.4
The creation of democracy, both in principle and on the factory floor, was an onerous task and one that took time to achieve. In its first years of existence, FOSATU organisers will admit that democracy was an aspiration as much as a reality. There were accusations that white intellectuals were the driving force behind the unions. Changes in strategic direction were spear-headed by key officials (many of whom were workers). As the federation grew, it moved, sometimes rapidly, and generally unevenly, towards its democratic ideal of a strong worker-based and worker-led union.

“A leaflet produced by the National Union of Textile Workers announcing a report back to its workers at the Frame factory. Such report backs reflect the strong sense of accountability and democratic practice that FOSATU unions engaged in.

FOSATU Archives, AH 1999/C1.13.6.13
Democratic Unionism

The origin of democratic unionism is widely contested. The role of white intellectuals on the one hand, and black workers on the other, occupies centre stage in this debate.

Johan Maree asserts that white intellectuals played a central role in fostering workers’ democracy. They deliberately adopted a strategy to put union control into the hands of black workers. They created democratic structures at all levels of union organisation, and ultimately black workers rose through the ranks into positions of leadership.

“The force behind the democratisation of the unions was the commitment of intellectuals and other leaders to democratic practices in the unions.” Johan Maree

Sakhela Buhlungu, on the other hand, argues that the ‘lived experiences’ of black workers, and not only white intellectuals, shaped the traditions of the unions. Previous trade union experience, particularly from older members who had been involved in SACTU; the religious and traditional customs of African workers; and the negative experiences of repression, facilitated the development of a common-sense approach to democracy.

“... this [democratic] tradition is a composite of the lived experiences of black workers such as African tradition and religion, and a range of intellectual influences ...” Sakhela Buhlungu
Sonqoba Simunye – We will win as one! FOSATU calls for unity. FOSATU Archives, AH 2680/B31
During FOSATU’s time, the unions offered the only outlet for a democratic impulse amongst its members. By the mid-1980s, civil society organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) had also become potential avenues for democratic interaction. And after 1994, workers were able to participate in a parliamentary democracy as citizens. These processes certainly did not happen in isolation. The democratic traditions established by early trade unions made a significant contribution in the form, content and structure of civil society organs. It can also be argued that these traditions were integral to the drive for parliamentary democracy. This can be exemplified by the fact that the leading negotiators of the CODESA process, such as Cyril Ramaphosa, were drawn from the trade union movement.

The degree to which workers’ democracy and workers’ control still flourish in the age of COSATU is an argument that is difficult to answer conclusively. The form of organisation when a trade union federation is small, localised or regional, is very different from the situation in which a federation is national and involved in national agreements with single large employers or single groups of employers. For example, workers at a sweet factory in Johannesburg might have as a central demand in negotiations the improvement of housing benefits, while workers at a sweet factory in a small town such as Worcester might have few demands with respect to housing. It is the job of the central trade union leadership to consolidate demands into a single bargaining platform with national employers. From the perspective of the sweet-factory workers in Johannesburg, it might be assumed that their needs are being neglected by the national leadership.
The ‘Durban Moment’ – where a group of radical white intellectuals at the University of Natal became centrally involved in the labour movement – was marked by the emergence of two separate ideologies.

Firstly, Black Consciousness inspired black activists to lead resistance against the apartheid state. This in effect precluded white activists and forced them to seek alternative avenues of involvement such as the union movement.

Secondly, the emergence of a new kind of Marxism in the United States and Western Europe refocused attention on an analysis of power relations in terms of class struggle. The unions, with their working-class base, provided the perfect arena for white intellectual intervention.

From Natal, this movement broadened to other universities where radical intellectuals took up the struggle. Academics organised educational workshops, seminars and training for black workers in factories. This contributed to shaping the democratic structures that emerged on the shop floor.

Ultimately, it was the dynamic relationship between union intellectuals, and the lived experiences of black workers that fuelled a powerful democratic ideology in the FOSATU unions.

Rick Turner
In the 1970s, Rick Turner, an academic at the University of Natal, inspired a group of radical white intellectuals to engage actively in the labour movement. Turner placed great emphasis on the role of black workers in the economy. A firm advocate of the value of participatory democracy, he believed that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of their own lives through participation in trade unions. Rick Turner was assassinated by the apartheid state in 1978.
The gradual replacement of what can be called the founding white intellectuals of FOSATU in the early 1990s by worker-leaders can be seen in two ways: on the one hand, the departure of academic intellectuals can only reduce the innovative capacity and hence the strength of a trade union organisation. On the other hand, this can be seen as a natural process whereby intellectuals originating outside the movement are replaced by intellectuals groomed and trained within. These leaders can be called ‘organic intellectuals’.

**Is COSATU today stronger or weaker as a result of the rise of organic intellectuals?**

**Do intellectuals, whether academic or organic, have a significant role to play in helping fully developed unions chart the way forward, look at alternative systems, or make international links?**
FOSATU workers attend a May Day celebration at Secunda in 1985. FOSATU Archives, AH2680/B127
The shop steward – the voice of democracy

Workers’ control was based centrally on the shop steward. The shop steward was a union member who was elected by fellow workers to represent them in negotiating with management. This meant taking up the grievances of workers on a daily basis, and setting up a stable and ongoing engagement with management.

“To be a trusted shop steward I think you need to talk to a crowd well and I could do that ... I was not afraid to take things to management that workers asked me to take, and to come and report back what management said.”

Richard Ntuli, a MAWU shop steward in the early 1980s

FOSATU relied on the strength of shop-floor structures in directing union matters. It took management much longer to come to terms with the notion of shop stewards.

“The concept of the shop steward was still not understood. I can recall when Naawu organised at CDA, which is now Mercedes Benz. When we went to negotiate for shop stewards, the MD said: ‘Shop stewards? What are shop stewards?’ We said: ‘No, those are people that are elected by other workers to represent them when they have problems.’ He says: ‘Problems? Workers with problems don’t work in this factory!’ So the concept of shop stewards had not really caught on ...”

Les Kettledas, FOSATU Regional Secretary in the Eastern Cape, 1979 - 1985

“Organisers don’t own the union, workers own the union.”

Bernie Fanaroff, MAWU organiser 1973 - 1987
Shop stewards were the mainstay of the FOSATU unions, organizing workers on the shop floor. Shop stewards were fundamental in building workers’ control.
FOSATU Archives, AH2680/880
An extract from a FOSATU publication highlighting the duties of a shop steward. Such publications provided shop stewards with a clear sense of what role they were expected to play on the shop floor.  Taffy Adler Papers, AH2065/D14.7

FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.7.3.16.2.1
“You see, worker control means that officials can’t take decisions without workers.”
Joe Mahlangu, former CWIU shop steward

Worker’s story: Jabu Ndlovu

Born in 1947, Jabulile Florence Mkhize was the third of seven children in her family. At secondary school, Jabu met, fell in love with, and married Jabulani Ndlovu. By 1974 Jabu and Jabulani had five children and in order to meet expenses, Jabu found a job as a machine operator in a kitchenware factory.

Jabu joined MAWU in 1981 and became a senior shop steward in 1985. She campaigned around issues pertinent to women, such as maternity benefits, childcare and women’s health. Jabu said of herself: “I used to be just a quiet person, really, but I could get cross quickly ... When we had the first meeting, seeing that I was so cross, the workers said, ‘Hey you must be a shop steward!’.

Then because I was so cross I said, ‘Let me take this thing.’”

Jabu, her husband Jabulani, and their daughter were killed in a cruel attack on their home during the violence between the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Inkatha in Natal in 1989. Thousands of workers stayed away from their workplaces on June 5-7 to mourn Jabu’s death.

Shop stewards earned the trust of the workers. They acted for them, in a principled and often fearless manner. Shop stewards themselves were organised into a shop stewards’ committee. Here, all shop stewards in the workplace came together to discuss and plan tactics. These committees were a new feature of South African trade unionism and set independent unions apart from the TUCSA-styled unions.
If one compares the role of the shop steward in FOSATU to the role of the shop steward in COSATU, a few striking differences are apparent.

In FOSATU the shop steward was the voice of organised workers at a local level. Once national unions had been established under COSATU and growth was not the main focal point, shop stewards became the voice of the national leadership. In other words, workers grew to hear about national campaigns through their shop stewards.

Some would argue that this process has gone too far and what set FOSATU apart from all previous unions, namely that locally elected shop stewards were subject to control and recall by their membership, has declined into a system where workers receive mandates from national leadership and not the other way round.

Moreover, COSATU’s move towards centralisation and its continued role as a political player in the Tripartite Alliance has had a negative effect on COSATU leaders, from shop stewards upwards. With the shift in the political dispensation after 1994, union leaders and shop stewards were given access to greater power and privilege. Large numbers of union leaders, officials and shop stewards left the unions for ‘greener pastures’ in government or in business. This has provided a serious challenge to COSATU as they have sought to replace several strata of leadership. For many members of COSATU, there is a perception that union leaders have sold out the workers. This suggestion has been rejected by Patrick Craven, COSATU’s spokesperson (2010) who said “those who have left have been replaced by hundreds more workers who have kept up their good work.”

**Is it possible for a large trade union to continue to function with FOSATU-style shop stewards?**

**Is there a contradiction in a union federation representing millions of workers being in alliance with a party in government whose avowed policy is one of maintaining the capitalist system?**

**Are workers’ local grievances being ignored in favour of national priorities?**

**How have unions dealt with the expectations of their members that liberation and democracy would lead to improved living and working conditions?**
"(Our goal is) To build a strong labour movement – and that’s all."

Alec Erwin, FOSATU’s first General Secretary

Andrew Zulu, the Vice-President of FOSATU addresses a meeting of workers in the East Rand. FOSATU Archives, AH 2680/B84
Despite being vehemently opposed to the apartheid regime, FOSATU adhered to a policy of non-involvement in national politics. This policy stemmed from two considerations and beliefs. Firstly, trade unions continued to be harassed and repressed by the authorities until the early 1980s. Their core need was to implement and entrench worker-controlled structures. Repression brought about by political engagement necessarily jeopardised this stance. Pre-occupied with simple survival, FOSATU adopted a politically abstentionist stance.

FOSATU also feared that involvement in national politics would subsume workers’ interests in the name of a nationalist agenda, and thus compromise workers’ democracy and control.

"Workers obviously have political interests, but these are best catered for by workers’ organisations. What they should not allow is to let themselves be controlled by non-worker political parties ... or they will find their interests disregarded and their organisation and power gradually cut away."
Phil Bonner, a founder member of FOSATU

The Federation’s non-involvement in the broader political struggle was a contentious issue. While workers in the workplace recognised the strength of a focused union, many found it difficult to divorce themselves from the political struggles raging outside the factory floor. Inside the factory, they were workers; but outside, they were oppressed victims of the apartheid regime. Their identities did not begin and end as workers at the factory gates.

“You are a worker here at Volkswagen. When you come out there, something is going to happen. Maybe they beat you with the batons. So how can you not support politics? So they ought to support politics.” – A worker from Volkswagen
What did political involvement mean?

The field of politics was open to many definitions. For some, politics meant affiliation with a political party. For others, it simply referred to any activity outside the factory floor.

While many workers argued for a political role of the federation, the majority believed that FOSATU should not affiliate to any particular political grouping. They feared that such affiliation would create splits along ideological lines. They were well aware that as a worker organisation, the union encompassed all political positions within the working class. Affiliation to a particular grouping, it was feared, would alienate those workers opposed to that organisation. FOSATU was also worried that political involvement would bring about state repression, which had been the fate of the political union, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the 1950s.

**Political Unionism: SACTU**

The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was representative of political unionism. It was formed in May 1955 and was involved in a structured alliance with the Congress Movement, particularly with the African National Congress (ANC). SACTU insisted that the organisation of workers around economic conditions was inextricably bound up with the political concerns of black workers. It argued that any union movement that did not work for political emancipation alongside workers’ rights was essentially useless. While it was not banned alongside the ANC in 1960, its leaders and members had to endure constant police harassment until they closed down its local operations in 1963 and went into exile.
At its Second Congress in 1982, FOSATU was more confident of its capacity to survive and grow, and now responded to the mounting community-based struggles that shaped the political landscape of the 1980s. In 1983, the range of community and student organisations would coalesce into the United Democratic Front.

By reassessing from policy of abstention in political struggles, FOSATU paid respect to the role of the ANC, and resolved to pursue a political agenda. It would engage with progressive political organisations, but would not enter into permanent structured political alliances in which workers’ interests might be subordinated.

“IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WORKERS MUST STRIVE TO BUILD THEIR OWN POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION EVEN WHILST THEY ARE PART OF THE WIDER POPULAR STRUGGLE. THIS ORGANISATION IS NECESSARY TO PROTECT AND FURTHER WORKER INTERESTS AND TO ENSURE THAT THE POPULAR MOVEMENT IS NOT HIJACKED BY ELEMENTS WHO WILL IN THE END HAVE NO OPTION BUT TO TURN AGAINST THEIR WORKER SUPPORTERS.”

‘Workerist’ versus ‘Populist’

The challenge facing the labour movement was whether to involve themselves in wider political and social issues. The ensuing debates around these issues led to a clear rift in the movement.

‘Workerists’ favoured a class-based analysis of the struggle and sought the independence of workers’ organisations from political and social organisation. At one point, the idea of a Workers’ Party was mooted.

‘Populists’ embraced the notion of the struggle in terms of national liberation and saw the role of trade unions as part of a broader anti-apartheid popular front. They believed in a two-stage theory; in the first, a broad national movement would overthrow the apartheid regime. This would be followed by a socialist revolution, in which a socialist society would be established.

These two positions divided the labour movement. Both often failed to recognise the space that existed in between, i.e. the role of the community and involvement in community issues.

FOSATU focused on the development of strong shop-floor structures and believed that ‘populist’ unions like the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) often compromised the principle of workers’ control by deferring to the demands of political structures.
With the benefit of hindsight, during the 1980s as the apartheid state clung to power with increasing repression of workers and non-workers, it would have been impossible for a trade union movement to remain aloof from the broad-based liberation struggles of the time. As community-based organisations like the UDF took centre stage, FOSATU and other independent trade unions naturally had to shift their political position.

In a post-apartheid democratic South Africa, the political context within which trade unions operate is very different. Political participation has been normalised. Yet after 1994, COSATU became involved in government as part of the Tripartite Alliance, with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

Critics of COSATU’s current involvement in a political alliance suggest that COSATU has sacrificed organisational strength for strong political influence. On the other hand, COSATU’s increased political power has enabled the passage of favourable labour legislation as well as industrial institutions which provide workers with improved security in the workplace.

However, from the early 1990s, the growth of unions led to a centralising effect, which had a harmful impact on local-level structures. COSATU itself spoke of its “abandonment of the shop floor” as it engaged more and more with national initiatives. It also led to a greater reliance on leaders who were perhaps becoming increasingly alienated from its own members.

How has this affected the role of trade unions in South Africa today?

Unions by nature unite workers at the workplace and permit political diversity. Is it then necessary, in order to maximise shop floor strength, that unions maintain political independence?

Can it be argued that where a trade union supports a political party, that party should be of its own creation and under its own control?

In a capitalist economy, is it possible for a trade union to gain benefits from an alliance with the ruling party?

Do the examples of Britain in the 1970s and Brazil in the 2000s shed any light on this debate?
“The apartheid workplace was a place of white power and black powerlessness.”

Black workers experienced the world from a position of powerlessness. The authoritarian nature of apartheid denied them basic human rights and placed them in a brutal system that affected their lives on a daily basis. This oppression was duplicated on the factory floor. It was this condition of powerlessness that the union had first to overcome in order to become a potent industrial force.

The lived experiences of workers played a critical role in shaping the trade union traditions that emerged. They were also a powerful force in drawing workers to the union movement.

“We joined the trade unions because of the way we were treated.”

The capriciousness of white bosses, managers and especially foremen, was a deeply felt grievance. Foremen wielded unchecked power, particularly over the most basic factory processes, and controlled access to training and promotion.

“When he [a white man] gets employed they say he knows the work. When he is inside the firm I teach him. That made me cry. I didn’t get the money which he is getting, but am supposed to be his teacher.”

Mandlenkosi Makhoba, a worker at Rely Precision Castings

Low wages, job grading and training also led to a deeply felt sense of injustice. Underqualified white workers were placed in senior positions ahead of their more experienced black counterparts.
“When the boss liked you, he gave you an increase. But when he did not like you, no matter how hard you worked he did not give you an increase.”

Jabu Ndlovu
Health and safety conditions in many factories were deplorable.

“We were not given proper safety boots and overalls ... There are many accidents at the furnace when we pour and when we carry pots. Very often the molten metal falls out of the pots and burns us. It can burn you from the waist down, mostly on the legs ... There is no way you can escape the danger of burning ... I have been burned so many times I can't count.”

Mandlenkosi Makhoba
It was important that workers felt that they were part of FOSATU, that it was their union and that they were heard. It was commonplace for workers to write letters to FOSATU, expressing their grievances, asking for advice, and looking to join the union. FOSATU attempted to respond to these letters wherever possible.

In this letter, the workers of the Sugar Transport Service have written to the manager asking for an increase in salary from R1.30 to R2.60 as they are not able to survive on such wages. They also express concern that they often work a 12-hour shift but are only paid for 8 hours.

Here, a worker asks FOSATU for help as a result of being dismissed unfairly. FOSATU Archives, AH1999/810.2
Before African trade unions were recognised, wearing a union T-shirt on the factory floor was often cause for dismissal. This fear of victimisation made it difficult for unionised factory workers and shop stewards to organise in the workplace. Often this had to be carried out in secret, after work, and on a one-to-one basis. This made union organisation a slow and often arduous task in the early years. Taffy Adler Papers, AH2065/J44
Victimisation was a huge issue for workers involved in union activities. When management was unable to contain the demands and resistance of organised workers, the security police and the Department of Labour were often called in.

“You know, the situation here is politicised, racialised ... You suffer in this set-up. You must just be moderate. And then you get the right chances for moving up ... If you have definite political inclinations, chances of advancing are minimal. It is like that.”

A worker at Volkswagen

Because victimisation strongly hampered the ability of unions to organise in factories, FOSATU placed a major emphasis on recognition agreements. It was only through recognition that a space opened up for organisation without victimisation.

AN ARTICLE ON THE TRIAL OF ANGEL MAKHANYA WHO CHARGED S.A.G CERAMICS OF DISMISSING HER AS A RESULT OF VICTIMIZATION. FOSATU Archives, FOSATU Worker News, 9th Ed. December 1980
At first the emerging unions were suspicious of the legal system set up by the apartheid government. This was reflected in the unions’ initial reluctance to comply with registration procedures or to participate in industrial councils. However, increasingly, FOSATU’s legal advisers began to use the law to challenge existing labour laws and to create new ones. A major victory for FOSATU was its successful Supreme Court action in 1983 whereby the government lost the right to register unions on a racial basis. This opened the way for FOSATU unions to register.

FOSATU’s legal advisers used the courts to challenge significant unfair labour practices. The courts often ruled in favour of labour, and established guidelines in such areas as dismissals, victimisation, retrenchment and union recognition. A whole new area of labour law was created and there is no denying that the contribution of these labour lawyers to industrial relations practice has been profound.
Halton Cheadle, one of the many lawyers who worked for FOSATU, examines the legal obstacles that faced the labour movement in the past and the progress that has been made in an article entitled ‘The Law of Industrial Relations: Retrospect and Prospect’. AH1999/C1.73.16.2.3

Correspondence relating to a case brought against Mintex S.A. for victimisation of an employee. FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.7.4.6.1

A summons in the case of T.G. Gladile and Consolidated Cotton Corporation Pty Ltd, trading as Frametex Ltd. FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.7.4.6.5
Worker’s story: Moses Mayekiso

Moses Mayekiso, called “Moss” by his friends, was born in the Transkei in 1948. He was the firstborn of 12 children in his family. Mayekiso initially had dreams of becoming a teacher, but his education was constantly interrupted by duties at home or lack of money for school fees. When Mayekiso could not find a job close to home, and since he did not have a properly endorsed ‘pass’ to work in Cape Town or Johannesburg, his only other option was to go and work on the gold mines. Mayekiso worked for only three months at the Welkom mines before deserting – but this short and profound time had provided him with the experiences of racism and exploitation that were faced by most black workers in South Africa. This resulted ultimately in his being at the forefront of the workers’ struggle. He later worked at Toyota in Kew and it was here that he joined the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU). Mayekiso soon proved his leadership abilities when he was elected a shop steward. However, he was ultimately fired from Toyota because of his union activities.

In 1987, while Mayekiso was in jail facing a trial for treason, MAWU joined with other unions in the metal sector to form NUMSA, the giant union of which Mayekiso was elected General Secretary.
Women workers on strike are both defiant and joyful. Photo by I. Bissell, South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union Records, AH2196/K2.2
Women workers experienced triple oppression. They were exploited in the workplace, they were exploited at home and were discriminated against as African women.

FOSATU had from the outset a very clear idea of their approach to women workers on the shop floor. The federation recognised that management constantly sought to emphasise the differences between workers in order to weaken the organisation; and hence a fighting trade union needed constantly to engender class unity by emphasising workers’ common experiences and common source of exploitation.

Three phases can be recognised within women’s struggles in FOSATU:

1. The end to ‘special duties’ within the unions. It was common in South African trade unions before FOSATU to expect women delegates to do women’s work at union meetings – that is to make tea and tidy up afterwards. A conscious effort by all delegates to share such duties put an end to this practice.

2. Women’s demands to employers. The struggle for maternity rights (guaranteed jobs, paid leave and later, leave allowances for fathers) was a major platform for FOSATU in the early years and was broadly successful. By 1981 two plants had a negotiated maternity-leave policy in place and in 1984, an industry-wide agreement applied to all women in the motor industry. In 1987 an agreement was negotiated for the entire metal industry.

3. The double shift. At various meetings of FOSATU, women put forward the complaint that they worked a double shift – on the factory floor and at home caring for children and the house. Although to some extent this reflected European-feminist thinking,
the charges occasioned lively debate. At a 1983 FOSATU conference, one male worker spoke from the floor: “That women are exploited in the factory I’ll agree. But to say that to make food and fire for her husband and children is exploitation, I cannot agree. It is tradition among our people. It is unacceptable … that a man should look after the children and do the washing.”

To change some worker militants’ attitude to women was not a struggle won overnight. Women still encountered sexism and sexist practices within the unions. There were only a few women who occupied leadership positions, and meetings were dominated by men. Some women complained of sexual harassment by men in union structures. Many felt that their opinions were not taken seriously because they were women.
COSATU has continued to bring women’s struggles to the fore.

While workers generally are undermined by modern production processes such as casualisation and outsourcing, women, as the most vulnerable members of the working class, face the full brunt of these attacks. Another threat that women face presently in the workplace (as women) is the sex-for-jobs or sex-for-promotion practice. This is widely practised by men in authority – including, shamefully, within the trade union movement. This is a sobering example of patriarchy in the workplace.

**Can anything be done to stamp out sexist practices?**

**Is it possible to run a national campaign similar to the maternity leave campaign during the 1980s, to campaign for leave for HIV treatment, illness and recovery?**
“... There was a vision of strong industrial unions where a national worker unity and worker identity could be forged.”
Kally Forrest

In the years leading up to the formation of FOSATU, a debate had raged in worker and intellectual circles about the most desirable and effective form of trade union organisation. The debate centred primarily on industrial versus general unions.

At its launch in April 1979, it became clear that FOSATU was nothing like its predecessors. It established its identity comprised of both industrial and national unions, and at its core was a clear policy of trade union unity. Another critical feature was that it was a tight federation.

**Industrial versus General Unions**

General unions aimed to organise all workers in a given locality, irrespective of the industry in which they worked, into a single union. Those supporting general unions claimed industrial unions divided workers by industrial sector. General unions were more inclined to work closely with community groups and to be more revolutionary and political.

Those supporting industrial unions believed community and political struggles could be successfully engaged in only from a position of strength, and this was only available to black factory workers. Thus to truly wield power, black workers could not just organise in single factories but had to control entire industrial sectors. They nevertheless recognised that industrial unions could divide workers. To construct a working class movement, therefore, required a tight federation. TUACC was the prototype of this, and FOSATU took over this structure.
“We used to share organisers. The FOSATU secretary in each region was the organiser of last resort ... it was share and share alike, we shared photocopiers, benches, desks, cars, organising, strikes.”

Bernie Fanaroff
What did it mean to be a tight federation?

FOSATU unions shared a common vision and a common strategy and were expected to implement a common policy. In return, FOSATU shared its resources with affiliates, making it possible for unions to strengthen their shop-floor structures. In particular, the shared education workshops were critical in building a FOSATU identity. As a tight federation, it intervened in its members’ affairs. Unions that failed to adhere to policy were disciplined.

What did it mean to be an industrial union?

FOSATU established itself as a federation of industrial unions. This involved the recruitment of members on an industry-by-industry basis, in order to establish strong shop-floor organisation and create democratic worker-controlled structures.

What did it mean to be a national union?

In the 1970s, a range of different unions emerged, both industrial and general, and these existed alongside racially exclusive unions such as the TUCSA unions. These divisions within the trade union movement encouraged TUACC, and later FOSATU, to begin thinking in terms of trade union unity within the various industrial sectors. They believed that the creation of one unified national union would add strength and restrict the employers’ ability to exploit racial and regional differences.
One of the weapons that employers have developed in the last 20 years is outsourcing. Outsourcing refers to the contracting of elements of the production process to an outside, usually specialised, company. For example, a railway workers union organises all workers on the railways. But what if the railways outsources food catering to a catering company? Are catering workers then organised by the railway union or the catering union? On the one hand it makes more sense to be organised by the railway union. On the other hand, the interests of catering workers might be very different from those of railway workers. In addition, because they have different employers, their conditions of service may be completely different.

How do current employment practices affect the ability of trade unions to organise?

How can trade unions today address these problems?
FOSATU’s international relations

Henkel workers on strike. Taffy Adler Papers, AH2065/J60
FOSATU soon recognised the importance of establishing links with international trade union movements. The federation believed that they could learn from the experiences of others and use international contacts to advance their own struggles.

A common tactic of FOSATU was to rally the support of international unions. This made sense, given that many South African factories had been established by multinational corporations. FOSATU would embarrass publicly the South African subsidiary by highlighting its appalling wage structures and conditions to the parent company. It was also able to draw on the expertise and considerable resources of the international union to fight its battles with the parent company.

FOSATU was also committed to the socialist idea of building international workers’ solidarity. From the early 1980s, it saw its international campaigns as part of the global anti-apartheid movement.

**The Henkel recognition battle**

In 1978 the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) approached Henkel SA, a German multinational, for union recognition. Management ignored the demands of CWIU. In 1982, the workers went on strike, following management’s decision to walk out of wage negotiations and increase working hours. Striking workers were fired and scabs hired.

Workers from IG Chemie, the Henkel workers’ union in Germany, put pressure on its parent company. They called for a consumer boycott of Henkel’s detergents and glues. The International Chemical and Energy Federation also threatened to call an international boycott. As a result of this pressure, Henkel eventually agreed to recognise CWIU.
As the trade union movement has declined internationally, so too has the incidence of international solidarity. One of the most notable exceptions in recent times was COSATU’s picketing of the Mexican football team in 2010 World Cup. COSATU responded to requests for help by the Mexican Trade Union Federation in its ongoing struggles primarily with multinational corporations that had moved production from the USA to sweatshops in Mexico. To this end the Mexican government has actively encouraged multinational exploitation of Mexican workers.

In an age of globalisation, is international solidarity still possible? If yes, then does it facilitate or retard international solidarity among workers?

Alternatively, does the speed with which production can be moved from country to country mean that international campaigns can only expect short-term success?
“And when you are out of a job, you realise that the boss and the government have the power to condemn you to death”
Mandlenkosi Makhoba

“We contract people are different; we do the rough work while the location people do the easy work”
A migrant worker

“I joined the union because workers are not treated like humans by management”
A migrant worker
Memory is our heritage

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