FOSATU in Action
By 1984, as a result of a number of consolidations and amalgamations of unions, the number of FOSATU affiliates stood at eight.

**MAWU**
In April 1973, the Metal Allied Workers Union (MAWU) was established with the assistance of the Benefit Fund. In June it set up its first branch in Pietermaritzburg and a second branch was formed in Durban shortly thereafter among the Leyland workers. MAWU organised in the electrical engineering, electronic equipment, cables, motor, rubber, non-ferrous metals, iron and steel, and heavy engineering sectors. It soon established a reputation as a courageous trade union that was prepared to fight for its members’ rights.

MAWU was prepared to work with registered trade unions such as the white Engineering and Allied Workers Union (EAWU) and others associated with the Urban Training Project (UTP), but operated as an independent, non-racial trade union. This became an important principle for the new trade unions. MAWU and NUTW were the founding members of the Trade Union Advisory Council (TUACC) which was formed in October 1973.

**NUTW**
In September 1973, the Benefit Fund helped to form the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) with 500 workers, many of whom were women. By October, its numbers had climbed to 1 300 members. Like MAWU, it soon became well-known as a dynamic and fearless trade union. It was a co-founder of TUACC. By mid-1974, it had 5 000 members. It won a major victory when Smith and Nephew, an international pharmaceutical company based in Durban, formally recognised it. This enabled the trade union to organise its workers ‘in-depth’, building up a system based on shop stewards and factory-floor organisation that became the defining characteristic of the new trade unions.
Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU)
The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) was founded in 1973. It organised in the passenger transport, goods transport, stevedores, motor ferry, municipality, cement products, hospitals, cleaning and security sectors. It affiliated itself to TUACC in 1974. By 1984 the TGWU had a membership of 11 080.

CWIU
In 1973, workers from a Johannesburg company called African Explosives and Chemical Industries joined the Benefit Fund and, with its help, began to recruit Durban chemical workers from AE&CI and Chrome Chemicals into the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). It was launched in November 1974 with 1 000 members. It organised workers in the sectors handling chemicals, plastic, rubber, glass, industrial minerals, petroleum and coal products, gas, candles, oils and fats. It affiliated to TUACC in 1974.

National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU)
The National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) was an amalgamation of the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA) and its African parallel, the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW). Initially NUMARWOSA was affiliated to the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) and was registered as a union for coloured workers only. In 1976 NUMARWOSA withdrew from TUCSA because of its refusal to organise unions on a non-racial basis. Leadership recognised that whatever the legal restrictions were, it was vital to organise all workers in the motor and allied industry. By 1980, at the time of the merger, NAAWU had 12 000 members and was recognised as the most representative union in the automobile assembly industry. It had an established presence in the tyre manufacturing plants and was beginning to organize in the motor component plants.
**Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU)**

The Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU) was established in 1974 with the help of the Urban Training Project (UTP). It was based in Durban where it organised in the sugar, milling, biscuits, bakeries, dairies, brewing, sweets and chocolate sectors. By 1977 it had expanded into northern and southern Natal and the Transvaal. By 1982, SFAWU had succeeded in organising 100 per cent of the workers in the factories that fell within its sector. SFAWU was one of the two CCOBTU unions that broke away and affiliated with FOSATU.

**Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAWU)**

PWAWU was also established with the help of the Urban Training Project. It was founded in 1974. It organised workers in the paper and pulp, paper printing and packaging, wood, sawmills and furniture sectors. It had branches in the Transvaal, Natal and the Western Cape. PWAWU was successful in breaking down ethnic divisions between Mpondo and Zulu workers in Natal.

**Jewellers and Goldsmiths Union (JGU)**

The Jewellers and Goldsmiths Union (JGU) was the smallest of FOSATU’s affiliate unions with a membership of 470 in 1984.
Some people claimed unions like NUMARWOSA were bureaucratic because they were well run, but we began to see that a union didn’t have to lose its militancy if it was run properly. We believed we could learn from their style of unionism.”

Alec Erwin, first General Secretary of FOSATU
FOSATU recognised that a key aspect to success was to ensure that it was a tight organisation in which sound financial and administrative procedures were maintained. FOSATU drew on the bureaucratic tradition and administrative successes of NUMARWOSA as part of the challenge to develop a strong and militant trade union movement. It recognised that membership growth and the extension of its influence needed to take place hand-in-hand with a well-administered and tightly run federation.

FOSATU was a well organized federation. It kept records of all its meetings from national to regional to local levels. As a result of this strong administrative focus, the Historical Papers Archive is able to house such a solid collection of material on FOSATU.

**Minutes of the Seventh FOSATU Central Committee Meeting, July 1982**
FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.7.1.1

**Minutes of the FOSATU executive meeting, August 1971.**
FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.7.2

**A financial statement for the period of April to December 1979 reflects expenses of R33 524.54.**
FOSATU Archives, AH1999/C1.1.5
In the early years of union organisation, recognition was crucial if unions were to survive. It was a defensive tool that would protect the worker. Without recognition, union organisers were subject to harassment, victimisation and arbitrary dismissal. Under such circumstances, it was impossible to build a union.

**What does recognition mean?**

- The union has the right to represent its members and negotiate wages and working conditions
- Recognition of shop stewards
- Union access to the workplace
- The right to negotiate grievance and dismissal procedures
- These rights were enshrined in a Recognition Agreement negotiated between employers and the union. For the first time, the two parties negotiated as equals at factory level.
Smith and Nephew recognition agreement
In 1974, the emerging union – the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) – was recognised by the British-owned textile company, Smith and Nephew. This was a watershed moment. It was the first South African union to be recognised. Usually factory bosses were extremely hostile to recognition agreements and often, protracted battles were fought with unions to prevent them from operating.
The Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) engaged in a long struggle to gain recognition from the giant multinational Colgate-Palmolive.

In February 1980, CWIU requested a union recognition agreement. The Colgate management refused, agreeing to negotiate only with the liaison committee.

An important feature of the struggle was the decision by CWIU to use international pressure. The union accused Colgate of violating the ‘Sullivan Code’ which required all American companies in South Africa to recognise a trade union whether it was registered or not. The struggle dragged on and in 1981, CWIU called for a boycott of all Colgate products. This was one of the earliest examples of workers’ struggles being taken into the homes of black workers outside the factory gates.

A huge campaign was launched, with posters and stickers pasted everywhere urging workers to boycott Colgate. It was so successful that management decided to back down. The managers subsequently changed their minds and refused to negotiate, so CWIU workers came out for a two-day strike. Finally, a recognition agreement was signed on 21 August 1981.
"When Colgate caved in and agreed that we should negotiate at plant level it was a very big victory for us because ... it made our battle easier in terms of facing employers ... [for] the right to negotiate wages and conditions on the shop floor”.  

Dusty Ngwane

Recognition was inextricably bound up with the issue of registration. However, as FOSATU grew in strength, and its shop-floor structures became more solid, it recognised that it was quite possible to organise without recognition.
“We believe that the law would divide workers by race.”
FOSATU Worker News, Feb 1980

The Wiehahn Commission opened up a space for the recognition of the emerging unions of the 1970s. Registration offered unions legitimacy, but it imposed restrictive measures on the unions. Most importantly, it excluded migrants from joining unions and disallowed racially mixed unions.
The FOSATU unions were faced with a difficult choice. Either they registered and accepted the government restrictions imposed on them. Or they chose not to register and faced problems of recognition, losing their rights to use the Industrial Councils. These councils had been invaluable to white unions in improving wages and working conditions.

Initially the emerging unions refused to register. However, after a few months, NUMARWOSA, a FOSATU affiliate, applied for registration on the understanding that they would be allowed to operate on a non-racial basis. This opened the space for FOSATU to engage with the issue of registration. The federation agreed to register on the condition that no racial restrictions were imposed on the unions, and that migrant workers were allowed to join.

Eventually in 1983 the state gave way, leading to explosive trade union growth and major shop-floor gains for unionised workers.

“I always thought Wiehahn would give us new openings. Registration and the other controls could not tie us up if we were strong in the factories. They needed blunter instruments to do that, and because they said they were reforming, they couldn’t use them.”

Alec Erwin, first General Secretary of FOSATU

The registration issue split the emerging unions. The independent Cape unions refused to register, arguing that they would not place themselves under state control. They also believed that the registration mechanism could only be reformed if unions did not register. FOSATU, however, saw registration as an issue of tactics and not of principle. The federation believed that registration would make it more difficult for companies to refuse recognition. It also believed that it would strengthen the unions’ bargaining power and reduce employer and state favouritism for dealing with registered unions. FOSATU was also keen to get stop-order facilities to collect members’ subscriptions. The state tied stop-orders to registration.
It was essential for the FOSATU trade unions to grow their numbers. Strength through numbers was what would give the unions their power to challenge employers.

Of course, growth in numbers brought with it its own contradictions. The FOSATU unions had committed themselves to consolidating their organisational strength in a limited number of factories. They had to secure a balance between strong internal organisation and solid workplace structures on the one hand, and growth in numbers to present a united front that would be difficult to ignore on the other hand.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the FOSATU unions were small. Initially, the unions faced enormous difficulties in trying to recruit union members. More often than not, recruitment took on a clandestine nature. Visible union work within a factory could result in instant dismissal. Unionists would recruit ‘behind bushes outside factories or in secret cells across company departments’. It was also a personalised interaction as shop stewards would visit workers at home in the townships.
It was only during the 1980s that the FOSATU unions began to grow in numbers. A number of factors made this growth possible. After Wiehahn, recruitment was able to take place more openly. The economic hardships confronting workers also contributed to union growth. Rising inflation led to a continued attack on their living standards.

“Employers for about a year weren’t quite sure how to deal with us. Some of them went over the other way, they were so accommodating — after refusing to talk to us for years! It took about two years for them to realise they didn’t have to say much to us, then they reverted.”

Bernie Fanaroff, a MAWU organiser
In general, trade unions tread a path between being a smaller more democratic organisation and a large more centralised one. As growth takes place, as it must, in order to increase bargaining power, the trend internationally has been one of increasing centralisation and thus increasing distance between leadership and the rank and file.

Professor Sakela Buhlungu makes a different point. He refers to a ‘paradox of victory’ wherein COSATU gained political power at the expense of organisational strength.

**Is this a valid criticism of Cosatu’s position today?**
A great deal of successful union recruitment took place in migrant hostels. Migrant workers were the most vulnerable, coming from impoverished homelands, and facing pressures from an ongoing attack by the state, which aimed to exclude them from the urban areas. Living in hostels, they were able to develop a collective understanding of trade union organisation. The Vosloorus Hostel on the East Rand, which housed 15,000 men, serves as an example.

“The hostels have been good places to talk and learn about trade unions and the struggles in the factory. Meetings are easy to organise because everybody lives together. We live close to fellow workers of other factories. We share our experiences, and the victories and defeats in one factory become lessons for a large number of people.”

Mandlenkosi Makhoba, a worker at Rely Precision Foundry

Unions also gained the trust and loyalty of their migrants when they saw how hard FOSATU fought for the rights of migrant workers. FOSATU vociferously opposed the Wiehahn regulations that attacked the migrant workers’ right to belong to registered unions. It was through this initiative that the state finally conceded on the issue.

However, at the end of the day, migrant workers were the casualties of a state-inspired onslaught. Through wide-scale retrenchments, migrants ultimately were lost to the union cause, and it was urban African workers who were to become the mainstay of the unions.

In the 1980s, the FOSATU unions moved towards mass recruiting and their numbers increased dramatically.
Victory at SASOL

The Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) wanted to organise the workers in the chemical giant SASOL. However, this oil-from-coal company was a national key point and trade unions were forbidden. The CWIU got around the strict security by pretending to be visitors and organising the workers at the hostel.

The key to CWIU’s success was its willingness to use black clerks to recruit workers. They were the best recruiters because they worked in the personnel departments and thus had access to workers’ files. The CWIU held a huge rally and workers signed up in droves.

By February 1984, the CWIU had recruited 4 000 workers, about half of the total workers at SASOL. The company finally conceded defeat and granted CWIU stop-order facilities for union subscriptions. SASOL had to deal directly with the trade union in the years that followed.

This was an impressive victory, achieved in spite of considerable hardships for organisers.
Worker’s story: Petrus Tom

Petrus Boy Tom was born in 1935 in Top Location near Vereeniging. As a boy, Tom drew water for a blacksmith, tended gardens in white suburbs, and looked after bicycles and carried shopping for customers at OK Bazaars to help his mother and grandmother make ends meet. He first joined a union shortly after starting work at a bakery. Later on, at African Cables, where Tom started working in 1956, he was involved in challenging the management on various issues: such as getting paid the shift allowance that white workers were already receiving, introducing a canteen for African workers, and organising a system where workers did not have to queue for their pay. Tom was involved in the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) during the 1960s. In the early 1980s Tom joined the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) and later became an organiser in Vereeniging.
It can be argued that the strength of FOSATU was related to the organisation being embraced by migrant workers. In previous bursts of trade union activity in the 20th century, migrants had been regarded as difficult to organise, or the forgotten workers. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, some other grades of workers were regarded as too difficult to organise. Largely, these workers remain unorganised even today. The hard-to-organise workers included domestic workers, farm workers, foreign workers, casual workers, workers at home, informal traders and sex workers.

Are these grades of workers forever unreachable by a trade union organisation?

Alternatively, is it possible to adapt organising tactics to include these forgotten workers?

Critics often refer to organised COSATU plants as a ‘labour aristocracy’ compared to the unorganised, whose working conditions are so much worse. Is this a valid point? Are we seeing two fractions of the working class with different interests forming?
"... It [worker education] was to teach people how the trade union organisation can be used to defend the interests of not only the working people, but also the working class."

Bernie Fanaroff, a MAWU organiser
Workers’ education was fundamental to the growth and development of the union movement under FOSATU. The nature of educational interventions was rich and varied, and encompassed both formal structures and informal overtures.

**FOSATU Worker News**

FOSATU recognised the vital role of education in promoting workers’ control and the democratic principles of the Federation. As a result, FOSATU unions produced a large number of publications that aimed to educate workers on their rights and to highlight the vital role of workers in working class struggles. *FOSATU Worker News* was one such publication. It was written with workers in mind, sensitive to the low literacy levels of many workers. It also published Sotho and Zulu editions. The publication provided workers with news of the various affiliates’ activities, FOSATU campaigns, and new labour laws that emerged. It also informed workers of the unions’ policies and provided histories of working class struggles. It was a vital educational tool for workers, and one that was highly valued.

The Health and Safety campaigns launched by FOSATU were sustained through booklets which aimed to empower workers by providing them with information about the special dangers of their jobs. They also taught workers how to use the information to negotiate with management for rights and better conditions.

The booklets were created with painstaking attention to detail. In an era of limited technology, information was typed, and the documents were put together by hand.

“[In order] to exercise power, you have to understand the issues.”

Enoch Godongwana, MAWU organiser and later NUMSA general secretary
FOSATU booklets covered a range of topics and issues.

A number of labour academics who were not formally employed by FOSATU offered their intellectual services as lawyers, teachers and researchers. They were mostly white and middle class. These so-called ‘freelance intellectuals’ established a number of initiatives such as the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) and the South African Labour Bulletin.

The Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) was created by a group of Durban-based academics in 1973. It began as a correspondence course to help workers understand the social and economic situations under which they operated. The Institute produced study books for union activists in both English and Zulu. It aimed to introduce them to the notions of accountability and the importance of a mandate.

The *South African Labour Bulletin* is a journal on labour that emerged out of the IIE. The journal addresses general matters on trade unions, both at home and abroad, and includes topical discussions and analyses of economic trends.
FOSATU Labour Studies course, 1980 – 1985

The FOSATU Labour Studies Courses was run by labour academics at the University of the Witwatersrand for two weeks at a time for the advanced worker leadership of FOSATU. There were modules on labour law, labour history, the labour process and worker organisation, and contemporary political economy. They were taught by Halton Cheadle, Phil Bonner, Eddie Webster and Duncan Innes. These courses were popular and well-attended by shop stewards and union organisers. They also had the added advantage of bringing worker leaders together for two weeks at a time, and helped to build a cohesive national worker leadership.

The courses began in 1980 and ran for two years at Wits until the University Council terminated the contract with FOSATU on the grounds that the contract breached academic freedom, as it was only for FOSATU and not for any other trade union federation. Both the academics and FOSATU were outraged as it was both hypocritical of Wits, as they were running specific courses for Anglo American, and short-sighted, as Wits lost an opportunity to pioneer university-based trade union education in South Africa. The academics continued to teach the course off-campus at St Peters in Rosettenville until 1985, when the initiative was terminated with the formation of COSATU.

Did this group of academics wield power in the labour movement? Eddie Webster, a labour academic, believes not. He stated: ‘These freelance intellectuals did help define worker interests and clarify the direction of the union, but they did not have any organisational power inside the movement.’

Trade union members were eager to absorb as much knowledge as possible, and demonstrated enormous commitment to the various educational avenues open to them. One such innovation was the ‘siyalalas’ (literally ‘we sleep’). These were educational training sessions that would continue through the night.
“We would call a siyalala and meet at the office on Friday night after work. We would talk all night, and they were well attended. The debate, the manner in which people conducted themselves was good. People were committed to this union.”

Elias Monage recalls the participation in the siyalalas
“History and society as the workers see it!”

More organic forms of worker education also played an important role in the unions. Cultural activities went hand in hand with education workshops, and workers used these opportunities to convey their experience and understanding of society.

“A play about a strike is shown to the very workers involved in that strike. That process makes activists more determined and grooms them ... our plays, poems and paintings have the potential of popularising our worker politics”.

Worker poet, Mi S’Dumo Hlatswayo

“When he introduced us to labour politics he started with the activities of SACTU ... We did not have anything to look at as a mirror, except the oral history that Manci had given us ... we were introduced by Manci to the Industrial Aid Society ...”

Sipho Kubheka reflects on how the experience of older unionists helped shape his own understanding of unions

Alfred Temba Qabula, Mi S’Dumo Hlatswayo and Lawrence Zondi were some of the worker poets who passed on traditions and memories of struggle through the use of the traditional Nguni imbongi – praise poetry. The context and performance of worker poetry added further substance and meaning to the poems. They were often performed at May Day rallies and at workers’ funerals, further inspiring their audiences in the spirit of the moment.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning also played a critical role in educating workers. This was learning on the shop floor, and immediate and valuable lessons were drawn. Evaluation of tactics and failures, gaining information and debating future projects were an ongoing process that engaged the membership at all levels, from union organisers to shop stewards and their committees, and the workers themselves.
Worker’s story: 
Mi S’dumo Hlatshwayo

Mi S’dumo Hlatshwayo was born in 1951 and grew up as an illegitimate child in a working-class household. The family’s poverty stopped his education in Standard 7 – an event that traumatised him – and forced him into the labour market at the age of 15. Hlatshwayo recalls: “...I wanted to be a poet, to control words, many words, that I may woo our multicultural South Africa into a single society. I wanted to be a historian, of a good deal of history; that I may harness our past group hostilities into a single South African ... history ... After 34 years of hunger, suffering, struggles, learning to hope, I am only a driver for a rubber company ...’ Hlatshwayo continued his own education by reading whatever material came his way. In 1984 Hlatshwayo’s poem, ‘Black Mamba Rising’, celebrating the Dunlop workers’ struggle and victory, caused a sensation beyond union circles. This poem contributed both to the revival and transformation of imbongi poetry and to the political struggle by expressing the issues and challenges that the workers were experiencing.
A large number of choirs sprang up in FOSATU factories. These choirs used tunes from church songs, but changed the words to celebrate workers’ newly discovered power. The FOSATU choirs were so popular that they often competed to gain a spot to perform at the Education Workshops.

FOSATU Archives, AH2680/H37
The unprecedented number of strikes in the early 1980s reflected workers determination to negotiate their own wages and conditions in the face of the harsh conditions imposed upon them by employers. FOSATU Archives, AH2680/C2

“... it is the strike weapon, the ability to withdraw labour, that lies at the basis of trade union power.”

Kally Forrest
Strike action was fundamental to the growing success of FOSATU. With each victory, workers were empowered; with each setback, there were important lessons to be learnt.

Many of the early strikes of the FOSATU affiliates were spontaneous outbursts, and the unions were taken by surprise. However, it was testament to FOSATU’s tight organisational structures that it was able to turn these strikes to its advantage.

“*We are commanding. We are commanding. The workers are commanding now. No more the police or the Labour Relations Department.*”

Vuyo Kwinana, a Volkswagen union activist, echoed the sense of empowerment and victory that the workers felt.
The Frame Strike, 1980

Violence broke out when police confronted Frame Workers on 22 May 1980. Police tried to disperse workers with teargas. It spread quickly to the nearby Clermont township, which rapidly became a war zone.  
* Natal Mercury, South African Institute of Race Relations Records, AD78/11B2
The Frame strike was the first strike that centred around the demand for a living wage. It is notable for the extreme violence that it generated from the state.

Workers at the Frame Mills, centred in Durban and Pinetown, demanded wage increases in accordance with a living wage. Within five days, 6,000 workers were on strike. Frame fired them all. Amid growing violent confrontations with the police and Frame security guards, the workers stayed out for a week. Frame was forced to grant a 15% increase on top of the 10% pay rise it had already implemented. Some 117 workers were fired after the strike, most of them shop stewards.
Volkswagen Strike in Uitenhage, 1980

The Volkswagen factory, in Uitenhage, had been well-organised by UAW/NUMARWOSA in the late 1970s. Recognition had been achieved in 1977 and the Liaison Committee scrapped.

On the anniversary of the Soweto Uprising, June 16 1980, 4 000 black workers at Volkswagen went on strike after failing to reach an agreement with management on a living wage. The strike quickly expanded into a general strike of most of the workers in Uitenhage. The strike lasted for three weeks. From the outset, the union gained support from the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) and IG Metall – the German metal union. It was an IMF negotiator that finally brought the strike to an end, demonstrating the importance of international links.

The workers refused to give up until their demands were met. Ultimately, they returned to the Volkswagen factory with their jobs intact and their union strengthened. The strike established the union in the eyes of management and in the eyes of the workers themselves. For the first time, coloured and African workers joined together to challenge management and secure their demands. Ultimately, Volkswagen became the best organised factory in the union.
The East Rand Strikes, 1981 – 1982

During 1981 and 1982, an unprecedented wave of strikes within the metal industry rocked the East Rand. Significantly, these strikes were spontaneous in nature, but MAWU stepped into the breach and considerable gains were made for workers and for the union.

Workers went on strike for varied reasons. Some demanded wage increases, but it was the unfairness of the apartheid workplace that bound workers in ongoing struggles with management. Arbitrary dismissals, unfair retrenchments and unjust treatment by white foremen were at the heart of these struggles.

In each instance the workers became more aware of the role of the trade unions, and the power of the strike. The strikes on the East Rand strengthened MAWU considerably.
The Rely Precision Strike

“Our struggle at Rely was important ... We showed how even a small group of workers can stand up against the bosses.”

Mandienkosi Makhoba, a worker at Rely Precision, reflects on the impact of the Rely strike.

When a worker was unfairly dismissed at the Rely Precision factory in Boksburg, the workers went on strike. Management promptly fired them. MAWU encouraged the workers to develop a play about their experience, which they went on to perform all over the East Rand.

Union involvement was invaluable for the Rely workers, but it also demonstrated to other workers just how far the union was prepared to go to support its workers. MAWU sued the Minister of Police, gaining a monetary pay-out for its workers for police assault. It paid the fines of workers who were found guilty of striking illegally. MAWU demonstrated in a very real way that they were there for the workers!

MAWU had demonstrated its commitment to the workers’ struggle and its numbers increased dramatically. However with mass membership came problems of organisation. MAWU did not have adequate organisational structures in place to cope with its support, and the union began to suffer setbacks with management. MAWU was forced to adapt. One of its strategies was to join the Industrial Council in 1983. MAWU had suffered defeat at the hands of Anglo-American who had insisted on dealing only with the Industrial Councils.

Another significant strike was at Hall Longmore, where workers demanded a wage increase. They went on strike and won! When news of this victory spread to other workers on
the East Rand, this was, according to Moss Mayekiso, the ‘beginning of the wave of strikes that took place on the East Rand’.

**Shop Steward Councils**
The shop steward councils played a vital role in mobilising workers and coordinating strategies. They inspired a unity of action, and demonstrated the value of organisation.

A poem written by a migrant worker describing the harsh life of migrant workers on the East Rand. From The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers by M. Mandlenkosi

**Shop Steward Council**
It was during the battles on the East Rand that workers in FOSATU began to organise a new committee to increase their power – the shop stewards council.

Shop stewards from different factories on the East Rand came together to discuss common problems and ways of building their organisations. They also believed in playing an active role, not only in the workplace, but in areas where workers were affected in general. In 1982, the shop stewards council played a leadership role in protesting against the demolition of shacks by the East Rand Administration Board.

FOSATU’s constitution did not envisage shop steward councils. However, these councils spread to all areas where FOSATU had a presence. In 1982, FOSATU changed its constitution to allow for shop steward councils.

These councils played a crucial role in developing worker leadership in FOSATU. They became the foundations of the federation and often took the lead in fighting for workers’ rights, both inside and out of the factory.
Worker’s story: Andrew Zulu – a worker leader

Andrew Zulu was one of a number of worker activists who came to prominence as a result of his work on the shop steward councils during the strikes on the East Rand.

Andrew was born in Nqutu in Zululand. His schooling came to an end when his father was unable to afford his school fees. Being a star soccer player, Zulu was recommended to a Johannesburg-based club, where he played for about 12 years. In 1974, he registered and began to work in factories around Germiston. In 1977, when Zulu heard via a friend about MAWU, he was immediately interested, joined the union, and began trying to recruit other workers. Zulu recalls initially feeling suspicious of white involvement in the unions, but realised through experience that ‘in the real worker struggle there is no place for racism’. In his role as FOSATU’s Vice President, Zulu fostered future worker leadership so that workers’ children could benefit from the struggle.
Traditionally, strikes are the sharpest weapon in the armoury of the working class. The withdrawal of labour can cause an absolute shut-down of any enterprise. In the 1980s, in the time of Reagan, the US President and Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, employers overseas hit back and developed a series of strategies to minimise both the possibility of strikes and the strength of the organised working class. South Africa has not been immune to these new tactics.

The strategies included:
• Shifting production elsewhere in the world where labour is cheaper (most notably, China)
• Outsourcing: the division of production into discrete units, with each unit being the responsibility of a small manufacturer, has fragmented what was previously the sites of large concentrations of labour.
• Casualisation: employers frequently refuse to award permanent status to continual employees. Under this system, workers remain casuals for the duration of their working life. In this way, employers avoid the costs of workmen’s compensation, sick leave, annual leave, retrenchment, pension and other benefits that organised workers have fought for. A well-known example in South Africa is a chain of supermarkets, Woolworths.
• Contracting: this is similar to outsourcing, except the outsourced unit of production is carved out of the existing force. An example is breweries and bottled mineral factories who sell delivery trucks to the drivers, sometimes at terms favourable to the drivers, and contract the drivers to deliver the firm’s product. In this way, the driver becomes a small businessman who owns his own truck and employs his own delivery crew, none of which are unionised. At a stroke, employers reduce the amount of labour they directly employ and shift human resource responsibilities on to other people.

But perhaps the strongest weapon employers have used against strikes in a country like South Africa is an ideological one, where production for export or domestic consumption is regarded as a national goal. Strikes are equated in the newspapers and in popular belief to national treachery or betrayal. An example of this was in 2010 where a threatened strike by power workers was branded treasonous because it threatened the power supply to the World Cup soccer matches.

In the 21st century, are strikes still the major weapons of organised labour?

Is it possible to develop strategies to combat these initiatives by employers? (For example, it is neither impossible nor illegal to organise casual labour, but it is much more difficult than organising registered workers.) The question is, can a modern trade union afford to turn its back on casual workers?
In the 1980s, the trade union movement felt the full force of state repression as trade union organisers and leaders were banned, detained and some even killed.

'Those who were seen to be active both at a political level and a union level were the first targets.'

Vusi Mavuso, a trade union organiser at the time

'The white policeman held my hands behind my back while the other walked on my ankles. It was very painful ... He then put his hand against my forehead and banged the back of my head hard against the wall twice. He said "Sit daar jou striker".'

James Tamboer, a shop steward at General Motors, speaks of his interrogation.

The death of Neil Aggett

Neil Aggett was a trade union activist working for the independent Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU). He trained as a doctor but soon moved into trade union work on a full-time basis. He was appointed as the organiser of FCWU’s Transvaal branch and helped organise a successful strike against Fatti’s and Moni’s. In 1981 he was detained by the security police in a swoop against largely white union and student activists. On 5 February 1982, after 70 days in detention, Neil Aggett was found dead, hanging in his cell. He was the 51st person to die in detention.

According to the security police, Aggett committed suicide. However, fellow detainees testified to Aggett being tortured in prison. In a statement released by the Food and Canning Workers Union, the union stated, ‘As far as we are concerned there are no ‘suicides’ in detention, only victims.’

About 15 000 people attended Neil Aggett’s funeral. The FCWU called for a stayaway on that day, to which there was a widespread response from unions.
The death of Andries Raditsela
More than 30 000 mourners bade farewell to Andries Raditsela who died of head injuries on May 6 1985 shortly after being released from police detention. Raditsela, aged 29, was an active worker leader. He was a senior shop steward at Dunlop in Benoni and sat on both the Transvaal Branch Executive Committee and the National Committee of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union. He was also active in FOSATU where he served as vice-chairman of the Transvaal region. Raditsela was committed to bringing about wider unity among the working class.

Andries Raditsela was taken into police custody allegedly for stealing a car which the union had hired for his use. However, later the police insisted that Raditsela had been detained under Section 50 of the Internal Security Act. Shortly before he died, the police withdrew the detention order.

Over 100 000 workers in factories around the country downed tools and held memorial services for Andries Raditsela. This demonstration of worker solidarity served to cement trade union unity immediately prior to COSATU’s formation.
The State of Emergency

In the 1980s, the state was placed under increasing pressure from resistance movements. It responded with even harsher methods of repression. In 1985, a limited State of Emergency was declared in identified ‘trouble spots’, followed by a national State of Emergency from 1986 onwards. More activists were detained, and the power of the security forces was boosted.

On 21 March 1985, on the anniversary of Sharpeville, security forces attacked a crowd in the Langa township in Uitenhage, killing 21 people. The police used intimidation tactics to threaten unionists. However, these kind of tactics just made unionists and workers more determined to resist.
Worker’s story: Chris Dlamini – a worker leader

Chris Dlamini was born in 1944 in Benoni. He grew up under harsh and unforgiving circumstances. For most of his childhood, he lived with his mother in a shack in someone’s backyard. Chris thus grew up with a sense of apartheid’s injustices. But it was not until he was inspired by visits by Mandela and Sisulu to his township Daveyton, that he began to synthesise his own experiences into a wider political context.

During his school years Chris strengthened his interest in the politics of the time through the intervention of a teacher who spent many hours talking to him about the struggle. He remembers feeling involved in these wider struggles, “I thought that I’m an activist of Umkhonto We Sizwe when I had no connection but this is what was in my mind…”

At the time of the 1973 strikes, Chris was working at an engineering company and he joined the Engineering and Allied Workers Union. This was the start of his work in trade unions. In 1976 he began working for Kelloggs in Springs. He volunteered to organize the workers and as a senior shop steward, Chris was instrumental in campaigning for equal work for equal pay and for maternity rights for women. His hard work and dedication to workers’ control led to his appointment as President of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU) in 1978. The union workers and their victories at Kelloggs made such an impact that many white artisans at the factory also joined SFAWU— a step that made FOSATU the largest non-racial union federation and contributed to the breaking down of apartheid’s racial barriers. Through his tremendous victories Chris Dlamini earned his qualification to be the President of FOSATU from 1982 to 1985. He epitomised the qualities of a true worker leader.
“MAWU is not just a union anymore. It is a movement of workers fighting for liberation.”

In 1982 Moses Mayekiso, a MAWU organiser, registered the union’s shift to political involvement.

By the 1980s FOSATU had strengthened its organisational structures and had grown in confidence. However, the federation found that it was forced to look beyond the factory. Drawn into community involvement by a radicalised and politicised workforce, it realised it should no longer abstain from the political terrain.

The formation of the United Democratic Front and the National Forum in 1983 reflected the resurgence of black politics. The focus was on community struggles, and civics strove to address the needs of their constituents.

At its 1982 conference, Joe Foster presented a new strategy for FOSATU. FOSATU would engage in community campaigns but on its own terms – they needed to be controlled by the workers, and they needed to have a mandate from FOSATU.

The Bakers’ Workers Strike, July 1985. Four different unions were involved in the Durban/Tongaat bakeries’ strike, SFAWU from FOSATU, the CUSA union, Food and Beverages Workers Union, the Black Allied Workers Union and the Natal Baking Industry’s Employees Union. FOSATU believed that it was crucial that the unions presented a united front against employers. However, the other three unions signed separate agreements with the employers. This clearly led to a division of the workers. Such action also strengthened FOSATU’s belief that there was a strong need for unity. FOSATU Archives, AH2680/G50
The Tricameral Parliament
FOSATU rejected PW Botha’s new constitutional proposals for a Tricameral Parliament. FOSATU launched its own ‘No Vote’ campaign with the UDF.

‘We campaigned house-to-house. We covered 40 000 households in that campaign. Every afternoon from 5 o’clock after work we started campaigning until about 9 o’clock at night, Monday to Thursday, Saturday afternoons, Sunday afternoons.’

Les Kettledas of the Eastern Cape recalls the energy and hard work of the ‘No Vote’ campaign.
The 1984 stayaway
In November 1984, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) called for a two-day stayaway. COSAS was demanding major reforms to the Bantu education system, as well as the election of democratic student representative councils and the removal of the army and police from the townships. FOSATU supported the call.

The 1984 stayaway represented a shift in FOSATU’s strategies as it participated for the first time in a region-wide alliance with community organisations.

At least 800 000 workers stayed home on both days, and the Vaal and the East Rand witnessed an 80 per cent observance. In unionised plants 90 per cent of workers stayed away. Township and hostel workers participated.

It was the most significant general strike that demonstrated the power of workers and youth unity, and inaugurated the insurrection that followed.

SASOL
The Chemical Workers Industrial Union asked that SASOL be exempt from the stayaway and FOSATU agreed. However, SASOL workers were keen to participate. As a result of their involvement, SASOL dismissed 6 000 workers. Workers decided not to leave their accommodation and the army and police intervened by charging the workers’ hostel block in armoured vehicles. The workers gave in. SASOL hired buses to take the workers back to their homelands. Many were forced onto the buses at gunpoint.

‘... a lot of people were really affected by their dismissal – the way the dismissal was issued and effected. People were really, in my view, treated like – nothing. I don’t think that people even treat animals like that.’
Brian Moholo, a shop steward at Sasol

CWIU launched a massive campaign to try to get the SASOL workers reinstated. It was a long hard struggle, but finally SASOL agreed to the reinstatement of 70% of the workforce, and it recognised the CWIU.
‘An injury to one is an injury to all!’

From its inception, FOSATU had committed itself to broader unity in the labour movement. Since 1981, the emerging unions had been involved in unity talks, but it would take a further four years before this ideal was achieved.

‘To emerging unions, unity was often like motherhood; they agreed it was a good idea, but feared it would cost them their independence.’

Steven Friedman

What were the barriers to unity?

• A level of suspicion and hostility towards the role played by white officials in FOSATU. The Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), which adopted a Black Consciousness philosophy, was particularly hostile.
• FOSATU was not willing to bring into a proposed new federation unions that would not adopt its democratic and administrative style, with its focus on shop floor organisation.
• A number of personality clashes within unions had led to tensions.

The Neil Aggett work stoppage

The death of Neil Aggett proved to be a turning point in the quest for unity. Two days after Aggett’s death, the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU) announced that their members would embark on a 30-minute work stoppage on 11 February to mourn Neil’s death. The FOSATU unions and other independent unions all backed this call and joint work stoppages and demonstrations took place countrywide.

FOSATU’s commitment to worker unity, and its ability to efficiently mobilise its unions to participate in this event, helped reshape perceptions of the federation. The general and more political unions viewed FOSATU with less suspicion, and the event sent a clear message of the need for worker unity.
In 1984 FOSATU worked closely with other unions to organise May Day rallies. There was a concerted drive among independent unions to get May Day recognised as a national holiday.

Shop stewards throughout the country discussed and held joint May Day rallies, resulting in large gatherings. In Cape Town more than 3 000 workers crammed into one hall to call for May Day to be recognised as a national holiday. In Natal thousands of workers wore May Day stickers and handed out pamphlets educating workers on this international holiday. Some employers responded to these vociferous calls and many companies negotiated these holidays in private recognition agreements with the unions.
The Congress of South African Unions (COSATU) was launched at the University of Natal in November 1985. It brought together 760 delegates from 33 unions representing over 460 000 workers. Cyril Ramaphosa, the General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), opened the congress. He reiterated the power and strength of this new federation.

“A giant has risen and will confront all that stand in its way.”

There was no question that COSATU embraced the principles of FOSATU.
“COSATU is first and foremost a trade union federation... Its roots are on the factory floor. Its starting point is its organisational strength at the point of production...Our political and economic strength lies in building powerful, militant, democratic organisation in the workplace. This strength will guarantee that workers' aspirations will not be suppressed. Such organisation is also the basis for the real democratisation of production.”

Jay Naidoo, the General Secretary of COSATU
For 25 years COSATU has been the largest and most effective trade union federation on the African continent. COSATU remains an important, arguably critical, voice on a range of social issues, such as HIV/AIDS, corruption in the state, job creation, social welfare, the energy crisis, xenophobia and many others. COSATU remains a pillar of democratic South Africa. It’s future seems assured: but is it?

One of the trends noticeable amongst trade unions over the last 10 years is the decreasing militancy and strikes amongst private sector industrial workers. In addition, the number of organised workers in these sectors have barely grown. The sections of the trade union movement that have seen both growth and increasingly militancy are the public sector unions. This is analogous to industrial strikes of the FOSATU era where the cost of increased wages was passed onto the consumer. In public sector strikes undertaken against a government that is nominally in alliance with the trade union federation, the effects of public sector strikes are passed onto citizens, either in the form of reduced services or increased taxes. This too has an ideological component. A strike against a multinational corporation’s South African branch has in workers’ minds a clear class enemy. A strike against a government public service that provides services to workers and their families and whose employer is supposedly in alliance with the working class has no such clear enemy. It is possibly in this context that prolonged public sector strikes have repeatedly slid into anarchy and mindless violence. For example, during the hospital strikes of the late 1990s, a number of workers, confused about which side they were on, were murdered for not striking.

**Is this trend going to be maintained in South Africa? Will industrial strikes become increasingly rare and public sector strikes increasingly common?**

**Is there any tactic that can be embraced to return industrial workers to the militancy of the past?**

**Does the presence of trade union-inspired investment companies, some of which inevitably invest in companies or industries already organised by a member of the federation, represent a conflict of interests?**

**Do the large salaries and share options of former leaders, now prominent in the investment companies, represent a source of resentment for the rank and file of the unions?**

**Can former leaders, now officers of the investment companies, remain free of the corruption frequently associated with venture capital?**
Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust
101b Killarney Mall Office Towers
Riviera Road, Houghton, 2041
PO Box 2599, Houghton, 2041
Tel: 011 487 2354
Cell: 082 669 1333
Email: mutloatse@mweb.co.za
www.mutloatse.com

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