Speech Given By Professor Philip Bonner (NRF Chair of History, University Of The Witwatersrand) at Historical Papers Archives Unit Book Launch Of ‘The Future Is In The Hands Of The Workers’ A History Of FOSATU, 17 February 2011

This book emerges at least partly from a sense of nostalgia for a world that, to a certain extent we have lost. And I have a feeling that tonight is going to prompt more. Not native nostalgia of which Jacob Dlamini so provocatively and eloquently writes, but nonracial nostalgia – a term which only sprang into my mind this morning. Now to summon this nostalgia, is important and opportune. When the exhibition on which this book is based was mounted last year there was no other commemoration of FOSATU. It was as if it had been air brushed out of the struggle to be substituted by the dominant nationalist grand narrative of liberation. Much the same was the fate of much of the rest of the internal movement. The UDF likewise has almost disappeared from view. These experiences which are so evocatively captured in this book offer us many insights and many lessons. It is for this reason especially that I hope that it will be widely read.

The late 1970s and 1980s, when for many of us our politics were formed were the heyday of non-racialism and the nonracial struggle against apartheid – and it’s a time and a spirit to which many of us look back with a deep nostalgia and with a sense of regret at that bit of the world we have lost. Over the past decade or more politics have been re-racialised and it is time I think for the struggle for a nonracial future to be resumed. FOSATU was at the forefront of this rising tide of non-racialism in the first years of its existence – it was one of its central non-negotiable principles, others of which I will note later on in this talk. All this is richly recounted in this study. Other independent trade unions also played important roles in entrenching it in the political discourse and practice of the time. In 1983 they were joined by the UDF which was from its inception nonracial. Now the importance of this period and the public nailing of these political colours to our political masts have vanished or been marginalized in much of the recent political debate. Certainly in much of the literature we read. And one central element of this tradition that gets all too often overlooked is that non-racialism was essentially homegrown. It was an organic internal development. It flowered inside. To highlight this point I refer to something that was said to me in one of the many interviews I conduct in particular localities, often in the styx with an anti-apartheid activist firstly inside in the country and later with the ANC in exile. This person was and still is utterly committed to the ANC, but he noted his surprise at the furious debate which taking place in the exile ANC when he arrived in the front line states about whether to admit non-Africans to its ranks and to its leadership as well. As he remarked, with a certain incredulity, this issue at least is inside the country had been disposed of three years before, with the formation of the UDF who in turn were influenced – I say this, not to him – by the powerful trade union discourse of the time.
Another core principle of FOSATU to which we could all benefit from revisiting is worker control, which could be translated into a broader political discourse by the notion of full accountability on the part of representatives to the constituency he or she represents. Worker control, in the sense that FOSATU thought of it comprised three elements, firstly worker democratic control over their leadership, secondly worker leadership, that is to say workers in the top structures of the Federation and its affiliated unions who controlled full-time union secretaries, organizers and paid officials and thirdly – something I’ll come to later - worker power and control on the factory floor in the industry and ultimately in the economy. FOSATU constructed a pyramid of committees grounded in individual sections of factories who would elect recallable shop stewards. The foundation of the Federation, as became a virtual mantra of the organization at that time, was this key stratum of factory floor worker leadership. This you will find explored in fascinating, and now not widely comprehended detail, in this book.

Now in my experience the phrase worker control can degenerate into a slogan or in fact never even began to acquire reality. Worker control does not come naturally. Critically you cannot control something if you cannot understand much of what it is doing. It was for this reason that workers’ education was such a central part of FOSATU activities. And you will find full chapter and verse on this subject in this book. This was education at all levels. It required massive inputs of time and energy. Building up worker leadership through day-to-day practices but also through education became one of the central distinguishing features of FOSATU, and later COSATU, something in my view never subsequently matched. Now through such processes worker leaders developed the analytic skills, the values, the self confidence, the strategic thinking, and the adversarial capacity to really take the argument and the battle to employees and the state. As a result, and unfortunately for the unions, innumerable key worker leaders went on after 1994 to assume political office and important leadership positions in the state. You can’t deny the success even when you lament some of the consequences for the union. This acted as a leaven on the wider society. Now the educational resources necessary for such worker education could be generated from within the ranks of the Federation – but never completely. And another distinguishing feature of FOSATU and COSATU which followed it was a massive commitment and utilization of external expertise – the much maligned intellectuals. I think tapping into this resource is critical to making big advances, to seizing initiatives over one’s opponents, be they factory manager or state, to taking the gap. This is what both FOSATU and COSATU did in an extraordinarily creative and effective way – and there is much to probe thought on this subject in this book. And this kind of synergy, this kind of chemistry, is once again something which post 1994 we gradually began to lose. Once last reflection on this subject of focused strategic education is that I think it endowed FOSATU and COSATU with was one absolutely central characteristic and virtue – and that was that it developed the capacity to reflect, to
recognize, to analyse and to learn from mistakes – something not nearly so much in evidence in our political culture today.

As I suggested earlier, an important dimension of worker control was worker power. Worker power only developed in the early 1980s – and grew explosively thereafter – as more and more factories were unionized and industry wide unions and power could be created. Now industry wide unions were another key objective of FOSATU. Without this you couldn’t leverage effective economic power. This was FOSATU and later COSATU’s key argument against general unions. Another argument against general unions was that they were more difficult to organize in a structured democratic fashion based on the shop stewards on the factory floor. However – and this increasingly loomed as a problem in FOSATU and COSATU - and it remains with us today, is that having built up the massive power to confront the captains of industry and the custodians of power how do you keep it subject to democratic accountability. This raised and raises all the key issues about democracy. The larger your unit or constituency gets the more difficult it is to maintain democratic control. FOSATU and COSATU developed creative mechanisms for trying to manage this profound dilemma – where for example in industrial Council negotiations in huge industries, which demanded skilled and knowledgeable negotiators who at the same time had to be subject to genuine workers control – one device which was used was to transport hundreds of shop steward representative to a venue next door to the negotiations who would then discuss or ratify each stage of the negotiations. We have much to learn both from the practices but even more so from the debates that took place at that time on how to achieve democratic accountability in South Africa. It is a debate which astonishingly is hardly begun. How to begin is the subject of my final remarks.

Worker control also went well beyond that – how to roll back what used to be called managerial prerogatives – to allow workers and unions to gain even greater purchase over production. That needs research, knowledge, skills, development. You have come with answers which the management hasn’t. You have to create constructive rather than simply destructive worker power in a complementary of interest. Now this is a terrain which has all but abandoned since. Perhaps partly because of the increasingly centrality of white-collar unionism – which barely existed then in the independent trade unions.

So no easy walk to worker control.

A last point to which I would like to draw your attention is this. FOSATU was part – a major part - of the re-awakening or rehabilitation of civil society which occurred as South Africans began to drag themselves out of the darkest days of apartheid. There is ample evidence of this process in this book, a process that progressed to such a point that by the end of the 1980s South Africa was widely proclaimed to possess among the most vigorous and substantial and healthy civil societies in the world. Now it has for some time seemed to me
that while the grand plan of the nationalist party and its allies of holding on to effective power while accomplishing a superficial transition to democratic state was checked and in fact demolished by the ANC and its allies between 1990 and 1994, where it succeeded – and in surreptitious and largely unrecognized ways – was in the disruption, dislocation and at times complete destruction of a democratically functioning civil society. Now it didn’t do this to the trade unions and I believe that it was their democratic rooting – set in place initially by groups like FOSATU – which allowed them to survive. Many others were really mutilated by the civil war the so called black on black violence sponsored by the covert forces of the state, and that destruction has constituted a major deficit in post 1994 South Africa. Combine this with the self dissolution of the UDF and you were left with very little check or constraint – outside of COSATU – on the ruling forces of political alliance that took over the government of South Africa. And of course, offering opportunities for influence, but also closing down others, was the fact that COSATU was part of the alliance. Civil Society in South Africa has – in my view – over the last few years begun to regenerate itself. Nevertheless it still has a long way to go. I think that the reconstruction of that civil society is crucial to helping those significant elements within the ANC and the Alliance to keep the ANC on its historical track, to keep it accountable, to keep it honest. Those elements are there but all too often they fear to name or expose themselves. They need the support of a vigorous civil society, of which the trade unions, while not functioning as effectively or possibly even as democratically as formerly, comprise a crucial constituent part. It was for that reason that I personally welcomed the news of a plan to form a new UDF sometime last year. It came to naught at that point, but its moment is yet to come. It will take a huge effort to accomplish and it will be demonized and attacked. But then I would like to turn your minds back to the birth of FOSATU which this book so richly describes. Then this fledgling federation outnumbered something like 30 000 strong. It was in reality tiny – though not puny: we all said the struggle will be long and we all committed ourselves to a long haul at least 20 years. I believe we have to commit ourselves to such a struggle again. This book may help us plot the way.