

## Review

## SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR: A MODERNISED MARXIST APPROACH

A Review of Eddie Webster, Laura Alfred, Leal Bethlehem, Avril Joffe and Terry-Ann Selikow (eds), 1994, *Work and Industrialisation in South Africa: An Introductory Reader*. Ravan Press, Randburg.

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This work (henceforth *WISA*) comes from the Sociology Department of the University of Witwatersrand - ie from the strongest labour studies centre in a country with one of the strongest labour studies traditions in the world. It draws heavily on the now 20-year-old South African Labour Bulletin (henceforth *SALB*). *WISA* also draws on a tradition of labour education going back to the first duplicated texts produced by the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) in Durban in the early 1970s. The IIE texts were, even in the period of deep apartheid, the most professional and radical union educational texts produced anywhere in Africa. *WISA*, oriented to university students, is certainly the most professional and radical such reader in contemporary Africa. It will meet the needs of several kinds of South African readership: academics, labour leaders/educators/communicators, management and government. Outside the country it will not only be useful for those interested in South African labour, it could also provide a stimulating model for those elsewhere in Africa or Asia planning similar readers.

*WISA* consists of seven topics, each dealing with a particular theme or problem. These provide us simultaneously with an overview of major issues and debates and with a history of labour in South Africa. The discussion of each topic has an editorial introduction, these giving the busy reader a condensed, but by no means simplified, overview of labour and labour studies in South Africa. The 25 or so readings include many extracts from now-classical books and articles but they also include numerous recently-published items and one or two written especially for the volume. Each topic section ends with the exercises that turn the book from a conventional reader into a teaching text. The exercises have been designed with help from a teaching methods specialist and are adapted to the needs and capacities of university students.

The topics are the following: 1) race and industrialisation in South African society (including a new item by the veteran British labour specialist - on both

miners and Africa - Vic Allen); 2) institutions of unfree labour (with the first of several extracts from the well-known popular histories of Luli Calinicos); 3) control, resistance and division on the gold mines, 1886-1924; 4) work, class and culture (with theoretically innovative items by Robin Cohen and R.T. Gordon); 5) apartheid and industrial modernisation (including a recent periodisation of the political economy of South Africa by Terreblanche and Nattrass); 6) the rise of the new trade union movement (with two items from Jeremy Baskin's well-known union history); 7) the decline of apartheid and emergence of new divisions.

Everyone will identify their own most-regretted lacunae. Mine are 'culture' and 'internationalism'. The first of these appears in a topic title but is in effect restricted to class behaviour, not the broader kind of cultural belonging and collective creativity worked on by Ari Sitas (another of the *SALB* group). When a woman from the slums of Sao Paulo, Brazil, is reported as saying she would rather have a TV than a refrigerator because there is always something on the TV she is revealing not only the increasing incorporation of the poor into a globalised culture of individualised consumer durables but also into an increasingly 'mediated' world. Labour specialists and movements ignore this at their peril (they don't in Brazil). The second of these lacunae is regrettable because the South African labour movement has always been part of, and shaped by, the international one - and it has recently been reciprocating the influences. It is a pity that this work abstracts from international labour politics just as South Africa is being dramatically re-incorporated into the world - economically, politically, culturally.

I will concentrate critique on the overall orientation of the work. This is revealed by the General Introduction, the Introduction to Topic 1, and by Topic 7, which not only deals with the most recent period but also has implications for the future.

The orientation of the work is not fully revealed by the title. It could, more accurately perhaps, have been called 'Work, Industry and Labour Protest in South Africa: A Marxist Introduction'. Given that there are in the collection only one or two items from writers outside this tradition, why the blander title? It could be understood as part of the worldwide abandonment, by left intellectuals, of labour protest as socially emancipatory and of Marxism as both theoretical approach and political strategy. There is, indeed, in the introductory matter, some attenuation of traditional Marxist certainties. But the slide is evidently intended to be forward rather than backward - toward broader and more sophisticated theoretical understandings and a more realistic assessment of labour's capacities under the new national and international dispensations.

The attenuation - or opening? - can be found where the relationships capitalism:

apartheid and capitalism: state are both characterised as 'contingent' (1994:10). The implication here is that both apartheid and state have their own laws and cannot be reduced to, or understood only by, reference to the requirements of capital. But 'contingent' suggests that the relations are quite indeterminate - which would seem to be carrying a critique of economic determinism a little too far. The new theoretical orientation is indicated by a recognition that a: fundamental challenge to class theory has come from post-structuralism, an approach that emphasises the fact that South Africa is a society with many divisions that generate a multiplicity of social identities, all of which are interrelated though none can be prioritised. Class is one of them, and so are race, nation, ethnicity and gender (1994:16).

A possible opening - to the women's movement, if not those of race, nation and ethnicity - is indicated in a following passage, which also makes explicit the continuing stress on social struggle:

[W]e share the post-structuralist concern with the need to recognise different social identities, particularly that of gender. We will also place resistance, both formal and informal, at the centre of our approach (1994:16).

It is regrettable that the meaning and implications of post-modernist and gender analysis are not spelled out for the novice readership. Both are, indeed, subversive of even contemporary Marxisms, as well as suggestive of wide new terrains of both formal and informal resistance (not to speak of assertion). Both could enrich the 'political-economy Marxism' that has dominated South African labour studies. The gestures in the direction of innovation are therefore welcome. Whether they are more than gestures should be shown by the concluding topic, dealing with the contemporary situation.

This final section turns out, however, to be problematic in relation to all the above: to recognition of new social identities, to women and women's movements and even to the centrality of struggle (the title of the section, note well, links the end of apartheid not with the emergence of 'new identities' or 'new struggles' but 'new divisions'!). The analysis of increasing or continuing unemployment and poverty, of differentiation amongst the working class, is presented in several contributions. The evidence is convincing in its own right and because it reproduces global processes. Thus, a study on Peruvian workers in the late-1980s, took as its title the words of a worker interviewed: Being a Worker is Something Relative. The contributions by Karl von Holdt (longtime and respected editor of the internationally influential *SALB*), could be understood as confronting this difficult reality. One item calls for an extension of meaningful participation within the enterprise. The other extends this argument to the

national level. 'Strategic Unionism' is, in this latter item, presented as a positive and constructive labour-popular alliance. It is intended to replace the literally destructive labour-popular alliance, of the apartheid era, known as 'Social Movement Unionism' (see Webster's contribution to the previous topic). 'Strategic Unionism' depends on a fundamental alliance with a party capable of creating a majority-based government - in the South African case evidently the ANC. A labour-popular alliance, allied to and assisted by a majority-based government, can, von Holdt argues, bring about far-reaching economic, social and political reforms, thus laying a base for socialism. It is 'also the only strategy that can strengthen and empower the working class in South African today' (1994:312).

I have many problems with this concept and argument - apart, I mean, from it being (as Social Credit once was) the only remedy. One is the failure to explain how a strategy developed in Australia and Sweden (with 150 years of liberalism, almost 100 of liberal-democracy, currently shifting from industrial to information capitalism) can be appropriate for the radically different conditions of South Africa. Another is that, apparently, it has failed, or is failing, in Australia and Sweden (see the articles by Liv Torres and Mike Murphy in *SALB* 8, (2), May 1994). A third is the vacuous nature of the term itself, covering, as it apparently does, both the modernisation of a nation-state-based capitalism (at the cost of other capitalisms, other nation states? other workers?) and to radical-democratic reforms. It would seem to have space within its empty realm for any other 'strategy' someone wanted to place within it. If this project is intended to be essentially radical-democratic in nature, why not call it 'radical-democratic unionism', something one could without embarrassment put on a banner? It is only if it is, in fact, a left-corporatist project - allying organised workers to the logic of modernising capital and/or a nation-building state - that it needs a name that conceals this. It must, finally, be pointed out that the strategy proposed takes no account of globalisation, nor of the global transition to information capitalism. Nor, for that matter, does it allow for the new global social subjects, issues, theories, ideologies and movements (e.g. self-conscious women, patriarchy, the various feminisms, women's and feminist movements).

Although, in the previous section, it is pointed out by Jeremy Baskin that women form 36 percent of the South African wage force and of the union membership, this is their sole major appearance in *WISA* and they are therefore more or less invisible in the concluding section. 'New Divisions' therefore blithely ignores what should be considered as one of the major divisions, if not a particularly new one. What is new is the feminist argument that the multiple roles and identities of women allow for 'coalescing strategies' which could reinforce wage-labour struggles with those within the community and the family.

Any new strategy for labour, I would argue, must recognise the democratic equivalence between such struggles - the necessity for any successful labour strategy in the contemporary world to simultaneously be a community one, a domestic one, a gender one. Or at least to have positive implications for such other spheres.

Globalisation does make its dramatic appearance in the concluding item by Jon Hyslop. His is a paper of considerable originality and import, particularly in the context of a previously-isolated South Africa, particularly in the context of this consequently national book. The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme (now that of the Government of National Unity) seems to be aware of globalisation primarily in terms of increased market competition - which it treats as a reality to be accepted and adapted to. Hyslop shows, however, that it is much more than this. Globalisation implies the end of large-scale concentrated industrial production (threatening the homogeneity, size and density of the working class), the end of a Three Worlds model, the end of both socialist and capitalist utopias (he could have added radical-nationalist utopias as well), and the increasing stretch, depth and impact of highly interdependent technical, financial and cultural processes. Recognition of this brave new globalised world, unfortunately, does not lead Hyslop to identify the new global social movements it has also produced. Or, where he does identify them, to identify with them:

'Green' ecological theorists argue that growth is environmentally destructive and should not be a goal of policy. But with a rapidly expanding population and massive unemployment, South Africa has no alternative but growth if the society is to become stable. Like many poorer countries, South Africa finds itself in a position where our internal needs conflict with the ecological slogans of richer countries. (1994:345).

This is a thoroughly modernist message - simultaneously industrialist, nation-statist and capitalist (or at least growth-ist). It is important to recognise that 1) in so far as the ecological slogans originate in the richer countries, they originate with critics of these, and that 2) India has produced vibrant popular ecological movements and such an original ecological theorist/activist as the rather anti-Western eco-feminist Vandana Shiva. Hyslop, finally, fails to reconnect the threats/opportunities of globalisation to either labour or other democratic social movements in South Africa. Yet democratic global social movements, global solidarity and global civil society are also produced by globalisation. The new global social movements insist, moreover, that there must be alternatives to the destructive growth typical of modern societies (whether capitalist, socialist or populist). And the new South African labour movement, as suggested above, has not only been a major beneficiary of international solidarity but is currently using

its considerable prestige to exercise pressure for the transformation, or at least renovation, of the international trade-union movement.

So the gestures made by this book toward the new social subjects, new theories, new movements, new strategies, do remain gestures. And the concluding topic points in no clear direction for a post-apartheid future that is already the post-apartheid present. The inconclusive nature of this final section does, I think, reveal the current disorientation facing not only left intellectuals but the South African labour and democratic movement itself - and their joint counterparts internationally! Jon Hyslop's final chapter, thus, could equally be the beginning of a new book, situating labour in relation to a globalised information capitalism and the new global social movements. I think that, sooner rather than later, South African labour is going to need such a one.