Review

Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster (eds) (2000) *Trade Unions and Democratisation in South Africa, 1985-1997*. International Political Economy Series. Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press.

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Given the recent ongoing tensions between the trade union movement and government in the post-apartheid South African state regarding a variety of issues – relating not only to the latter constituency's insistence on pursuing more orthodox economic policies – the appearance of this book, essentially tracing the crucial role that the union movement played, initially, in bringing an end to the apartheid state and later, in attempting to consolidate the shaping of democratic transition, is to be most welcomed.

The editors of this collection of essays have incorporated several interesting and pertinent contributions to the dominant issue – as to whether labour is 'strategic enough and strong enough to shape the process of consolidation of democracy and economic restructuring' in South Africa (2000:11). The editors, both renowned industrial sociologists, were directly involved in the Labour Monitoring Group as well as the Sociology of Work Project and the emergence of this work represents not only their affiliation with the above projects but also a collaboration with the Albert Einstein Trust (Cambridge, Mass.).

The core of the argument is articulated by the editors in both their preface and introduction to the collection of contributions. Contrary to the conclusion of various social science writers who argue that labour can be construed as an unimportant actor or even an impediment to the consolidation of democracy (in that sectional demands may conflict with democratic restructuring), Adler and Webster are explicit in contending that, through its access to institutions and policy making in the political democratisation in South Africa, labour has the potential to shape economic restructuring in a substantial way such that the costs of adjustment are not borne by workers and the poor alone. The issue thus

becomes one predominantly of a class compromise. In fact, the authors even go further in their conclusion, correctly maintaining, in the view of this reviewer, that if labour is marginalised from policy making, the consolidation of democracy and economic reconstruction may well be put at risk (2000:ix). The key issue thus relates to how the labour movement can in essence best effect its strategy that would ensure the desired outcome. It is precisely this that represents the bone of contention.

The strategic options conventionally available to the labour union movement include a 'corporatist' style of consultation and negotiation (along the lines of the NEDLAC arrangement adopted in South Africa as part of the transition) and 'concertation' (this latter concept drawing on the substantive work of Przeworski and others in their comparative perspective of policy options facing new democracies). Adler and Webster reject this approach as viewing the role of unions as being too functionalist and representing too narrow a perspective. The detailed analysis of the role of unions in South Africa's more recent history suggests a much more fundamental and critical contribution for labour in that it can adopt a 'radical reform' alternative – broadly conceptualised by the authors as being a situation where labour is not captured by either capital or the state and it is both inside and outside the state. By virtue of its independent power base, labour is able to mobilise outside state structures, yet through its alliance with the ANC it is able to influence state policy (2000:9) – the implication of this strategy being that labour can exercise its muscle outside as well as inside, thus dramatically impacting on policy making. If labour's voice is marginalised or rejected, unions can afford to be more militant and 'spoiling' – in that its special and unique (for recent democracies) relationship with the ruling party would ensure that its voice be heard and taken seriously.

Whether in fact the identification of this potential implies that labour will successfully realise this envisaged role is the crux of the issue. The editors' contribution in their introduction duly acknowledges the threats to a radical reform project, stemming from the unfamiliar political terrain of democratic transition (in contrast to representing a movement at the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle), the substantially changed macroeconomic environment posed by globalisation, neo-liberalism and structural adjustment, the internal workings of the labour market and the possible capacity constraints of the union movement itself. In the viewpoint of this reviewer (and admitting with the benefit of hindsight that the severity of some of the above threats was not as clear to the contributors at the time of writing the book), insufficient attention is provided to these threats – an issue I shall return to later.

The chapter by De Villiers and Anstey compares the role of the labour movement in the democratic transition of South Africa with that of Spain and Brazil. While much of the chapter provides a concise outline of the history of labour union involvement in these countries, the authors identify the one distinguishing characteristic of the South African labour movement's struggle during the apartheid struggle – that racial authoritarianism added a vital and decisive unifying dynamic to the opposition that was absent in the other examples (2000:38). The point these authors make in their conclusion (2000:39) – that once democratisation takes place and former opposition allies are transformed into governing parties, interests and constituencies must inevitably broaden – is at the essence of some of the transitionary problems faced in South Africa. In those countries where labour unions were instrumental in mobilising against non-democratic regimes, once the mantle of democratic and representative government was achieved, dilemmas emerged regarding the degree of independence the trade union movement must seek to retain from government, as well as the extent of use of traditional strike and stayaway weapons. Jeremy Baskin's contribution (Chapter 2) sets the parameters for alternative categorisations of policy options available for future sustainable development. Rejecting the deregulation approach, he argues for a form of 'bargained corporatism' and 'concertation' as the appropriate framework for the successful development of labour relations in South Africa. But he is emphatic that the success of this strategy requires a strong labour movement, not only in terms of 'numbers and muscle' (2000:54), but also on ideas and capacity. Furthermore, it requires a collective bargaining environment more structured and centralised than at present – and given the 'difficult' context of globalisation – an approach fundamentally different from that adopted in the heyday of welfarism in a number of industrialised countries. The warning sounded by Baskin in the concluding paragraph of his contribution is relevant:

> This imposes a heavy responsibility on organised labour. It suggests the union movement needs a renewal strategy, a revisiting of organisational structure, capacity constraints and its vision of social and economic transformation. Without this the unions are unlikely to make the transition from resistance to engagement. Either they will engage with tripartism and concertation without the active support of their members, or they swing inconsistently between cooperative and conflictual strategies. For labour the answers may not be clear. But, certainly, if unions act as if little has changed they will marginalise themselves and may even provoke a backlash which may undermine the democratisation process. (2000:54-55)

In Chapter 3, Ian Macun presents a historical overview, and useful set of statistics on the more recent growth, structure and power of unions in South Africa. The racial nature of unionisation in South Africa could be considered a reflection of the 'racist' practices of the long-standing employer-worker relationship in South Africa, and, as long as this social context dominates, is likely to boost unionisation. But the ability of the union movement to achieve greater unity and cohesion is ultimately dependent on an ability to shape and influence macroeconomic management and the political process (2000:73).

Sakhile Buhlungu's contribution (Chapter 4) highlights the manifold capacity problems faced by trade unions in South Africa – problems that became evident even before the consolidation of democracy phase occurred. Apart from substantial capacity enhancement the credibility of the union movement for the future must ensure democratic decision-making and worker control, leadership accountability and proper servicing of union members.

Karl von Holdt's analysis in the form of a case study of NUMSA's experiences at STEELCO in Mpumalanga (Chapter 5) highlights the difficulties unions have in forming a collective voice among vastly disparate interest groups. The next two chapters focus on what many regard as the point of departure, depicting the tensions within the tripartite alliance – the adoption of GEAR as the democratic government's flagship economic strategy, signifying a blatant rejection of the Reconstruction and Development Programme to which the union movement made an integral contribution. In PG Eidelberg's contribution (Chapter 6) the author traces the formation and early evolution of the tripartite alliance between the ANC, COSATU and the SACP. Apart from the critique that the thrust of GEAR was regarded by COSATU and the SACP as being neo-liberal and antithetical to the broad objectives of the union movement and the Communist Party, the 'non-consultative and non-negotiable' manner in which it was adopted still represents a severe bone of contention. Eidelberg explores the options available to the ANC's partners in the alliance and concludes that the latter might have to consider the option of reconciling themselves to a reduced role within the tripartite alliance. Breakaways could condemn them to the political wilderness (2000:156-7). Graeme Gotz (Chapter 7) argues that the 'regovernmentalisation' of the principles of the RDP brought about through union pressure could prove the saviour of a future labour movement – although the possibility of this falling foul to forms of economic rationalism looks the more likely scenario (2000:188).

The final contribution to the collection is provided by Steven Friedman and Mark Shaw. This analysis focuses on the part played by South African labour

unions in the multinational negotiating forums which emerged in the early 1990s and continued after 1995, ie the National Economic Forum and National Manpower Commission, which later were transformed into NEDLAC. The limited successes achieved by the labour movement in these negotiating forums have brought into question not only the value of corporatism as a way forward, but also the viability of a more militant radical reform strategy.

> The evidence discussed here suggests that participating in forums has at the very least, ensured labour's continued role in policy-making.... But the evidence suggests too that having inserted itself into the policy process, labour is not assured of exerting substantive influence on it. The fact that NEDLAC has been established does not mean that it is assured of survival, nor that it is guaranteed influence, nor that labour is guaranteed either influence or power on it. (2000:206-7)

Friedman and Shaw are somewhat sceptical about the ability of the labour movement to embark seriously on a radical reform strategy-taking into account the substantially changed global environment and the capacity problems of the union movement, drained of key personnel as a result of the transition. The crucial issue in the present context relates to whether unions, having asserted their right to become an influential social partner, can retain and sustain influence in the post-transition phase. In the authors' opinion, this will ultimately depend on the strategic choices which unions make (2000:210).

The above contribution by Friedman and Shaw serves not only as an informed, critical, well-articulated summary of the issues presented throughout this excellent book, but also poses questions regarding a strategy agenda for the future.

The pursuit of the above-mentioned agenda for South Africa's labour movement is not going to be an easy task. As Duncan Innes has recently pointed out – it has become apparent that the honeymoon period is over and the 'pendulum has begun swinging back' (a reference not only to the ending of the 'cosy' ANC government/labour union relationship but also to ideological shift of the State to the embrace of much more internationally-induced orthodox economic policies) (Innes 1999). The State's determination to reinstate South Africa's economy (as well as other African economies) into the global economy ought not to be underestimated and as such is regarded by some as being primarily responsible for many of the recent tensions inherent in the State's alliance with the union movement. It could be that the union movement in South Africa is being subjected to the problems experienced by labour unions worldwide. That these have come to this country rather suddenly, and induced tensions of the sort that the various contributions to the Adler and

Webster collection indicate, can be attributed to rather late re-emergence of South Africa into a profoundly-changed world economy after the prolonged period of isolation.

The changed structural features of the end-of-the millennium world economy has induced a crisis for the labour movement universally that ought not to be underestimated in terms of its widespread significance. Coincidental to the appearance of the Webster/Adler edited work, a recently published book by Guy Standing (himself a co-author of what many regard as one of the recent definitive studies on the South African labour market) deals with the broad issue of global market flexibility (Standing 1999). He details the characteristics of this post-Taylorist phenomenon and the essence of this argument is that flexibility spells doom for unions in their present form.

Countries worldwide are exhibiting shrinking union membership density. The shift from blue- to white-collar occupations, the disproportionate growth in small firm production, the general decline in employment, the shift in global production to non-unionised countries as well as the increased participation and incorporation of women, youth and part-time workers whose less than firm attachment to the labour force makes union organisation difficult – all combine to spell doom for trade union movements, according to Standing. The 'New (market-regulated) Economy' can be interpreted as a system characterised by more insecurity, socio-economic fragmentation and detachment.

> The era of market regulation will not be the 'end of history'. Each era of flexibility and insecurity offers an opportunity to usher in a new scheme of distributive justice. The twentieth century has seen the rise and fall of a scheme that placed labour at the heart of the strategy for justice. Dominated by the image of the industrial society, with laws and regulations to keep the balance between capital and labour, and with labour protection being the essence of social protection, in the end distributional conflicts could not be overcome by statutory regulations and the enhancement of labour security. For a while, the welfare state achieved great progress. *However, no scheme fits all societies, and models devised in the twentieth century may not match the needs of the coming era.* (Standing 1999:337, italics added)

Standing's critical contribution in this extensively researched work suggests an innovative (if not entirely feasible) way out of the above impasse faced by union movements in the present global environment, a strategy that could have implications for impacting on the way in which the trade union movement in South Africa could attempt to resolve the dilemma of how positively and substantially to shape economic reconstruction in South Africa's era of

consolidating democracy. He advocates a form of 'voice regulation' – Hirschmanian in essence and representing a stark contrast to the characteristic notions of 'statutory and market regulation' which dominated much of the previous century. This implies enabling all groups to put pressure on the powerful to redistribute the gains of growth. Institutions and processes must be sufficiently representative to promote distributive justice and dynamic efficiency. Standing advocates a network of citizenship/industry/company/enterprise-based-union organisational structures, which would not all necessarily require central union affiliation – but would cut across specifically functionally defined structures – as a mechanism for such voice representation. Community unions or citizenship associations (or, to use Heckscher's term 'associational unions') which could incorporate not only the employed, but also flexiworkers and marginal wage earners as well as the unemployed – associated either on a geographical or more micro-based community basis and with a much more active role envisaged for personnel and placement agencies (who in turn could act as an intermediary voice – offering training, advice, etc) could suggest a way forward.

The broad conclusion that '... economic democracy within the production process is essential if political and social democracy are to be meaningful and sustainable' (Standing 1999:398) has immediate relevance to several of the issues raised in the Adler and Webster book. Standing's contribution to the debate suggests a more fundamental and grassroots notion not only of democracy, but also of the labouring classes. Possibly the concepts of 'radical reform' and 'democratisation', used so extensively in the most recent South African analysis by Adler and Webster, could assume new meaning in the context of Standing's more global analysis?

References

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