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RED ALERT



50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE HISTORIC 1973 DURBAN WORKERS' STRIKES



SACP
1921-2022

101 YEARS

OF UNBROKEN STRUGGLE

TOGETHER LET'S BUILD A POWERFUL, SOCIALIST
MOVEMENT FOR THE WORKERS AND POOR!

SOCIALISM IS THE FUTURE—BUILD IT NOW!

50th Anniversary of the historic 1973 Durban Workers' Strikes

By Sithembiso Bhengu and Alex M. Mashilo

The South African working-class, taking its cue from the 1973 Durban workers' strikes, should build maximum unity and join hands in forging a powerful, socialist movement of the workers and poor. This is what the conditions of today require, towards overcoming the persisting high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality, and to advance towards a socialist transition.

Capitalist exploitation of workers will be eliminated under the socialist transition and prosperity from production, trade and other economic activity will be equitably shared in a movement towards a higher phase of development in which society will inscribe on its banners, "From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs!"

The 50th anniversary of the Durban workers' strikes

Monday, 9 January 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the Durban Workers Strikes.

From one factory to another, the 1973 Durban strikes grew in

leaps and bounds, becoming a movement which gave birth to new, militant trade unions.

Thousands of workers took down tools and marched from Avoca to Briardene, in Durban¹. By the end of January that year, workers in over 100 factories had embarked on industrial action. The strikes impacted various industries—construction, clothing and textile, mills, harbour, the docks, manufacturing, metal and transport sectors, to mention but a few.

Despite a number of the striking workers being dismissed, the workers continued with the strikes.

In addition, the strikes catalysed the re-organisation of African industrial workers into trade unions.

Moreover, the workers increasingly re-connected the workplace struggle with the broader liberation struggle and thus played an important part towards the defeat of the apartheid regime. This occurred in the context where the Alliance comprising the progressive trade union movement, the Communist Party and the African National Congress, supported by formations of the mass democratic movement, including the progressive civic movement, ultimately again assumed the organisational form of the connection between the workplace and broader political struggle for liberation.

Where did the strikes begin, why, and how did they develop?

The apartheid regime intensified repression in the 1960s after banning political and industrial organisations pursuing the

struggle for liberation and social emancipation, having started by banning the Communist Party in 1950 under the Suppression of Communism Act. This also coincided with the golden age of “industrial capitalism” characterised by high growth rates, especially in the United States (US) and Western Europe. It became more difficult to organise under the intensified repression by the apartheid regime, but this challenge had to be overcome in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and oppression at some point. That moment occurred in the decade of the 1970s when the capitalist-world economy erupted into a crisis².

There was a significant decline in the fortunes associated with the capitalist “golden age”. A confluence of factors resulted in the capitalist crisis, including squeeze in oil production, and rising oil prices, as the Middle East was embroiled in a conflict with the western imperialist regimes, primarily the US.

Middle East countries had taken issue with the support for the

Zionist apartheid Israeli regime by the US-led western imperialist forces. In the US, the Federal Reserve Bank dissociated the dollar from the gold standard, forcing other world markets to follow suite. These shifts coincided with oversaturation of mass-produced goods in world markets, affecting mass production as a capital accumulation regime. Leading markets in the world-capitalist economy collapsed. Capitalist bosses reacted to the crisis by retrenching many workers in the Global North and the share of workers income from production and trade collapsed. South African workers felt the crunch by the end of 1972³.

As the new year began, Coronation Brick and Tile workers raised their complaints regarding wages and poor working conditions. Management ignored their pleas⁴. In the morning of 9 January 1973, the workers, who demanded wage increases, downed tools and marched to a nearby stadium singing, “Ufil’ umuntu, ufile usadikiza. Wamthint’ esweni, esweni usadikiza” [A person is dead, but his spirit still lives. If

you poke the iris of his eye, he still comes alive]. Thus began the first of the 1973 Durban strikes.

By mid-morning, management had called the Zulu king Zwelithini ka Bhekuzulu to address workers. During the engagements workers outlined their wage increase demands and complained of inhumane exploitative working conditions. The monarch suggested that the worker form a committee to negotiate with management. Somehow this went against the expectations of the newly formed KwaZulu Bantustan government, which looked forward to the king reprimanding the workers for striking and imploring them to return to work. The Bantustan government revealed itself as essentially an instrument of capital’s accumulation interests and rule.

In the workplace, management was coercing workers to go back to work, insinuating, supported by the Durban municipal authorities, that the strike was a communist plot against the government—meaning the apartheid regime! The workers refused. The

communist plot continued!

The striking workers went on to form a workers' committee, through which they negotiated with management. On the fourth day they stopped the strike after compelling the employer to accede to their demands for wage increases, and some benefits.

Taking their cue from the first strike, on 10 January 1973 workers at A.J. Keeler, a transport company, embarked on industrial action. Although their demands were not met, this contributed to the overall momentum of the 1973 Durban strikes, which spread to other areas.

Workers at T.W Beckett & Co., a factory outside Durban, went on strike. The employer responded by threatening to fire 150 workers and enlist support from police and municipal authorities to quell strikers. The workers defied the threat. They continued with the strike until management accepted negotiation and offered some wage increases.

The next recorded strike started on 22 January 1973. More than

200 drivers went on a picket at a transport factory at the Pinetown Depo. Management reacted by dismissing workers and replacing them with drivers from the company's Pretoria and Bloemfontein Depos. However, this tactic failed. The replacement drivers also joined the strike upon arriving at the Pinetown Depo.

By the end of January 1973, over 29 strikes had taken place.

The biggest strike was by garment workers in the Frame Textile Group. This one began on 25 January in New Germany⁵. The strikes in the Frame Group spread like wildfire. Over 6,000 workers joined. Also joining the strike were workers from Smith and Nephew, another textile factory in New Germany. The strikes were met with police repression, with the police detaining and beating up the workers. The company managements coerced the workers to negotiate through a liaison committee (a legislated sweetheart committee), but the workers rejected it. From these strikes the workers in the sector mobilised and organised into

the Garment Workers Industrial Union.

More strikes followed, affecting the docks, transport, the mills and manufacturing sectors, covering the industrial stretch from North Coast to Pietermaritzburg. News reports approximated about 100,000 workers joined the strikes, which affected over 100 factories between January and March 1973.

The workers embarked on the strikes against the background of growing pressure from rising costs of living. The rand depreciated against the dollar and the pound, an aftermath of the capitalist economic crisis of the early 1970s and reactions to the crisis by the imperialist regimes, notably the US.

When they embarked on the strikes, the workers did not have a representative trade union. As formerly indicated, successive colonial and apartheid regimes, starting in 1924, respectively, prohibited African workers to organise into trade unions and excluded them from participation in and coverage under collective

bargaining⁶. As Eddie Webster states in his book *Cast in a Racial Mould*, South Africa's industrial relations regime reflected the apartheid workplace, articulating racial despotism with apartheid authoritarianism⁷.

The rise of militant non-racial trade unions from the 1973 strikes

The strikes ushered a rebirth of a militant black union movement and contributed to working-class struggles that connected workplace with the wider national liberation struggle. As the South African History Online states:

The strikes signalled the beginning of a turning point in the long struggle of Black, Coloured and Indian workers to build non-racial trade unions and to open up the possibility of mass struggle against the Apartheid regime. The Durban strikes marked the first stage of mass action that contributed to the spirit of rebellion in the country. The strike signalled the growth of militant non-racial trade unionism, the evolution of an alliance between

workers, the broad united front of progressive organisations and the banned underground liberation organisations. Above all, the strike signalled the central role of working-class organisations in shaping the ideology, strategy, and tactics of the struggle against Apartheid and racial capitalism, which culminated in the fall of the Apartheid regime in the 1990s.

Conclusion

Sithembiso Bhengu⁸ argues that the history of black industrial workers in Durban is slightly different from that of the black mining and industrial workers in other parts of the country. To support the argument, Bhengu uses Dunlop as the empirical case, the first industrial factory that recruited black migrant workers as semi-skilled industrial operators in 1942 after white and Indian workers embarked on a strike action⁹. The stevedores soon followed. So were the textile mills, leading to the Durban Chamber of Business commissioning research, conducted by the Department of Economics at the University of Natal, examining

the “suitability” of black migrant workers (“natives”) to the rigour of industrial mass production¹⁰. This racist research report, as evident in the title and purpose, was published in 1950.

Industrial factories in Durban, from North Coast Road, Umgeni, the harbour and Congela, Jacobs to Prospecton, as well as in Pinetown and New Germany, to Hammarsdale and Pietermaritzburg, were first movers in employing black workers as industrial operators by the late 1960s. By the beginning of the 1970s, black migrant workers in Durban constituted the core of the industrial proletariat—wage labourers, taking the centre stage in the labour process of the mass production accumulation regime in South Africa.

Therefore, the 1973 Durban strikes were underpinned by the black workers’ structural power, argues this intervention. Erik Orlin Wright defines workers’ structural power as the power they derive simply from their structural location in a particular economic activity¹¹. What this intervention also argues is that the strikes

were underpinned by an emergent workers' associational power, which they consolidated into the trade unions that they formed based on their structural location and power. Wright defines workers' associational power as the power that they derive from their collective organisation.

Above all else, the workers increasingly became conscious of their position as the industrial proletariat, driving the industrial economy. They must as well have been aware that the employers would be hard-pressed if they would summarily dismiss the entire semi-skilled workforce, argues Bhengu.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Durban strikes, we should be inspired by the gallant and courageous fight by

the workers, who worked under the most despotic apartheid workplace regime. They risked not only their employment and livelihoods but also their lives under apartheid oppression. These workers became the forbearers of the re-emergence of militant worker struggles and a decisive momentum in the broader struggle for the defeat of the apartheid regime.

Taking our cue from the 1973 Durban strikes, we need to strengthen our resolve to build a powerful, socialist movement of the workers and poor.

Bhengu is the Director of the Chris Hani Institute and Mashilo is a member of the Central Committee of the SACP.

**TOGETHER, LETS BUILD A POWERFUL SOCIALIST
MOVEMENT OF THE WORKERS AND POOR!**

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¹ *New Nation Newspaper* 1987 Natal and the Rise of New Trade Unions, 16 July 1987

² **David Harvey** (1989 *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), in his writing on the critique of neoliberalism, makes a compelling account using the French Marxist school, also known as Regulation Theory to provide an analysis of this crisis of the capitalist system in the early 1970s, following the golden age of industrial, Fordist regime of accumulation, in the aftermath of the World War II. Crises leading to the 1973 ‘oil crises’ represent an articulation of the crises in regimes of accumulation with that in the modes of regulation. In this case, falling margins of profitability for Fordist capitalism globally, driven by oversaturation in auto mass production and rising oil prices, resulted in capital pushing for new modes of regulation—with the state reducing taxes on capital and the rich, resulting in reduction in role of the welfare state—neoliberalism, whose global political Apostles were the Reagan and the Thatcher administrations in the US and UK respectively.

³ *New Nation Newspaper* argued that “*the wage determination for the brick and tile industry had remained unchanged for five years. The Wage Board had been sitting since early the previous year to revise the minimum wage, but without result*” (*New Nation Newspaper*, 1987).

⁴ **Richard Hyman** asserted wrote on the significance of the 1973 strikes, asserting, “*The immediate effect here was to focus attention on the intensity of the exploitation endured by Black workers, most of whom earned substantially below the government’s own Poverty Datum Line*” (Hyman, R 1974 *The Durban Strikes 1973*, Warwick: Ravan Press/Institute of Industrial Education).

⁵ *New Nation Newspaper*, 1987 ‘73 Strikes Usher in New Era of Labour Militancy: breaking the silence’, 30 April 1987.

- ⁶ In its account, the South African History Online says, “*South Africa’s Apartheid Government and its White capitalist allies were shaken by, presumably, what looked like a spontaneous strike, which had its beginnings in the complex mix of low wages, the humiliation of pass laws, the hardship of migrant labour, forced removals and the denial of the right to organise, the denial of basic human rights and racism that was the bedrock of Apartheid legislation*” (SA History Online, ‘1973 Durban Strikes’, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1973-durban-strikes>, accessed on 28 October 2022)
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