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Precarious Collaborations. Working-Class Subjectivities, Community Activism, and the Problem with “Social Movement Unionism” in Late-Apartheid East Rand (South Africa)

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ABSTRACT
An influential current in South African labor studies has used the concept of ‘social movement unionism’ to characterize organized labor’s contribution to South Africa’s post-Apartheid democratization. Part of the concept of social movement unionism is the idea that during the 1980s independent black workers’ unions combined workplace struggles with community-based concerns related to social services, repression, and political disenfranchisement. In this way, trade unions came to play a politically transformative role, which implied both innovative labor-community alliances and the appropriation by organized labor of social movements’ mobilizing modalities.

After a decline in the immediate post-Apartheid period, when scholars and union leaders subordinated labor militancy to the imperative of socioeconomic reconstruction, the concept of social movement unionism is currently regaining ascendancy in debates on South Africa’s changing world of work. Due to high unemployment, the proliferation of contingent occupations, and growing labor market fragmentation, many intellectuals and trade unionists argue that unions are at risk of being marginalized unless they rebuild alliances with activists and social movements articulating the struggles of nonunion workers, the unemployed, and marginalized communities.

In this paper we look at the East Rand, one of the strongholds of South African labor radicalism, to problematize the paradigm of social movement unionism by examining how it was produced at the intersection of academic discourse, labor’s public ideologies, and formal organizations. On the basis of preliminary research findings, our aim is to raise questions and propose hypotheses for future research. In particular, we cannot easily discern a correspondence between local unions’ participation in community struggles and a coherent model of social movement unionism. Rather, indications exist that undergirding the template of social movement unionism were unstable, contingent, localized labor-community collaborations, which reflected deep, unsettled incongruities in workers’ subjectivities. Workers’ discourse in the East Rand’s black townships reflected the experience of growing precariousness and social vulnerability in wage employment, which provided crucial motivating factors for workers’ involvement with community struggles.
A Call to “Social Movement Unionism”? 

Social Movement Unionism (with its own acronym, SMU) has recently sounded as a global reform call for trade unions to combat the ills besetting them. From a neoliberal assault on working conditions and permanent employment to global capital relocation, increasing unemployment and generalized precarization, SMU seems to offer an alternative to bureaucratic or business unionism and narrow workplace interests (Moody 1997; Munck 2002; Waterman 1991; Lopez 2004; Buhlunngu and Webster 2004; Lambert and Webster 2001). It addresses the ‘Polanyi Problem’ (Munck 2002) of a pendulum shift toward marketisation by rehabilitating the old proletariat into a broader social movement capable of political import in these changing times (Waterman 1991).

As a model of unionism, its goals are noble. Social movement unionism, with its variants such as ‘political unionism’ (Webster 1988; Lambert and Webster 1988), ‘social unionism’ (Waterman 2001), ‘social justice unionism’ (Dibben 2004), covers features Fairbrother (2008: 214) usefully summarizes: rank-and-file mobilization; collective actions extending beyond the workplace and strike activities; building alliances with community organizations and extending concerns to the realm of social reproduction (Webster 1988); and politically framed demands, often in terms of social justice.

Yet there is also an emerging critique of the prescriptive way in which SMU has become a shorthand response to all the troubles of trade unions. It is generally acknowledged that SMU as a model emerged out of the particular conditions of industrialization under authoritarian Southern regimes, such as South Africa, Brazil, South Korea and the Philippines (Waterman 1984; Munck 1987; Webster 1988; Webster and Lambert 1988; Seidman 1994; Moody 1997; Scipes 1992). As a model of unionism, then, SMU explicitly contrasted the malaise of Northern unions (Webster 1988). In these contexts, unions entwined workplace rights and recognition with broader liberation struggles because, as Seidman (1994) argued, the authoritarian state provided the conditions for linking the realms of work and community in a common language of claims. Von Holdt (2002) critiques a transcendent application of this model of unionism. He argues that “social movement unionism” in South Africa was particular to the specific conditions of apartheid authoritarianism. Examining one major steel works, he finds that rank-and-file
participation and discipline, militant collective actions involving communities, and broader political framing emerged out of divergent cultural repertoires and struggles between migrant workers and urban resident workers. He points to the local contestation over the very characteristics of SMU. And, ultimately cautions that it cannot be regarded as a transferable model.

Some have argued that while social movement unionism proudly operated for South African unions in the 1980s, in the post-apartheid period the combined force of neoliberalism and ANC hegemony has made alliances between unions and locally based social movements more difficult. These experiences problematize the ease of relationship between trade unions and differently resourced, organized and politically inclined community groups (Lier and Stokke 2006). Most recently, Fairbrother (2008) reiterates Von Holdt’s (2002) point: we should recall that trade unions are both movements as well as bargaining institutions. As Von Holdt (2002:298) puts it, “Trade unionism is characterized by a constant tension between movement and the institutionalization and routinization of industrial relations”. Fairbrother (2008: 217) agrees,

Social movement unionism is not one particular form of trade unionism, a more authentic or class-based or focused unionism. Rather the argument is about how and under what circumstances trade unions can challenge and question the labor capital relation. The nonsense that business unionism is not part of this challenge is risible.

While we agree with scholars who have begun to argue for the relevance of the local conditions embedding trade union politics, we suggest that containing this debate within the functions of trade unions further inhibits our understandings of worker politics, and hence of possible organizational and political forms. By questioning the contingent, situational, diversified, and sometimes contradictory expressions of precarious East Rand workers in the 1980s – the very workforce initially studied as having pioneered SMU as a set of practices – we seek to raise questions about political possibilities which are otherwise foreclosed by a self-contained, overly prescriptive view of SMU as an organizational model.

Emergent Activism and East Rand Workers
In early 1973 black workers at Coronation Brick and Tile works and then at Frame Textiles outside Durban embarked on strikes over low wages, launching a period of resurgent unregistered trade union organization in South Africa. The East Rand became one of the core sites to which militant trade union organizing spread in the early 1970s. From the 1940s with the support of municipal governments, the East Rand had become the country’s most concentrated centre of manufacturing. Between 1950s and 1970, the share of the workforce employed in manufacturing there rose from 27% to 52%. The East Rand became home to metal, engineering, chemical and food manufacturing firms, hosting many large multinational companies (Barchiesi and Kenny 2002: 39). As the labor process in these firms became more mechanized, a pool of semi-skilled operative jobs opened to black workers by the 1970s (Webster 1985). Such workers had greater bargaining power than their unskilled predecessors (Ruiters 1995), and in the late 1970s as the economy slowed down and inflation increased, they felt the pinch of a decline in real wages (Bonner and Niefagodien 2001: 81). East Rand black workers, many of whom were migrants from Kwa-Zulu Natal, organized into trade unions, often focusing strategically on large, multinational employers (Sitas 1983; Baskin 1982; Webster 1985).

Trade unions emerged with the support of student activists, black consciousness-aligned structures, and sympathizers within registered white unions. Black workers’ unions were formed in and around Durban after 1973, particularly the Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (MAWU) and the Chemical Workers’ Industrial Union. Social support networks provided funding, office space, education, training, legal advice, and debated strategies for recruiting and organizing new members (Friedman 1987). Yet, workers themselves brought to trade union organization a memory of previous struggles in the 1940s and 1950s, sometimes transmitted by older workers, or inscribed in the oral tradition of the imbongi (e.g., Bonnin and Sitas 1988). As Sakhela Buhlungu (2006) has argued, black workers also infused organizational and participatory experiences from other realms, such as church and community groups, into their meaning of unionization.

Discussions among different groups of unions and support organizations in the 1970s led to unity talks culminating with the formation of FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) in 1979. The core principles embodied in the new federation were nonracialism, worker democracy, and industrial unionism. MAWU was one of the founding unions in this process (Friedman 1987; Ulrich 2003).
The student rebellion in 1976 brought a new group of township activists into political action on the East Rand. Influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, students protested poor conditions in schools, the illegitimacy of the East Rand Administration Board, and police violence (Bonner and Nieftagodien 2001: 69-76). In an attempt to contain political mobilization, the recommendations of the 1979 Wiehahn Commission proposed reforms aimed at recognizing black workers’ organizing rights to bring the independent unions in the fold of industrial relations institutions. FOSATU unions, instead, used the newly granted organizational rights to organize and win legitimacy in workplaces. Webster (1988) and Webster and Lambert (1988) argued that initially trade unions on the East Rand concerned themselves with recognition from company managers, wages and discrimination. Yet recession between 1982 and 1984 led to retrenchments across the East Rand, while rising utilities’ rates were applied on residents to fund the restructuring of local governments, and the government clamped down on “illegal” squatter settlement with waves of evictions and demolitions of shacks.

In the early 1980s, union organizing on the East Rand took on a territorial dimension, whereas in the previous decade it was mainly concentrated in the workplace. Shop stewards started to debate issues affecting workers in their neighborhoods were debated across different factory floors. As they continued to address workplace issues like recognition, unfair dismissals, and wages, union meetings ended up dealing with forced removals of shack dwellers, the rising costs of food, rents and transport, and illegitimate local government structures (Baskin 1982; Webster 1988; Webster and Lambert 1988; Von Holdt 1987). The growing awareness of social issues and conflicts within trade union structures underpinned a rising confrontation within the labor movement between positions simplified as “workerist” – which privileged a class-based analysis of the struggle and the independence of workers’ organizations from political and community organizations – and “populist” – which saw the struggle in terms of national liberation and regarded the unions as part of a broader antiapartheid popular front.

Unions following the FOSATU tradition emphasized the importance of maintaining strong shop floor organizations and of being able to define and control the forms of collaboration with civic and community groups in order to defend a socialist agenda. Sometimes these unions argued that “populist” unions like the South African and Allied Workers’ Union (SAAWU) compromised the principle of worker control by deferring to the leadership of community-based structures, and thus were less accountable to their members. The “populist” position responded
by openly advocating the unions’ participation in community alliances and in the United Democratic Front (UDF), formed in 1983 (Webster 1988:188-189). Yet as Webster (1988) argued of the time, citing FOSATU general secretary Joe Foster’s speech at the federation’s national congress in 1982, that even within FOSATU there was a growing recognition that trade unions could not avoid political engagement. Still, Webster (1988: 188) contended that on the ground emerging “efforts remained localized and partial”. He continued, “In the main, trade unions did not develop a unified national approach to the question of political action…the industrial unions moved cautiously on to this terrain and at a local level” (Webster 1988:189).

Other unions like the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA), which had remained outside FOSATU, had always argued that independent trade union organization was fundamentally about restoring the dignity of oppressed black workers. Led by many young members politicized in the 1976 student movement, its membership coupled political militancy influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement with commitment to shop floor organization. Specific episodes, as the massive Transvaal stayaway in November of 1984, which saw the vast participation of East Rand workers, brought together students, parents and workers, forging new political and organizational relationships involving labor activists from different trade union traditions. The “embryonic” character of social movement unionism (Webster 1988) during the 1980s suggests a fluidity and a contingency to them that has not really been interrogated, partly because research concentrated on leadership and monitoring of actions (Webster and Lambert 1988).

Organizational developments indeed took center stage after the waves of mobilization in the first half of the 1980s. The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 formally recognized the importance of the relationships between the liberation struggle and workers’ battles. Emerging out of debates in the 1980s about the appropriate form of unionism, COSATU’s formation has also reorientated trade union studies in a direction aligned with national liberation, perhaps preventing a more nuanced analysis focused on how workers’ subjectivities and everyday practices were invested by these political processes. COSATU provided the institutional answer to alliances between the trade union movement and community groups. Yet ironically our understanding of how workers understood such alliances remains limited.
The main problems encountered by researchers wanting to examine how the concept of social movement unionism, or indeed the unions’ growing involvement in community politics, played out in the narratives and meanings of rank-and-file black workers is the paucity of sources. Such a statement may sound paradoxical considering the vast scholarly and activist production on South African trade unionism in the 1980s, exemplified in the work of magazines such as the *South African Labour Bulletin* and *Work in Progress*. Yet, the two most important historical surveys of black independent trade unionism in South Africa, Steven Friedman’s *Building Tomorrow Today* (1987) and Jeremy Baskin’s *Striking Back* (1991), are almost entirely focused on formal labor organizations and the voices of leaders and cadres. The unions’ shift towards community movements and political engagement is rendered by relying on ideological pronouncements and official public discourse, which mostly characterized positions deemed as “workerist” or “populist”. In Gay Seidman’s *Manufacturing Militance* (1994), the turn to social movement unionism does not result from changing orientations or contestation among the unions’ rank-and-file. SMU is explained as a consequential outgrowth produced by external conditions, namely the country’s history of industrialization and black working class formation in conditions of political authoritarianism, which are deemed to produce similar results in different countries, like South Africa, Brazil, and South Korea, affected by the same processes. In this regard, Seidman (1994: 11) argues, “Any attempt to explain similar outcomes in very different contexts is unlikely to emphasize workers’ cultural repertoires. Different histories and cultural traditions help shape the way individuals respond to their world; but while cultural patterns shape the expression of demands, they need not determine their content.”

While a structural, organization-focused, cadreship-centered explanation of social movement unionism became hegemonic in South Africa precisely at the time union-community alliances emerged, as noted above, it is remarkable that earlier studies of black independent unions devoted a great deal of attention to workers’ cultural repertoires and signifying practices. Ari Sitas (1983) study of metalworkers’ organizing in the East Rand showed how the union in question, MAWU, which transplanted from Natal to Transvaal in 1975, successfully recruited in migrant workers’ hostels by challenging ethnic loyalties and reshaping workers’ rural cultural motifs, which nonetheless survived in nuanced, interwoven meanings derived from the
experience of urbanization. Eddie Webster’s (1985) analysis of workplace organization in the foundries argued that trade unions’ discourse is shot through with social imageries tributary to experiences of religion, masculinity, ethnicity, and education. Trade unionism emerged not merely as a reflection of external structural conditioning or a higher ideological rationale. It rather owed its rise, expansion, and enduring intensified state repression to its ability to provide meanings for the interpretation of social reality. Newly unionized workers, moreover, already carried with them a multifarious, stratified conceptual baggage not necessarily congruent with the primacy of class or workplace solidarity.

The gradual displacement, from the late 1980s on, of analyses focused on workers’ grassroots signifying practices by studies centered on labor’s formal organizational dynamics and official discourse increasingly tended to presuppose the unionized condition as a cornerstone of workers’ identities. Workplace and community ethnography remained prolific, but the focus shifted in a way indicated by the conclusion of Dunbar Moodie’s (1994: 306) study of mineworkers’ consciousness, in which “now the men of the union are replacing the men of migrant cultures” as “contemporary workers who are completely dependent upon wage labor . . . have no home in which to practice tiro [purposeful work as opposed to alienated wage labor], no umzi [homestead] to build . . . Wage labor is their life . . . the trade union is a home of a sort” (Moodie 1994: 306. Own emphasis). As an important, if underappreciated, consequence, the approach that had guided earlier analyses trying to explain the union as the contested result of signification from below, was downplayed.

Significantly, such a scholarly shift took place at the same time when involvement in local township politics led many unions to move away from organizing migrants’ hostels in the Johannesburg and East Rand areas as an organizational focus. Many migrants, for example workers from KwaZulu, regarded the unions’ political engagement as detrimental to struggles to improve workers’ living conditions. It is by now a widely held view that the disjuncture between trade unions and migrant workers in places like Katorus, the strip of African townships in the southern East Rand, created a political and ideological void that, in the case of Zulu migrants, was filled in the early 1990s by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in the process of extending anti-ANC attacks from Natal to the Transvaal (Bonner and Ndima 1990; Mamdani 1996; Chipkin 2007).
At a scholarly level, an equally important consequence of the shift towards formal organizational discourse coincidental with the rise of social movement unionism was that studies of worker identities and culture produced in the 1970s and early 1980s did not lead to the consolidation and expansion of a substantial body of oral history of the South African working class. With very few exceptions, publicly accessible oral collections on South African workers’ experiences predominantly document the voices of unions’ shop stewards and leaders. In the case of social movement unionism and union participation in community politics in the 1980s, virtually nothing exists to account for the experiences of ordinary workers, unionized and not, and to articulate the implication of their everyday lives in the unions’ conundrum of workplace struggles, concerns with neighborhood living conditions, and liberation politics.

While making the task of further research increasingly arduous, such gaping silences and lacunae of documentation question, nonetheless, crucial aspects of the idea of social movement unionism as a scholarly paradigm and a political project. They emphasize, in particular, the hiatus between official transcripts and public discourse, on one hand, and what James Ferguson (1999: 96) intended by “signifying practices,” or “a capability to deploy signs in a way that positions the actor in relation to social categories.” For him signifying practices do not necessarily express a material social condition, a transparent form of membership, or a self-evident cultural affiliation, but rather reflect a multilayered system of signs that enable life strategies in “situations of duress”, economic decline, and necessity.

The situation of duress that black workers on the East Rand confronted during the 1980s consisted mostly of the fact that for many of them wage labor remained, despite the gains brought by unionization, a highly precarious experience. Not only were migrant workers still subject to a system of contract labor and denial of citizenship and residential rights, but living conditions for the working class at large declined as a result of spiraling inflation, rising unemployment, and widening retrenchments in a context of deep economic crisis. Moreover precariousness was connecting workplace and society in new, deeper forms. The government’s program of “orderly urbanization” sought to partially deracialize the urban space and create new class divides among the politically disenfranchised populations by allowing township residential rights for African workers with skills, stable occupations, and formal accommodation. Escalating shack demolitions in the first half of the 1980s still represented a threat mostly for migrants, which were faced with deportation to the “homelands” in case of eviction (Rees 1983). With the
abolition of influx control in 1986, however, a de-racialized category of informal “squatters”, in whose ranks many unionized workers could be found due to the enduring housing crisis, became the target of government criminalization and a symbol of undesirability. Old distinctions between relatively secure workers with township residence rights and more precariously housed migrants tended therefore to be superseded. As a shop steward from Katlehong (Germiston) reported:

The fact is that the greater proportion of housing in the township build [sic] by the government are so bad that we consider them as shacks. So to call someone’s home or house a shack is based on political consideration.¹

MAWU, on the other hand, recognized that employment instability was feeding social precariousness across its membership, affecting migrants and permanent township dwellers alike:

When our members are dismissed they lose their accommodation (bed) in the hostels. . . . Also, those that are retrenched are being kicked out of their houses for not being able to pay rent. Those workers who stay in the shacks are being harassed day and night and their houses (shacks) demolished.²

The experience of precariousness was, simultaneously, situational and diversified, as it responded to different biographical trajectories, political socialization, and histories of collective organizing. Therefore, workers like the young, relatively well-educated, urban residents entering service sector jobs on the East Rand expressed their precariousness in terms that substantially differed from MAWU members. Service sector workers were second generation urban residents, their parents having migrated to the East Rand to enter manufacturing jobs in the 1940s and 1950s. They were part of the “1976 generation,” politically aware, conversant with the Black


² MAWU Transvaal Branch Report to MAWU National General Meeting on the 22nd June 1985. DHP, MAWU papers, AH1077, H.5.2.
Consciousness Movement, and lacking socioeconomic opportunities. These workers, many of them young women, joined CCAWUSA as a militant response to harsh racism at work, but they also felt pressures as younger household members assisting families affected by recession and inflation. One young woman entering retail work left school after Standard 7 in 1977 because her family lacked resources: “I went to look for a job as the situation was not good”. As another worker said of her entry into shop work in 1984, “We did not leave school because we liked it. It was poverty”. Unlike migrant hostel dwellers in MAWU, for whom precariousness was deeply engrained with the very experience of urban life, precariousness became evident to CCAWUSA workers in the form of thwarted expectations. They were the ones “who would have gone to university” if not for apartheid; their halted mobility and the dependency of their families clarified their racial and class oppression (see also Mashinini 1991).

In a reality in which widening social precariousness mirrored the state’s racial despotism and workplace managerial authoritarianism, the meaning itself of wage labor as a vehicle of class solidarity based on claims only at the point of production became increasingly frail and embattled. As another retail worker said, “At that time we were already involved in civic matters and underground activities which politicized some of us greatly. We began to take this politicization onto the shop floors”. The workplace became a site to enact broader claims to dignity, and the “community” consequently emerged as a terrain where the inability of waged work to provide that dignified existence to black workers could be redressed.

Studies that tend to look at social movement unionism not as a political-ideological category or, as Waterman (1991) put it, a “model” or “method” of union organizing, and regard it instead as localized experimentations led by specific material concerns emphasize two important recurring points. The first is that local union activists wanted the process to remain labor-driven. The second is the deep-seated suspicion local union structures maintained towards nationalist-orientated civic organizations deemed to be controlled by “petty bourgeois” elements in the townships. As Swilling (1984) convincingly argued, East Rand rank-and-file union members engaging on community issues retained a sense of the peculiarity of trade union

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3 Interviews conducted by B. Kenny, August 26 – 27, 1999, Daveyton.

4 Interview conducted by B. Kenny, July 25, 2005, Johannesburg.

5 Interview conducted by B. Kenny, August 11, 2000, Tembisa.
organisations and their methods, rather than being the product of ‘spontaneist’, ‘Jacobin’ community pressures.

Mainstream views of social movement unionism as a process of social alliance shaped by a coherent new discourse of citizenship and political opposition are more obscuring than clarifying as they explain historical processes by their supposed outcomes, rather than showing such outcomes as emerging from historical processes. The ways in which different trajectories as those of MAWU and CCAWUSA members converged in a common dynamics of political union involvement, and yet invested it with specific, only partially overlapping meanings, indicate that trade unions’ investment in community struggles responded to material conditions that are not reflected in the dominant social movement unionism narrative. Far from revealing the labor movement as the harbinger of a new imagery of citizenship and political change, such conditions predominantly reflected wage labor’s precariousness in the fabric of South Africa’s racialized social order and the inability of working class identities shaped in workplace conflicts to operate as vehicles of social emancipation.

The first significant attempts to build organizational coordination among unionized factories on the East Rand took place in the context of the 1981 and 1982 strike waves and gave shape to experiences of territorial shop-steward structures like the Germiston shop steward council (Baskin 1982). Shop-steward councils were almost entirely concerned with workplace issues and strikes and tried to devolve organizational responsibilities to shop-stewards as a remedy for the shortage of full-time organizers. In the end, however, they also enabled interactions among workers on common problems confronted in the townships. FOSATU unions’ subsequent involvement in community struggles against evictions, or in rent and transport boycotts, and eventually in political protest against late apartheid reforms operated in continuity with, rather than as a qualitative break of consciousness from, those early developments where survival in the face of employment precariousness was a decisive concern. In local union debates “workplace” and “community” do not appear as polarized signifiers of ideological inscriptions, but are rather tactically deployed on the basis of their expediency to express eminently practical concerns.

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6 Interview with Organiser of Glass & Allied W.U. (GAWU) and of MAWU as well as the Exec. of the Germiston Local s/s Council, 7/4/82. Handwritten notes. DHP, Jeremy Baskin papers, AH2920, R.
An example of discussion among FOSATU shop stewards in Springs is instructive in this regard. Springs was especially relevant among East Rand towns as a laboratory for social movement unionism (Von Holdt 1987). There, in fact, FOSATU activists played a decisive role in the formation of the local branch of the East Rand People’s Organisation (ERAPO), and supported the local student movement. Shop stewards in Springs saw a problem in the community in the fact that, despite the township’s population being composed mostly by members of the “productive class”, especially employed workers, the leadership remained in the hands of “businessmen or intellectuals” with “no feeling or understanding of the downtrodden masses”. Conversely, local shop stewards’ meetings provided a more effective avenue to communicate the participants’ grievances as workers and township residents. Even if such meetings were predominantly a trade union affair, mainly concerned with wages, working conditions, recognition from employers, nonetheless

what happened in these meetings is that: ‘workers would start raising other things that affect them, issues such as incredible water bills, unannounced rent rise, unrealistic rental accounts received by some of the people, and also Putco bus problem i.e. shortage of School buses, bus routes, behaviour of the bus drivers and Coupon System... These problems were always raised by workers as prime consent [sic] demanding immediate attention. [Own emphasis]8

Rather than being preoccupied with theorizing the conditions, forms and ideological contents of the alliance between workers’ unions and community organizations – these were the thorny issues debated nationally by camps branded as “populist” and “workerist” – debates in Springs were more focused on the practical shortcomings of “bourgeois” political leadership in the community. Local leaders were difficult to contact, had no culture of mandates from the grassroots, did not appreciate worker control of organizations, and were not politically accountable. The solution did not consist here in a call for the union to withdraw from the community, but it was rather an exhortation for the union to become the community. Taking

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8 Ibid., 2-3.
control of community organizations was not regarded as a step primarily aimed at political-institutional change. It was rather conceived of as a way to demand from local employers a commitment to subsidize and decommodify municipal services and utilities, bringing therefore wage struggles onto the level of contestation for social income. The political implications of the struggle were not, however, neglected. Rather the Springs shop stewards reminded that “we should not be evasive on the slogan ‘MAJORITY SHALL RULE’”, even if “majority” meant for them the working class.

The response by the FOSATU leadership to the overlap in the rank-and-file between union struggles and township mobilization capitalized on the narrative of working class leadership in community struggles to emphasize the role of the union as a more advanced, disciplined organizational form than civic organizations. Contrary to conventional views that saw FOSATU as a federation folded on the workplace and disdainful of engagement in township politics, its leaders articulated at a relatively early stage a discourse that reflected many of the tenets of the later theory of social movement unionism. In a paper delivered in early 1983, FOSATU’s general secretary Alec Erwin endorsed labor-community alliances to confront the potential class divisions created by the government’s projects of political reforms, and saw such alliances both as a sort of “popular front against the regime” and vigilant at the same time against class enemies in the communities themselves. Erwin saw refusal to engage community organizations as a strategic blunder leading to the possible danger of having FOSATU members divided by opposing political loyalties, which could have had the effect of “destroying the slow and hard work of building up a national trade union movement, particularly where gigantic achievements of non-racial solidarity have been won.”

The preoccupation with maintaining FOSATU’s tradition of nonracialism was not merely a principled stand. The unity talks that would lead to the 1985 launch of COSATU were still faltering at that time, and relations between workplace-based and community-orientated trade unions were in many cases overtly conflict-ridden. The South African and Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) had experienced a meteoric rise in the East London area premised on the idea of community mobilization as a tool to build trade unions directly engaged in national liberation

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9 Ibid., p.6.
politics. In Port Elizabeth, FOSATU affiliates in the automotive sector, NUMARWOSA (a predominantly “colored” union) and UAW, came under intense criticism from unions and township civics viewing workers’ oppression more along racial and national lines than with a focus on class contradictions. FOSATU ultimately confronted at a national level and in its East Rand stronghold the possibility of a split on questions of race and class. In 1984 the East Rand region of MAWU suffered the separation of UMMAWOSA, a breakaway union complaining against the dominance of “white intellectuals”, particularly Erwin and Bernie Fanaroff, in FOSATU (Swilling 1984). UMMAWOSA, which claimed to remain part of the FOSATU tradition, saw its revolt in “anti-bureaucratic”, rather than racial, terms. One of its accusations towards FOSATU’s leaders was, significantly, of discouraging shop stewards’ involvement in community issues, like housing evictions in Katlehong.11

FOSATU’s support for MAWU and its condemnation of UMMAWOSA drew criticism from other affiliates, particularly the Sweet, Food, and Allied Workers Unions (SFAWU) and the Paper, Wood, and Allied Workers Union (PWAWU), which had joined FOSATU from a background in the former Coordinating Committee of Black Trade Unions (CCOBTU), influenced by the traditions of panafricanism and the black consciousness. At FOSATU’s 1982 national congress PWAWU had drawn considerable controversy with its position that “workers are Africans first.”12 SFAWU in the end restated its loyalty to FOSATU and joined the federation in rejecting the UMMAWOSA split. It remained convinced, however, that workers’ autonomous activism in the community, on local as well as political issues, had shifted the terrain of antagonism from the factory to the broader society. Failure to respond adequately would expose FOSATU to irrelevance, similarly to the fate of “European and American trade unions, which while seemingly militant, inevitably end up mediating conflict between capital and labour, and leaving the political struggles of workers to political parties that are not controlled by workers.”13 FOSATU was not therefore the monolithically “workerist” federation it is often suggested, but was increasingly divided over the issue of political alignments. What would

11 TGWU Report on Special Central Committee Meeting Held at Wilgespruit on 11.8.84. DHP, Jane Barrett papers, A2168, A.7.2.


eventually become known as the theory of social movement unionism initially surfaced as a discursive device with which FOSATU leaders tried to keep the federation together. Erwin’s position on the relations between labor and community struggles, which foregrounded social movement unionism as a strategic and political orientation, represented an attempt to provide a response to the new, still unpredictable and ill-defined contours that workers’ discourse and mobilization were assuming. His argument favoring worker leadership in broad-based “popular front” was aimed at preserving the unity of the unions as well as addressing workers’ restlessness over their precarious social predicament.

Later scholarship would elevate, by the end of the 1980s, social movement unionism into an epistemological category designating the linear, cumulative maturation of union-community alliances towards a higher level of political consciousness, and ultimately the embrace of ANC-led nationalist politics, symbolized by COSATU’s launch in 1985 and its endorsement of the Freedom Charter in 1987. This paper has, however, provided initial evidence to motivate research in different directions. The category of social movement unionism is neither a self-evident product of historical developments, nor a plausible scholarly reconstruction of dynamics that saw the independent unions’ increasing involvement in community issues and their collaboration with township civic organizations. In the case of the East Rand, what eventually came to be known in scholarly circles as social movement unionism originated from the attempt by the leadership of certain trade union traditions, especially FOSATU’s, to provide a narrative and normative meanings to control dynamics of autonomous workers’ participation in local social conflicts emanating from rank-and-file union members and locals. It is at the same time important to avoid the risk of idealizing such participation, and the underlying collaborations between workers and community movements. Not only was collaboration along those lines highly situational and influenced by contingent factors, it also reflected on the workers’ side the need to survive conditions of extreme duress. Social precariousness, in particular, manifested itself as continuous, potentially catastrophic unpredictability in living standards, household conditions, residential stability. Combined, these factors highlighted the frailty of waged employment, in itself under attack due to retrenchments and joblessness, not only as a foundation for a minimally decent life but also as a sufficiently powerful arena of collective identities and claims.
It remains a remarkable historical development, still to be fully investigated and appreciated, that out of precarious collaborations between worker struggles and community mobilizations could emerge a movement that ultimately provided a decisive contribution to the ungovernability of the apartheid regime. Imposing on such a trajectory, however, a notion of social movement unionism – with its corollary glorification of the COSATU-ANC alliance and a normative discourse of socioeconomic “reconstruction” bestowed on the labor movement after the 1994 elections – as a providential, necessary endpoint is probably, by now, an impediment to critical analysis.

Some Concluding Observations

Our main aim in this paper was to indicate a possible new terrain of research, backed by some preliminary findings, to problematize a concept, “social movement unionism,” which has gained immense popularity not only in explaining anti-apartheid worker struggles in South Africa, but also as an indication of new philosophies and organizational modalities for labor movements confronting economic liberalization worldwide. The urgency of further research is here mostly motivated by the need to focus on the historicity of workers’ struggles and to eschew teleological narratives. In this regard, the entity that came to shape the imagination of scholars and activists alike as “social movement unionism” is at serious risk of obscuring the contingency, the fragility, and the unpredictability of the social dynamics that brought it to the fore.

In indicating this research path, however, we are not only motivated by the need to restore a sense of complexity and contestation to historiographical work. We also believe that questions raised in this paper interrogate present, highly contentious dynamics. After the turn to market liberalization by the ANC in power, ideas of “social movement unionism,” “social justice unionism,” or “social unionism” have enjoyed a renewed interest in South African debates (Buhlungu and Webster 2004; Lambert and Webster 2001; Dibben 2004; Lier and Stokke 2006). Now as in the 1980s, fascination with the concept has to do with the realization by intellectuals and activists that wage labor is a precarious reality, whose continuous degradation shapes areas of social vulnerability much broader than organized labor constituencies. In a context of permanently high unemployment, casualized, unprotected jobs have constituted a large share of the employment created since the ANC’s rise to power. In the East Rand, the 1990s have seen a
vast disarticulation of manufacturing industries and historically powerful union strongholds (Barchiesi and Kenny 2002), which economic growth during the 2000s has only partially counterbalanced. Differently from the 1980s, the precariousness of wage labor can be presented more as the product of impersonal market dynamics than as the result of coercively enforced state policies. Trade unions’ abilities to articulate, represent, and organize the resulting social discontent are, however, questioned in ways that do not substantially differ between the two periods.

In such a context, what is the usefulness of current paradigms inspired by the theory of “social movement unionism,” especially as it may be seriously flawed and simplified in its understanding of past worker struggles? Are hypotheses to revive and update the social movement unionism archetype fruitful responses that labor organizations and collective movements can provide to the current crisis of waged employment? Is SMU conducive to the idea of rethinking social emancipation beyond the mere celebration of wage labor? Or, conversely, can an uncritical idealization of social movement unionism conceal its use as a source of support for less than progressive forms of labor politics? Is COSATU’s recently victorious endorsement of Jacob Zuma – as a populist political leader riding popular dissatisfaction over joblessness and employment precariousness – an example of social movement unionism revived? In this latter case, one may well wonder about the implications of subordinating workers’ struggles to a new ANC elite whose affectations of social change have so far been rhetorical at best. As a result, the glorification of social movement unionism would delay once again a much needed reflection on the social crisis of wage labor in South Africa, and the political possibilities emanating from it.

References


