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# The Re-Emergence of Black Unions in the Western Cape

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**ABSTRACT**

Concern at the pitifully low levels of pay led the National Union of South African Students to launch an initiative in 1971 to try to rebuild trade unions to organise black African workers. By the 1960s unions linked to the African National Congress had been all but extinguished by repression, even if they were never banned. The leadership had gone into exile. Student activists at the English-speaking universities initiated wages commissions to combat grindingly low wages in Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. The students were white, reflecting the government's apartheid policies. Former union organisers were contacted and within a few years an embryonic union movement had been established. Its members became the backbone of the United Democratic Front, often at the forefront of resisting apartheid. Although the subject has been dealt with before, past writing has failed to explain in detail how this was achieved and what a high price was paid for the success. This article deals primarily with events in the Western Cape in the context of the wider movement. It is not an attempt to expand the theoretical debates that surround the subject.

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## Momentum for change

The attacks on unions aligned with the African National Congress (ANC) by the apartheid state in the 1950s and 1960s have been extensively discussed. The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was, with the Communist Party, part of the Congress Alliance. Even though SACTU was not declared a banned organisation, its unions were reduced to a rump and the leadership fled into exile, joining their alliance comrades.[1] Once in exile most SACTU union members left their union roles behind them, concentrating instead on regular ANC activities. As Martin Legassick argued:

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1. S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970–1984* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 30–33.

> The ANC's fixation on rural guerrilla warfare and resultant indifference to the urban areas and the organised working class, had serious consequences for the independent trade unions. SACTU advocated what it called 'political trade unionism', by which it meant that 'the apartheid state is all-powerful and that the only form of struggle appropriate to the strength of the state apparatus is armed struggle'.[2]

Those SACTU activists who remained behind and had not been killed were gradually released from jail. Most kept a low profile at home and bided their time. Only the Food and Canning Workers' Union remained a functioning organisation, although in a much-reduced state.

The African Resistance Movement, mainly formed by young white liberals, had also been destroyed by 1964.[3] By the mid-1960s it appeared that white rule was largely unchallenged, yet this was not really the case. A number of organisations continued to function, from the Black Sash and a range of Christian organisations to the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This came to a head at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1968 over the university's refusal to confirm the appointment of Archie Mafeje as lecturer in comparative African government and law after intense pressure from the state.[4] Hundreds of students, outraged by the university's reluctance to stand up to the authorities, marched to the university administration building and occupied it for almost 10 days. They faced threats from the government and attacks from students from the University of Stellenbosch, but were backed by protests at other university campuses, including the Universities of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Fort Hare, and received supportive messages from student protests in London, Paris, and Berlin.[5] Although the protest came to nothing, with Mafeje doomed to a tragic downward spiral of exile and alcohol, it marked something of a break from the quiescence of the previous years. Student opposition at white universities (and some black universities and colleges) gradually grew in number and intensity.[6]

The students were not immune to the events taking place around them, nationally and internationally. Natal became a centre of activity. Strikes in the Durban docks had taken place down the years, with important industrial action in 1954, 1959, and 1969.[7] There were also strikes in Namibia in 1971/1972, which were an inspiration to students, and the development of the

2. M. Legassick, 'Debating the Revival of the Workers' Movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and Post-Apartheid Patriotic History', *Kronos*, 34, 1 (2008), 250.
3. T. Sharp, 'Peace Profile: The African Resistance Movement', *Peace Review*, 17, 4 (2005), 455–462.
4. 'The 1968 "Mafeje Affair" Sit-In, 50 Years On', UCT Libraries, University of Cape Town, accessed 9 July 2025, https://lib.uct.ac.za/articles/2018-08-15-1968-mafeje-affair-sit-50-years.
5. University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers Research Archive (hereafter HPRA), Papers of Taffy Adler, ZA HPRA AH2065-A-A6-A6.1, 'A Brief History of Student Action in South Africa', https://www.thenewradicals.com/uploads/2/7/7/4/27747269/brief_history_of_stduent_action.pdf.
6. For the remainder of the article, the term 'black' is used to mean black African, rather than the wider use of the term to include Coloured, Indian, Chinese, and other ethnic groups that were not classified as 'white'.
7. D. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock Workers of Durban' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, Coventry, 1979), 359–359, 518–522.

South African Students' Organisation, which is discussed later.[8] Despite the repression, some forms of working-class resistance remained unbroken. In 1971 a decision to end Saturday working seriously reduced the dockers' wages and on 16 October 1972 they went out on strike.[9] Some were victimised and dismissed, but on 1 December 1972 the dockers did win a modest wage increase and a promise that their hours would not be changed and leaders would not be sacked.[10] Within a month other workers had taken up the baton. On 9 January 1973, 2000 workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile Company on the outskirts of Durban went out calling for better wages. Their slogan was 'Filumuntu ufesadikiza', or 'Man is dead but his spirit still lives'.[11] Their action set off a series of rolling strikes. In the period January to March 1973 more than 160 strikes erupted involving 61,410 workers refusing to work.[12] In time this became referred to as the 'Durban moment'.[13] It has been suggested that the strikes were spontaneous and 'took everyone by surprise – management, workers and an immature and disorganised labour movement'.[14] This appears to have been overstated. As is discussed later, some initial organisation had already begun around a benefit fund, which was to become the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund.

Students were also inspired and affected by the international mood, which was increasingly radical, with challenges to authority on campuses and beyond.[15] The American participation in the war in Vietnam was reaching a climax. Young men and women in Europe and the Americas ridiculed the style of dress and hair of their elders. There was a growing interest in an alternative set of values, summed up by the somewhat dubious phrase 'Turn on, tune in, drop out' popularized by Timothy Leary. Serious questions about the rights of women, people of colour, and the environment were also beginning to be raised, even if these issues were generally of interest only to a minority. If some white students were increasingly engaged with these questions, black students had gone their own way. Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement led to a break with NUSAS in 1968 with the formation of the South African (Black) Students' Organisation (SASO).[16] The emergence of SASO was a challenge to the generally liberal ethos of NUSAS, which the white students found

8. H. Becker, 'The Road to Durban: Workers' Struggles, Student Movements and the Resurgence of Politics in Namibia and South Africa', in P. Bianchini, N. Sylla, and L. Zeilig, *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2024), 262–280.
9. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers', 664.
10. *Ibid*., 664–666.
11. Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes 1973* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1974), 9–10.
12. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers', 667.
13. T. Morphet, '"Brushing History against the Grain": Oppositional Discourse in South Africa', *Theoria*, 76 (1990), 92.
14. M. Friedman, *'The Future Is in the Hands of the Workers': A History of FOSATU* (Johannesburg: Mutloatse Heritage Trust, 2011), 23.
15. C. Barker, 'Some Reflections on Student Movements of the 1960s and Early 1970s', *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 81 (2008), 43–91.
16. G. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971–1973', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 2 (2007), 404–405.

difficult to come to terms with. The racism of apartheid was all around them and the evidence of its impact upon the lives of black men and women was becoming increasingly clear. This was highlighted by an article by the distinguished British journalist Adam Raphael, whose in-depth revelations of the poverty wages paid by British companies in South Africa brought the matter to international attention. The article, entitled 'British Firms Pay Africans Starvation Rates', was published on 12 March 1973 and caused an immediate stir, including being raised in the British Parliament.[17] The story was widely reported in the South African media, to the discomfort of the authorities.

Raphael's work came at an important moment. Students at several white English-speaking universities had already begun to be active around the issue. Quite why they became engaged is hard to pin down, since they came from a variety of backgrounds; perhaps the zeitgeist of the time made it possible.[18] Some were excited by what American students had achieved and inspired by the Students for a Democratic Society.[19] In Durban a range of people came together, from church leaders to existing union organisers who worked mainly with Coloured and Indian workers. Two figures in Durban were particularly significant: the philosopher Rick Turner and the trade unionist Harriet Bolton. Turner had been appointed a lecturer at the University of Natal in 1969. His role was critical since he changed the prevailing intellectual debate, and he is credited with having inspired students to actively support the labour movement.[20]

> He guided a generation of student activists to become critical and strategic thinkers, helping them to understand that there were systems of participatory democracy which provided real alternatives to formal and representative democracy […] Turner was a central influence in the development of a body of socialist thought that rejected Soviet Marxism, drew on the varied traditions of Western Marxism and existentialism, and blended these into an analysis that addressed the specifics of South African conditions. This had a strong impact on students and other intellectuals who formed the Wages Commissions in 1971, and who took the first steps to establish the new trade union organisations of the early 1970s.[21]

Harriet Bolton was an existing union leader, with experience of organising mainly Coloured and Indian workers in registered unions. She was a

17. J. Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media, 1972–1979: A Struggle for Representation* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 109–121. For his contribution, Raphael was recognised with the British Press Awards Journalist of the Year prize for 1973 and the Granta Investigative Journalist of the Year award.
18. It is clear from the author's interviews with a range of activists that while some had liberal parents, others did not. Most grew up in English-speaking families, while others had Afrikaans as their first language. A number were Jewish, but others were raised in a Christian tradition. It is difficult to see a common thread.
19. S. Stryker, 'Knowledge and Power in the Students for a Democratic Society, 1960–1970', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 38 (1993–1994), 38.
20. A. Ryabchuk and J. Wilderman, 'The Changing Role of Worker Advice Offices in South Africa, from 1970s to the Present', *Politikon*, 45, 2 (2018), 205.
21. G. Moss, *The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2014), 35.

remarkable figure, who knew how unions worked and insisted on the 'intensely practical and "bread and butter" driven character of the new worker organisations'.[22] Bolton also understood the need to exploit loopholes in existing labour legislation. It was with her encouragement that a Durban student, Dave Hemson, began building the movement.

Turner's partner, Foszia Turner-Stylianou, who was at the heart of these early developments, commented: 'There were various people who were concerned about the situation, but there was no specific moment, rather a stringing together of moments' that led to the first initiatives.[23] However, Turner-Stylianou does recall a meeting at which a number of people came together, which led to the founding of the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) in May 1973, which operated mainly in the Durban area. Bolton, Turner, Laurie Schlemmer, Hemson, and Turner-Stylianou attended.

> The IIE was a coordinated effort between academics and trade unionists. The institute was affiliated to Ruskin College in England, an educational body based in Oxford, England for trade unionists. Soon after, from 1974 onwards, the IIE started up the publication, *South African Labour Bulletin* to report on and analyse labour matters.[24]

The IIE, linking academics, students, and workers, was to set something of a precedent of activism and research that other centres would follow while adapting the approach to their needs.

From the beginning those involved took risks and knew they were doing so. They were aware that the security forces were monitoring and infiltrating their activities.[25] Over time white students were arrested and their careers cut short by bannings. Some paid with their lives, while the black organisers that they recruited suffered a similar fate. There is no official list commemorating what happened to them, but those connected with the wages commissions who were killed, jailed, or banned include the following:

Died in detention: Elijah Loza and Storey Mazwembe (both of whom worked at the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau)

Assassinated: Jeanette Curtis and Rick Turner (the founders and inspiration behind the wages commissions)

Detained and banned: Chris Albertyn, Gavin Anderson, Jeremy Baskin, Debbie Budlender, Halton Cheadle, Gideon Cohen, Johnny Copelyn, Jeanette Curtis, David Davis, Paula Ensor, Judy Favish, John Frankish, Dave Hemson, Willie Hofmeyr, Pat Horn, Sipho Kubekha, Jack Lewis, Elijah

22. H. Keal, '"A Life's Work": Harriet Bolton and Durban's Trade Unions,1944–1974' (MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2009), 134.
23. Author interview with Foszia Turner-Stylianou, Zoom, 19 June 2025.
24. 'Institute for Industrial Education (IIE)', South African History Online, accessed 10 July 2025, https://sahistory.org.za/article/institute-industrial-education-iie.
25. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers', 405.

Loza, Zora Mehlomakhulu, Jeannette Murphy, Mike Murphy, Charles Nupen, and Karel Tip.

The role of Rick Turner has been mentioned. He was by no means the only academic to support the movement, like the industrial relations specialist at the University of the Witwatersrand, Edward Webster. Michael Nupen was another philosopher who taught about the German Hegelian tradition of Marxism. This was very different from the crude Marxism propagated by the ANC and its allies in the Communist Party. His cousin, Charles Nupen, remembered Michael as introducing the Durban students to Hegel and Heidegger, as well as Marx. It was, he recalled, 'a real eye opener'.[26] Michael Nupen's lectures at Wits had a similarly subversive effect to those of Rick Turner in Durban.

## Moving beyond Durban

If the earliest developments took place in and around Durban, they were soon taken up by other centres. The immediate concern was the wages paid by the universities themselves. 'Soon after the founding meeting of the Wages Commission in March 1971, NUSAS held its annual national seminar. Hemson and others put forward proposals for 'Wage-Level Action […] begun on a small experimental basis […] where a good chance for success is enjoyed'.[27] The wages being paid at the University of Natal were, at the time, just half of the prevailing poverty datum line. By the time of the next NUSAS conference in July 1971, those supporting student action to improve wages were well prepared. Two student leaders, Jeanette Curtis and Paula Ensor, moved a motion calling for 'the establishment of Wages Commissions at Wits, UCT, Rhodes University and the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg'.[28] Curtis and Steve Friedman established the wages commission at Wits, with the help of Phindile Mfeti, a nephew of Govan Mbeki and cousin of Thabo Mbeki, and Miriam Sithole, who had worked with SACTU in the 1960s.[29]

The activists knew they were facing danger by taking these steps: the heavy hand of the apartheid state was all too evident. There was also a recognition that mistakes that had been made in the 1950s and early 1960s should be avoided. The new movement had to establish its foundations in industry before it considered wider political challenges to the state, exactly the reverse of what SACTU had attempted. Edward Webster argued: 'Faced with a weak power

26. HPRA, Legal Resources Centre (LRC), Oral History Project (hereafter LRC), ZA HPRA AG3298-138, 'Charles Nupen Interview', 27 November 2007, https://researcharchives.wits.ac.za/charles-nupen-interview. Other lecturers from this period who provided students with an alternative perspective included Sheldon Leader, Charles van Onselen, Peter Delius, and Phil Bonner. 'Philosopher-Organiser: Rick Turner and the Revival of the Trade Union Movement in the Early 1970s,' *Daily Maverick*, 21 February 2022.
27. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers', 407.
28. *Ibid*., 411.
29. Moss, *The New Radicals*, 156–157.

base in the factories and a hostile state and employers, SACTU chose to engage politically with nationalism as a means of transforming its small factory base.'[30] As Johann Maree observed, the Congress Alliance had 'underestimated' the state's repressive powers. 'SACTU's involvement with the Alliance therefore incurred the state's oppressive wrath at a stage when SACTU was not resilient enough to withstand the onslaught.'[31] The result was predictable: SACTU's organisers were arrested or banned and its member unions crushed. The ANC's attempt to use the unions as a battering ram in confronting the state had been fatally destructive. As the unions crumbled, SACTU turned instead to military action:

> SACTU advocated what it called 'political trade unionism', by which it meant that 'the apartheid state is all-powerful and that the only form of struggle appropriate to the strength of the state apparatus is armed struggle'. Hence, 'Class-conscious workers […] should abandon the struggle to establish trade unions and acknowledge the primacy of political struggle by leaving the country to get professional military training. The issue of working-class rights thus can only be solved through military struggle; in a national democratic state trade union rights will be granted to workers.'[32]

By the early 1960s the unions had been decimated: their members forced into inactivity, their leadership into exile with the ANC.[33] Repression and poor organisation had broken union members of SACTU, leading to a failure of political analysis. SACTU, with its ANC and Communist Party allies, argued that South Africa was a fascist state that could only be challenged on the battlefield: there was (in its view) no room for overt resistance inside the country by trade unions. As it put it: 'SACTU was forced underground […] there is nothing to suggest that the apartheid regime will ever tolerate a strong, progressive and open trade union movement for very long. It would be a mistake to act on this basis.'[34] This analysis proved to be simplistic and inaccurate. It was an obstacle to the growth of unionisation and the re-emergence of the unions as pillars of resistance to apartheid.

By contrast, the activists of the 1970s were convinced that the apartheid government was not as all-powerful as it appeared: there was room for trade union work, even if it meant taking risks. The consensus of the Cape Town academics, students, and organisers of the 1970s was to emerge gradually, using the 'grey spaces' unwittingly provided by state legislation. This meant avoiding forming

30. R. Lambert and E. Webster, 'The Re-Emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa', in W. Cobbet and R. Cohen, eds, *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988), 21.
31. J. Maree, 'The Emergence, Struggles and Achievements of Black Trade Unions in South Africa from 1973 to 1984', *Labour, Capital and Society*, 18, 2 (1985), 282.
32. Legassick, 'Debating the Revival of the Workers' Movement', 250.
33. E. Webster, 'The Rise of Social-Movement Unionism: The Two Faces of the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa', in P. Frankel, N. Pines, and M. Swilling, *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1988) 179.
34. *Workers Unity*, SACTU, 31, June 1982.

unions at the inception of the movement. Instead, they looked to develop organisations that were labour allies to begin their work, while never losing their final goal of unionisation. In Durban this was the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund, on the Witwatersrand, the Industrial Aid Society, and in Cape Town, the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau.[35]

The roles of Curtis (or Curtis-Schoon as she became) and Ensor were important in getting the wages commissions off the ground and then spreading the movement across the country. Curtis is described as the 'prime mover' of the wages commissions, having been given the responsibility by the NUSAS executive.[36] Their aim was to transform the Durban form of organisation into a national movement by taking it to other centres. Ensor explained how this was done after she took over as a full-time NUSAS officer in January 1973:

> I spent time at [the] University of Natal, Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and while I was in Durban I received word that 8 of us had been banned. Jeanette Cunningham-Brown drove me to Johannesburg, and my plan was to meet with the Wits Wages Commission but this proved impossible and I then returned to Cape Town and was served with my (banning) order.[37]

Janet Love, another NUSAS activist at Wits, who subsequently worked for the ANC underground and was later appointed vice-chair of the Electoral Commission of South Africa, recalled sharing a flat with Curtis in the Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville. Although Love says she did not know it at the time, Curtis was already involved with people linked to the Congress Alliance.[38] This perception is supported by others.[39] Gordon Young, a student activist at UCT, recalls Curtis having contacts with old Communist party members who were still in the country, even if they were no longer active.[40]

From the start there was a concern about security. Curtis contacted the chairs of the wages commissions individually, recommending a two-tier structure, with a public face and an inner core whose work was kept as confidential as possible. A commission of inquiry by the state (the Schlebusch Commission) established in 1972 to investigate the activities of NUSAS, the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, and the University Christian Movement, quoted from a letter that Curtis wrote:

> It has come to my notice that a number of commissions are being infiltrated […] Any organisation concerning itself with fundamental issues such as poverty wages automatically brings itself under surveillance […] great interest will be shown in our

35. Webster, 'The Rise of Social-Movement Unionism', 187.
36. Author interview with Young, Zoom, 28 October 2024.
37. Paula Ensor, personal communication, 23 July 2025.
38. HPRA, LRC, ZA HPRA AG3298-66, 'Janet Love (x3) Interview', 14 July 2008, 14 August 2008, 30 October 2008, http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/historical-papers-research-archive-library-university-of-witwatersrand.
39. Author interview with C. Albertyn, WhatsApp, 29 June 2025.
40. Author interview with Young.

> activities by the powers that be […] One way of keeping essential information to yourselves is by keeping your caucus a relatively closed group.[41]

The Schlebusch Commission described this two-tiered organisational structure 'reminiscent of the guidelines laid down by Lenin'.[42] The description was not far from the truth.

## The Cape Town Wages Commission

Students at UCT were receptive to the suggestion that a wages commission should be launched. They were a small minority of those attending the university, as they were on other English-speaking campuses. At the time the student numbers at UCT stood at around 8500, of whom 94 per cent were white, since the government banned enrolment by African, Coloured, and Indian students, except in a limited number of courses.[43] No more than a few dozen white students became engaged with the work of the wages commission. At the same time, it is true to say that a wider opposition culture had developed at the university following the Mafeje protests of 1968, which had brought lecturers and students into contact with Rick Turner, who gave informal talks at the protest.

> The sit-in was a transformative event for the participants. This was particularly true for Richard Turner for whom the event was 'pivotal' as it was at the sit-in that he began 'to be defined as a student leader'. Together with [Rafie] Kaplinsky, Turner provided the intellectual leadership for the sit-in. The occupation lasted nine days during which a core group of between 150 and 200 students slept and ate in the UCT administrative block. Members of staff from UCT gave seminars and lectures […] Jeremy Cronin was a law student at UCT, who was later to become a member of the South African Communist Party, describes being 'seduced intellectually' at the alternative university lectures of the sit-in and remarks that the 'key seducer' was Turner.[44]

The sit-in was succeeded by further clashes with the authorities. Again Turner was involved. On 1 June 1972 an initial 'teach in' was conducted at UCT, by Turner and the liberal sociology lecturer and future opposition leader Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, amongst others. Students began a protest outside the Houses of Parliament in central Cape Town, carrying posters such as 'End Our Police State' and 'Equal Opportunities for All'.[45] Over 50 were arrested and the clashes later spread to UCT. Activists not only rejected apartheid but came to question the philosophical assumptions of the society. Groups of Cape Town students read what left-wing and Marxist literature they could get their hands on, since much of it was banned. Copies of books

41. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers', 412.
42. *Ibid*.
43. N. Davids, 'Celebrating UCT's Class of 1973', UCT, 18 December 2023, accessed 10 July 2025, https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2023-12-18-celebrating-ucts-class-of-1973.
44. I.M. Macqueen, 'Black Consciousness, Radical Christianity and the New Left, 1967–1977' (PhD thesis, University of Sussex, Falmer, 2011), 56–57. The author was a participant in the Mafeje protests.
45. 'Cape Town 2 June 1972', PoliticsWeb, 11 June 2012, accessed 24 June 2025, https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/cape-town-june-2-1972.

were carefully stored and then passed around until they became dog-eared with use. A number attended what were called 'Capital Reading Groups', at which Marx's three volumes were read and discussed.[46] Debbie Budlender was involved in one such group that included Willie Hofmeyr, Johann Maree, and Sean Archer, both of the latter lecturers of economics at the university.[47] The journal *New Left Review* was avidly read in the university library as each edition arrived.[48] The role and legacy of other movements, including the ANC, South African Communist Party, Pan Africanist Congress, Black Consciousness Movement, Unity Movement, and African Resistance Movement were debated and discussed.

This was the background to the first planning meeting of the UCT Wages Commission on 19 November 1972. Curtis, Ensor, Rob Petersen, a lawyer who had recently graduated from UCT, and Young participated, along with the students Jonathan Bloch and John Frankish and the lecturer Maree.[49] Young recalled that the focus was on black wages:

> We started with a concern about poverty. Wages were extremely low so from welfare we came to poverty and saw workers in very shocking conditions […] migrant workers […] [O]ur first campaign as the Wages Commissions was an anti-poverty campaign, but we were beginning to learn that unlike other poor groups in society workers had some potential power […] workers did have an opportunity to combine, which squatters or paraplegics or children did not have.[50]

The activists considered three forms of organisation: a federation of committees based in particular factories, an umbrella union similar to the existing Black Allied Workers' Union (which the Black Consciousness Movement had formed), and a traditional industry-based union.[51] After discussion they settled on factory-based committees, supported by an advice bureau that would provide advice, similar to the work of the Black Sash, while focusing on but organising workers. The aim was practical action that would strengthen the position of black workers. The minutes of the workshop also looked further ahead:

> [W]orks committees to be established in as many factories as possible. These are then to be brought together in a central committee to discuss common policy and common problems – to co-ordinate activities. It was recognized that all this was a long way in the future. Possibly, a strong trade union could emerge from the Federation.

46. 'Interview with Rob Petersen SC', by J. Sithole, 5 September 2003, Rob Petersen's information site, accessed 9 July 2025, https://rob-petersen.info/looking-back/interview2003/.
47. Author interview with D. Budlender, WhatsApp, 8 November 2024.
48. M. Plaut recollection, 15 July 2025.
49. D. Hemson, M. Legassick, and N. Ulrich, 'The Revival of the Workers' Movement', 19, unpublished draft of a chapter that was published as 'White Activism and the Revival of the Workers' Movement', in South African Education Trust, ed., *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Vol. 2, *1970–1980* (Pretoria: South African Education Trust), 243–314.
50. *Ibid*., 19.
51. *Ibid*.

> A priority recognized was the training of workers in trade unionism and worker organization.

The need for a publication for workers was emphasised.[52]

While this work was under way, other events took place, of which the students were initially unaware. Meetings were held in the townships of Cape Town in mid-1972 of several people whose bannings had expired. Zora Mehlomakhulu, the last SACTU organiser in the Cape, who had been active as late as 1963, explained that their aim was to decide what to do about unionisation:

> So a decision was made that trade unions should be started again in the Western Cape, but not under the South African Congress of Trade Unions. And there was a problem of financial resources that we had. Just at the time we came to know about the Wages Commission and then decided after several meetings that we approach them and see what can come of our meetings. So in [the] middle [of] '72 we did and that is how we came across people who were actually prepared to assist in the initial stages of the whole thing.[53]

There were preparatory meetings for the UCT Wages Commission in 1972 and then again in January 1973.[54] Quite how the students and township activists met is not clear, but Curtis appears to have used her links to contact Elijah Loza, who had been detained under the 90-days legislation, then banned.[55] He had been given a job as a cleaner with the Old Mutual insurance company, but he was a crusader for better conditions of service, which made some of his fellow workers nervous. They stole his keys and he lost his job and subsequently found life very difficult. Loza was a long-standing ANC and Communist Party member who assisted the UCT students in arranging their inaugural meeting. 'He brought a few people along to the Christian Institute. Jeannette was part of organising of that meeting and I attended,' recalls Young.[56] Lucas Kukulela, another former Communist Party member, also participated. He had been 'listed' by the state and could not work anywhere without informing the Security Police. Kukulela played only a limited role but did help in one critical way: he introduced the embryonic organisation to Mehlomakhulu.[57] Mehlomakhulu became the cornerstone of the work of the UCT Wages Commission (her role is explored in more detail later), although

52. *Ibid*., 20.
53. J. Maree, 'An Analysis of the Independent Trade Unions in South Africa in the 1970s' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1986), 524.
54. Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich, 'The Revival of the Workers' Movement', 20.
55. Author interview with Young.
56. *Ibid*. The Christian Institute of Southern Africa was a progressive ecumenical organisation founded by in 1963 to unite South African Christians against apartheid.
57. Author interview with Young; 'Obituary Zora Mehlomakhulu', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 25, 4 (2001) (which suggests that Curtis made contact with Mehlomakhulu through Elijah Loza); J. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 1', South African History Archive, accessed 20 June 2025, https://www.saha.org.za/nonracialism/transcript_of_interview_with_zora_mehlomakhulu.htm; J. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 2', South African History Archive, accessed 20 June 2025, https://www.saha.org.za/nonracialism/transcript_of_interview_with_zora_mehlomakhulu_2.htm.

much of the recruiting of workers was also quietly undertaken by Loza. Others with a SACTU past included Zoli Malindi and Christmas Tinto, who remained in the background but had considerable influence.

## The Western Province Worker's Advice Bureau

The question was where an advice office might be situated. Petersen recalled the discussion.

> You could not get premises anywhere in an African township; you couldn't do it in the centre of town because African people couldn't effectively come into town [freely at that time unless they were employed there, without attracting attention]. We – I can't remember now who actually did it, it wasn't me – succeeded in getting the co-operation of a man called Peters who was an organiser for the coloured Labour Party. They had an office in the Benbow Building in [Beverley Street,] Athlone.[58]

It is in this location that the advice office was opened. The students also received some support from established trade unionists Norman Daniels and Jack Heeger, who organised white and Coloured workers in registered unions. Black workers would arrive at the advice office from the townships around Cape Town – Langa, Guguletu, or Nyanga – to be advised on how to deal with the problems they were confronting. They were given a sympathetic hearing, and the commonality of their plight was pointed out. The answer, it was generally suggested, was to form a works committee with others at their factories. The office became known as the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau. It was formally launched on 9 March 1973, with the constitution presented to workers 'for their consideration'.[59] The movement grew slowly at first, but within four years it could claim to have the support of 5000 workers, but this came at a high price.[60] One of the key organisers, Luke 'Story' Mazwembe, had died in detention after being arrested at his home on 2 September 1976. Others, including the bureau's secretary, Mehlomakhulu, and Alpheus Ndude, Helford Ndzotyana, Loza, and David Kikobi, had been detained, while yet others were served with banning orders. Behind the advice bureau was another layer of organisation. Since Ensor was banned and could not legally attend meetings, it was a more informal body for consultations, which included Ensor, Petersen, Frankish, Maree, and Young.[61] Ensor

58. 'Interview with Rob Petersen'. 'The person who negotiated access to the Benbow building was Young, who worked through Bill Francis, then chairman of the UCT Staff Association. He was also connected with the British Ex-Servicemen's League. They occupied the old Athlone police station, used as a drinking hole, and allowed the [UCT] wages commission to hold meetings there. Bill Francis introduced them to Bill Peters who let us have some space at the Labour Party offices also in Athlone where the organisers were based'. G. Young, communication with author, 8 July 2025.
59. Maree, 'An Analysis of the Independent Trade Unions', 525.
60. 'Press Release by the Board of Trustees, Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 3, 2 (1976), 79.
61. Author interview with Young.

contributed by writing pamphlets and other material from home.[62] Petersen was by this time a practising lawyer, associated with the movement. Once the black African organisers were appointed, they participated and so did Favish, who was working on literacy at the advice bureau. They would meet at Frankish's home and decide how to move forward. In this way the strategy evolved. Barnett Ntsodo subsequently joined the advice bureau as an organiser and was supported by Budlender, who worked in the office part-time. The training sessions held every Saturday were discussed by the trustees, who also organised activities for the wider membership of the wages commission, which consisted of UCT students.

The student members of the UCT Wages Commission who were not on the boards of trustees were given tasks that supported the advice bureau. This began with activities that encouraged confidence amongst workers in their own strength and spreading information about the bureau's activities. These took a variety of forms, most of which had been pioneered in Durban, which by early 1971 had begun to produce pamphlets aimed at workers and to publish *Isisebenzi*, a newspaper for workers.[63] The June 1973 report by Frankish, chairman of the UCT Wages Commission, outlined the initiatives that the commission had undertaken, from the publication of a newspaper and research papers to questioning wage levels of staff on UCT campus itself.[64] However, a priority was given to supporting the advice bureau, which was said to be 'now operating in a virtually full-time capacity although its operations have been kept fairly independent of [the] Wages Commission'.[65]

This work was supplemented by attempts to involve workers in the legal process that set their wages, in the absence of union negotiations with management. Their pay was decided on by wage boards, at which anyone with a direct interest in the hearing could be represented. Normally only management presented cases to the relevant board, with a civil servant sent to represent the interests of labour. The Durban students, monitoring the hearings, decided to intervene.

> The Wages Commission prepared information on industrial legislation, trade unions, and works committees […] While some preliminary attempts were made to gather information to provide evidence to the Wage Board to raise the wages of workers at least to the poverty datum line, the publication of the Wage Board's recommendations for unskilled wages in Durban provided the Wage Commission with the opportunity of conducting mass agitation for higher wages in Durban. About 10,000 pamphlets were distributed on 8 June 1971 calling on workers to support the demand for at least R 7.97 a week (the current poverty datum line) and to attend a meeting to protest the Wage Board's recommendation for unskilled labour

62. Johann Maree, private communication.
63. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers', 7.
64. T. Karis and G. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990*, Vol. 5 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1997), 604–607.
65. *Ibid*.

> in Durban. More than 400 workers attended the meeting, demanded a minimum wage of R 20 a week, and signed a petition protesting against the recommended wages. The following day a strike broke out at a local steel foundry at which the workers used the pamphlets to support their demands for higher wages. In a relatively short period the Wages Commission in Durban had established a method of work in placing demands before the Wage Board in particular industries and conducting effective industrial agitation.[66]

These activities took place prior to the major strikes that broke out in Durban in 1973, suggesting that the activities of the wages commission were beginning to give workers confidence to act on their own behalf. As Hemson put it: 'The agitation of the Wages Commission had a considerable influence not only on the course of struggle in the stevedoring industry but also in the subsequent mass strikes.'[67] Similar activity was undertaken in Cape Town once the UCT Wages Commission was established. The law gave protection to anyone who testified and the UCT students would prepare a case pointing out how poorly wages compared with the poverty datum line and to take workers from the industries concerned to speak on their own behalf.[68] The officials on the boards were startled by these novel tactics but seldom took much notice. However, it did allow the UCT Wages Commission to provide the information to sympathetic journalists like Maeder Osler and John Kane-Berman, which these then published.

A second helpful piece of law was unearthed by Jonathan Bloch who discovered that the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1973 made provision for workers' committees to be established by management and to be officially registered.[69] The law aimed to head off black trade unions, but it did provide a useful loophole that could be exploited. 'It allowed us to explain to workers that they could form committees legally, and so that's what we did!'[70] A further legal provision was the requirement that companies provide workers with weekly or monthly wage slips, itemising their earnings, the tax they had paid, and any other deductions such as for loans. Students told workers that they had a right to one, and management, often grudgingly, complied. These were simple enough tactics, but they gradually gave workers confidence that far from having no rights at work, they did indeed have some basic legal protection.

The main activity of the Cape Town student supporters was the production and distribution of the newspaper *Abasebenzi*.[71] Styling itself 'The Worker's Newspaper', it was written in English and then translated into isiXhosa. The

66. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers', 552.
67. *Ibid*.
68. Author interview with Young.
69. S. Bendix, *Industrial Relations in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 2001), 66–67; D. Horner, 'African Labour Representation', SALDRU Working Paper 3, 1976, 11.
70. Author interview with Young.
71. *Abasebenzi*'s 23 editions have been digitised and are available online; *Abasebenzi*, Digital Innovation South Africa, accessed 1 July 2025, https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/ab16849728000000.

translation took place in Cape Town's townships, sometimes written in pencil, and sent to the UCT Student Representative Council office. For several years it was typed onto roneo stencils by Budlender, one of the few students with good typing skills and some knowledge of isiXhosa.[72] Budlender was a member of the Student Representative Council for two years, which gave her some access to the office and the equipment. The newspaper was a few pages long, with some editions carrying illustrations by the artist Vivienne Koorland.[73] The first edition set the tone, leading with the increase in the price of bread; explaining the role of the advice bureau; describing the Durban strikes; and giving details of how wages were set by the wage boards, with the exaltation, 'If you are covered by the determination and if you want higher wages, then you must make your demands to the Wage Board'.[74] It was signed off as 'Issued by Wages Commission, SRC (Student's Representative Council), UCT'. The newspaper was hardly complicated or very informative, since none of the authors had work experience or came from a union background. 'We were total amateurs, but we were the best and the brightest, or so we thought,' observed Young.[75] *Abasebenzi* lasted until March 1976, when it was banned, and then reissued as *Umanyano*. From June to November 1976 *Umanyano* was edited by Willie Hofmeyr and Budlender, until it too was banned. At the same date the executive of the UCT Wages Commission, including Hofmeyr, were banned under the Internal Security Act.[76] Those who were banned were barred from 'social gatherings' (defined as meeting more than one person at a time) and public participation in events and in organisations, with restricted movements. Any breach could lead to imprisonment.

UCT students would get up early to distribute the newspapers to black workers at railway stations and factories. Mowbray station was frequently used. Young remembers with some amusement that the UCT Wages Commission managed to persuade students to get up at 5 am to distribute the material. 'They got up on a cold winter's morning to hand out *Abasebenzi* at railway stations.'[77] Factories were also targeted, with newspapers distributed to workers leaving the Irvin & Johnson fish factory in the Cape Town docks. Since they were published in isiXhosa, they were given only to the African men who worked for the company. The Coloured women, who worked on the fish gutting lines, would greet Africans heading for the railway station

72. Author interview with Budlender; author's recollection.
73. 'Vivienne Koorland, South African, b.1957, Biography', accessed 1 July 2025, https://www.richardsaltoun.com/artists/245-vivienne-koorland/biography/.
74. 'Abasebenzi', 26 March 1973, https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/AbMar7316849728000000Mar1973.
75. Author interview with Young. His remark is borne out by the calibre of those who were involved, with several distinguishing themselves in law, politics, and academia.
76. 'William Andrew "Willie" Hofmeyr', South African History Online, accessed 1 July 2025, https://sahistory.org.za/people/william-andrew-willie-hofmeyr#endnote-8. The act had previously been named the Suppression of Communism Act. 'History of Wages Commission', South African History Online, accessed 1 July 2025, https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files2/rep19820700.026.022.000.pdf.
77. Author interview with Young.

with catcalls, lewd insults, and much laughter. At first the men were suspicious of young white students handing out material, but over time they became accustomed to it and would take a copy, thrusting it deep inside their jackets, without even making eye contact.[78] Feeback from the townships was that each issue was read by groups, leading to intense discussions. White passers-by would occasionally ask for a copy, only to turn it down when they found it was written in an African language they did not understand. Sometimes the police would intervene and seize the copies, at other times arresting those who were handing them out.[79]

The activities of the students and academics were designed to bolster the work of the advice bureau. However, the greatest risks were taken by the organisers the bureau recruited and funded. Chief amongst these was Mehlomakhulu. Those who knew her testified to her extraordinary determination, well-judged activities, and dedication to worker-based democracy.[80] Mehlomakhulu was born on 11 April 1940 in the township of Langa, on the outskirts of Cape Town, and joined SACTU in 1963.[81] She was detained in the same year, as the crackdown against the unions and the ANC intensified. Mehlomakhulu decided to remain in the Cape rather than go into exile, only to become active again in the 1970s. She never denied her SACTU heritage but did not see her later activities as a simple extension of the past. In her view the new forms of organisation were in a different mould: 'I would say […] they are actually in place of SACTU.'[82] Her determination to become re-engaged in the 1970s was driven by a desire to continue the fight. Mehlomakhulu explained how the decision had been reached after intense discussions in the township by

> ex trade unionists that were banned and house arrested and who actually felt that workers were defenceless. And anyway they had not reached their goal. Something had to take the place in the line of helping workers organise. And how that was going to take place […] nobody actually had the right pattern, so our beginning was starting it as a small advice bureau […] we had to be cautious of another crush by the government.[83]

To avoid the charge of illegality, the UCT Wages Commission adopted the strategy uncovered by Bloch of seeking the areas of work that were sanctioned by the law, despite government hostility. This has been described as a 'grey area' – legal but used in ways that the state had not envisaged and did not approve of.

78. M. Plaut recollection.
79. Author interview with Budlender.
80. 'Obituary Zora Mehlomakhulu', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 25, 4 (2001), 6–7.
81. 'Mama Zora Mehlomakulu: A South African Icon Who Inspired a Generation', *Sisi Africa Magazine*, 2 March 2022, accessed 2 July 2025, https://www.sisiafrika.com/mama-zora-mehlomakulu-a-south-african-icon-who-inspired-a-generation/.
82. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 1'.
83. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 2'.

> The unions were a step too far for the Western Cape, but we used the Advice Bureau office to promote workers committees that were elected by workers and had certain rights. Employers really couldn't sack workers for asking for a workers committee since there was the legislation, and they could argue that they were allowed to […] The strategy allowed us to 'fly under the radar' if you like.[84]

This mode of operation was embraced by Mehlomakhulu:

> We decided to start an advice office and not a union. The Minister of Labour was hard on unions at that time because the workers were still weak. The government wanted committees for the workers – not unions. When the Western Province Workers Advice Office started, we had nothing. We even borrowed a desk and a chair. Times were hard. The workers were scared. They thought unions led to trouble. The bosses were hard too. They used to throw us out – or call the police.[85]

None of this prevented Mehlomakhulu from continuing her work. However, she set clear parameters. She would only agree to a workers committee being formed if it had the support of 75 per cent of the employees at the factory. They would then be invited for training at the advice bureau. Maree recalls that much of the training did not really equip the workers to be effective shop stewards in their factories: 'I was one of the trainers and felt at times that we were training workers to become Marxists rather than workplace organisers.'[86] The bureau's work gradually increased, with Mehlomakhulu reporting that there had been a 'tremendous response amongst Black workers'.[87] In the first two years of its operation, the bureau expanded from a single employee (Mehlomakhulu) to two organisers and a worker who handled individual complaints. Budlender was employed part-time and took over much of the bureau's administration in 1975/1976.[88]

> For the first few years, the bureau was essentially run by a small informal group consisting of Zora Mehlomakulu, Young, Petersen, Ensor, Frankish and Maree (joined later by the second organizer, Barnet Ntsodo and the third, Daniel Tebe). They would meet once a week, often on late Tuesday afternoons (Frankish recalls) clandestinely, at someone's house (to accommodate Paula Ensor, who was banned in February 1973, and later John Frankish, who was banned in November 1976).[89]

Mehlomakhulu adopted simple tactics to reach workers, despite management disapproval. Even her children were brought into play. She recounted going to the docks to try to organise the dockers with her three-month-old baby on her back and leaflets tucked into her blanket.

84. Author interview with Young.
85. 'A Mother for Many', Learn and Teach 1981–1990, 1 (1986), accessed 2 July 2025, https://www.learnandteach.org.za/post/a-mother-for-many.
86. Maree, private communication.
87. Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich, 'The Revival of the Workers' Movement', 31.
88. Author interview with Budlender.
89. Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich, 'The Revival of the Workers' Movement', 31–32.

> No-one at the gate ever looked at me until one terrible day. Just as I got to the gates, Nosizwe started to scream. She shook all the blankets. The leaflets flew all over the place. The men at the gate came to see what these pamphlets were all about. They were very shocked. Those men thought I was an old woman, coming to do cleaning jobs. They refused to let me through the gates that day. And afterwards I was extra careful at the docks.[90]

It was a stratagem Mehlomakhulu used repeatedly, either sitting on the grass outside a factory, waiting for workers to come out at lunch time, or explaining that her child was ill to gain access to the factory floor.

> Once I was caught at the Dorman Long factory. I went in, as always, looking for my 'husband'. I went to a room at the back. Then I started a meeting. Suddenly I noticed all the workers looking very hard behind me. I could see in their faces that they wanted to tell me something. The boss had got in quietly while I was talking. But he did not understand me because I was talking in Xhosa. So I said in English: 'Not everyone has paid for the hats I knitted. I want my money now.' But the boss knew that I was lying […] So he threw me out.[91]

At the heart of her approach was the determination to have workers themselves decide as much of the strategy as possible and to be engaged in endorsing or rejecting what had been decided. An advice bureau manual, under the heading 'Things to Remember', instructed shop stewards as follows: 'Always consult the workers. Always report back to the workers.'[92]

The work of the organisers and the support of the advice bureau paid off. By 1975 there were committees at 40 factories and 'a city-wide union in all but name' had emerged.[93] It was a small step to the founding of the General Workers Union in 1981.[94] Between these two dates the unions went through extremely trying times. In 1976, coinciding with the Soweto uprising, the state engaged in an intense period of repression. Organisers, including Mehlomakhulu, were arrested and imprisoned for a period of four months.[95] Maree, who was directly involved in the advice bureau, accepts that the organisation was hit 'extremely hard'.[96]

> The next two years were spent in painstaking reconstruction and consolidation at a smaller number of factories than before in order to try and ensure in-depth workplace organization with democratic worker participation. It was only after the switch in state policy to grant legal rights to African trade unions in 1979 that the independent unions expanded rapidly and developed significant bargaining power.[97]

90. 'A Mother for Many', Learn and Teach.
91. *Ibid*.
92. 'The Annual Report of the WPWAB, 1 September 1974', in A. Lichtenstein, '"A Measure of Democracy": Works Committees, Black Workers, and Industrial Citizenship in South Africa, 1973–1979', *South African Historical Journal*, 67, 2 (2015), 127.
93. 'Obituary Zora Mehlomakhulu'.
94. J. Maree, 'Democracy and Oligarchy in Trade Unions: The Independent Trade Unions in the Transvaal and the Western Province General Workers' Union in the 1970s', *Social Dynamics*, 8, 1 (1982), 47.
95. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 2'.
96. Maree, 'The Emergence, Struggles and Achievements', 301.
97. *Ibid*., 301.

By 1979 the organised workforce across South Africa had decided to found the Federation of South African Trade Unions, but the advice bureau did not participate, only joining the Congress of South African Trade Unions, in 1985. At its inception the federation had a total membership of just short of 300,000.[98]

## White students and black workers

In a racist society like South Africa, it was always likely that tensions would arise between black workers and organisers and the white academics and students that supported them. This problem was, of course, not new. The Communist Party of South Africa (renamed the South African Communist Party in 1953 after disbanding and being banned in 1950) had been founded and led by whites. In the Cape, the most energetic and effective trade union organiser was Ray Alexander.[99] Born in Latvia in 1913, she moved to the Cape in 1929, to become an indefatigable union activist. Alexander worked with fruit workers to establish the Food and Canning Workers' Union, one of the few organisations which survived the repression of the 1960s, although in a much-reduced state, and was revived in the 1970s. Maree pointed to the potential tensions in the relationships in the advice bureau:

> Although the constitution provided for the election of an Executive Committee annually at the AGM, real control of the organisation was in the hands of a small group of White intellectuals from the university and legal profession drawn together in what became known as the Workers Advisory Project (WAP).[100]

There was, however, a key difference between the involvement of white intellectuals in the 1970s and the historic role of the Communist Party in its relationship with the unions: the students and academics were not, on the whole, Leninists.[101] They therefore rejected Lenin's analysis that class consciousness could only be introduced to the working class by a vanguard, Marxist party: '[a]lthough white intellectuals were involved in the development of

98. *Ibid*., 297.
99. M. Shain and M. Pimstone, 'Ray Alexander (Simons)', The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopoedia of Jewish Women, Jewish Women's Archive, accessed 4 July 2025, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/alexander-simons-ray; 'Ray Alexander Simons', South African History Online, 17 February 2011, accessed 4 July 2025, https://sahistory.org.za/people/ray-alexander-simons.
100. Maree, 'Democracy and Oligarchy'. Most issues were discussed and resolved informally, since few individuals were really involved. However, Maree provided a description of the formal structure of the advice bureau. 'The Advice Bureau's African secretary, a former trade unionist, also formed part of this strategic planning group. To provide the Advice Bureau with respectability in the eyes of donors and a protective umbrella against the state, a Board of Trustees was also set up. Its membership was determined by WAP and composed mainly of WAP members as well as registered trade unionists who were considered to be sympathetic. Constitutionally, the Board of Trustees controlled appointments and finances and decisions taken by the Executive Committee.' Maree, 'Democracy and Oligarchy', 46.
101. A. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 19, 1 (1999), 66–81.

the new unions[,] however, unlike the Communist Party in the past, they saw themselves as supporting rather than leading the workers' efforts to organise.'[102]

Mehlomakhulu had little time for many of the theoretical debates the students and academics engaged in. As her obituary pointed out:

> She was one of those tough, independent-minded Langa women. She was not an intellectual. In meetings, while the young students hotly debated the issues of the day, Zora would drop tolerantly off to sleep. But her instincts were built on a rock – the rock of workers' rights. Many times 'our young baby' – that is what she called the growing organisation – was threatened by the security police. She never wavered. Many times there were political and strategic challenges. Her answer was always 'Workers first'. She had no time for any party line.[103]

Mehlomakhulu, interviewed about her relationship with whites, made clear that their race made little difference, pointing out that her work in the ANC and SACTU had also been with whites.[104] Mehlomakhulu said that workers themselves appreciated the work of the white students who came to help them. She knew that some might be police agents sent to infiltrate the union movement but argued that this was as likely to be undertaken by blacks as by whites. From the students, there was a similar feeling of acceptance: 'What I learnt was that if you behave sensitively and didn't try to take over anything[,] then it was easy to build relationships,' recalled Favish.[105]

## Funding the movement

The advice bureau was driven by the need, enthusiasm, and courage of the organisers and workers of Cape Town, but it also required material support. Funding the wages of the organisers and paying for the office and the printing of the *Abasebenzi* and advisory material was beyond the resources of the students and academics involved. Settling the bills was a constant headache and one that was met in a variety of ways. Not all the fundraising went through official channels. Maree recalled being asked by staff members of the Norwegian consulate in Cape Town, with whom he had established some links, to come to meet them.[106] They had heard that the advice bureau was being formed and wanted to know more about its work. At the time the bureau was just getting on its feet, with money from UCT that was provided 'by hook and by crook, misleadingly accounted for'.[107] The consular staff said to Maree that they knew running an organisation was expensive and that they would like

102. S. Morecroft, '"This Thing Is Historical!": Understanding NUMSA's Split with COSATU through the Lens of Permanent Contention' (PhD, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, 2021), 112.
103. 'Obituary Zora Mehlomakhulu'.
104. Frederikse, 'Zora Mehlomakhulu Interview Transcript – Part 2'.
105. Author interview with J. Favish, WhatsApp, 12 November 2024.
106. Author interview with Johann Maree, 10 November 2024.
107. *Ibid*.

to help. The Norwegians simply pushed a suitcase full of cash across the table, to Maree's astonishment. To deal with the funds he opened a safe deposit box in a bank, so that the cash did not formally go through the banking system. As payments had to be made, he would go to the bank and make a withdrawal. 'I insisted that no-one saw what was happening and I would hand it over in cash,' he explained.[108] Some of the money went astray, which angered Maree, but it helped keep the advice bureau going at a difficult time. These arrangements were tangentially referred to in a major Norwegian study of aid to groups fighting apartheid:

> Without the substantial economic – and moral – support from abroad it would not have been possible for the South African trade union movement to expand as fast as it did in the 1970s and 1980s and thus become capable of playing such a decisive role in the defeat of the apartheid system […] The recipients of the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Union] and LO [Swedish Trade Union Confederation] assistance were in the mid-1970s to a high degree 'workers' institutes', while from the 1980s onward the main bulk of the assistance went to the unions.[109]

Clearly the movement needed more official channels of funding. In 1973–1974 Young travelled abroad to raise money for NUSAS to provide to the wages commissions around the country.[110] The student movement had good relations with the World University Service and the International University Exchange Fund, which was run by the Swede Lars-Gunnar Eriksson. The role of Eriksson in employing Craig Williamson, who was later revealed as an apartheid spy, has been widely documented, but the funding of the Wages Commission is seldom referred to.[111] Young also visited Brussels, meeting the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), whose secretary at the time was a Tanzanian, Andrew Kailembo. Kailembo led the ICFTU's campaign against apartheid, of which he was a staunch critic. 'From 1974, Andrew "ate", "drank" and "slept" the struggle against apartheid,' wrote his biographer.[112] Kailembo took the matter to the International Labour Organization and the United Nations. He was described by the *Financial Times* as having an 'encyclopaedic knowledge of South African affairs, a single minded devotion to his work and a touch of Machiavellian cunning […] [as he] […] orchestrated the ICFTU's campaigns to affix and tighten thumbscrews to European companies with interests in South Africa.'[113] Kailembo made links with the Urban Training Programme in Johannesburg and the Institute for Industrial Education in Durban, channelling funds

108. *Ibid*.
109. V. Vetlesen, 'Trade Union Support to the Struggle Against Apartheid: The Role of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions', in T.L. Eriksen, ed., *Norway and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000), 344.
110. Author interview with Young.
111. J. Barber, 'BOSS in Britain', *African Affairs*, 82, 328, (1983), 315.
112. G. Gona, *Andrew Mtagwaba Kailembo: The Life and Times of an African Trade Unionist* (Nairobi: CUEA Publications, 2002), 126.
113. Gona, *Andrew Mtagwaba Kailembo*, 126.

through both.[114] At the same time the ICFTU refused to bow to SACTU demands that any funding for South African workers should be channelled through the latter, reflecting the Western federation's scepticism about SACTU's links with the Communist trade union movement, the World Federation of Trade Unions, and their status as an exile organisation.[115] 'Andrew wanted to deliver, not to any other people, but to those in South Africa.'[116] From the point of view of the advice bureau, Young's efforts paid off. While the advice bureau had initially been funded largely by the Cape Town Wages Commission itself, 'from 1975 it became very successful in raising funds from overseas trade unions through contact with the ICFTU.'[117]

The funding of the advice bureau, and other union allied organisations, only increased the anger and paranoia of SACTU, which believed it was in danger of being rendered irrelevant as an exile organisation. SACTU continued to deny that the 'grey zone' existed, since in its view South Africa was a 'fascist state' that would not tolerate such a challenge.[118] The most vituperative response came in April 1982 when SACTU produced an article entitled 'Direct Links Stinks'. It claimed that visits to South Africa by international trade unions were objectionable since 'they do us no good and put our organisation in jeopardy'.[119] Similarly, visits from South African unions to the United Kingdom or the United States by the new movements were deemed 'unnecessary' since the independent unions 'don't need lessons in class collaboration', SACTU maintained.[120] Most tellingly the article attacked direct links between international unions and their emerging South African counterparts as an attempt to bypass what it termed 'the people's revolutionary organisations, the ANC (SA) and SACTU'.[121] Black trade unionists who left South Africa to try to encourage wider solidarity with the emerging labour movement were vilified by the Congress Alliance in an attempt to maintain their monopoly over access to the international arena and the flow of funds that the ANC and South African Communist Party controlled. Describing the unionists as 'apartheid emissaries' who were 'known to be floating around Western Europe', SACTU asserted as early as 1977 that '[t]heir mission is to undermine the international workers' solidarity with the struggle of workers in South Africa and in the process hope to discredit SACTU as the instrument which forges

114. *Ibid*., 131–133.
115. SACTU's relationship with Communist bloc unions via the World Federation of Trade Unions was complex. See R. Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity: International Labour and South African Trade Unions* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995), 101–104. Between 1981 and May 1982 the ICFTU had, for example, provided legal and relief aid for the emerging unions worth R 214,150.50. Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity*, 130 Table 4.2.
116. Gona, *Andrew Mtagwaba Kailembo*, 128.
117. Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity*, 174.
118. *Workers Unity*, SACTU, 31, June 1982.
119. South African Congress of Trade Unions, 'Direct Links Stinks', 1982.
120. *Ibid*.
121. *Workers Unity*, SACTU, 30, April 1982.

this solidarity'.[122] It was an extraordinary statement, but it failed to undermine the ties that British and other Western unions developed with the new labour movement. Aid flowed to the emerging unions, and with it the strength to confront the South African government.

The aggressive attitude displayed towards the emerging unions reflected both the isolation and the insecurity that SACTU experienced in exile and its lack of understanding of what was happening in South Africa. Howard Barrell, who served in the ANC intelligence underground inside South Africa and in exile in the 1980s, noted that 'trade union policy became the main blind spot in the political strategy of ANC, […] SACP [South African Communist Party] and [SACTU]', adding that SACTU's 'external representation had almost no sources of information inside the emergent trade union movement in the late 1970s'.[123] Norman Levy, an exile who had been amongst the Treason Trialists in the 1950s, recalled meeting young South African trade unionists in Zambia and Zimbabwe in the 1980s under the auspices of SACTU. 'In the space between the 1960s and the mid-1980s the labour movement had developed beyond the experience of almost all the former SACTU members. In preparing the background studies for these workshops I realised that the country had in many respects become unrecognisable.'[124] Roger Southall assessed that any claim made by SACTU to have been organisationally involved in the relaunching of open trade unions amongst African workers in the early 1970s should be regarded as hyperbole.[125] He concluded that 'it is difficult to gain any sense of a distinct SACTU presence in South Africa even in the early 1980s'.[126] Yet as late as 1984 the SACTU general secretary, John Nkadimeng, was still issuing vituperative attacks on Swedish, Canadian, and Dutch unions for 'attempting to divert the revolutionary path of struggle followed by the militant working class [in South Africa]. The funding of trade unions in South Africa is aimed at corrupting and buying over the trade union leadership in order to alienate them from the workers'.[127] It was only after the unions were once more fully established and their efficacy undeniable that SACTU finally offered its backing for the internal unions.

## Conclusion

The role of the wages commissions in helping the re-emergence of non-racial trade unions in the 1970s is remarkable. They brought together a group of

122. Background to Apartheid Trade Unionism, British Trade Union-SACTU Liaison Group, April 1977, 5, pamphlet in author's possession.
123. H. Barrell, 'Conscripts to Their Age: African National Congress Operational Strategy, 1976–1986' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, Oxford, 1993), Chapter 5, 16–17.
124. N. Levy, 'The Final Prize: My Life in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle', South African History Online, 31 May 2011, 399.
125. Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity*, 227.
126. *Ibid*.
127. T. Sellmstrom, *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa: Solidarity and Assistance 1970–1994* (Uppsala: Nordisk Afrikainstitutet, 2002), 449.

left-wing academics who encouraged students to become involved in the novel organisation. Rick Turner played a seminal role, but so did others, including Harriet Bolton, Michael Nupen, Edward Webster, Phil Bonner, Dudley Horner, and Francis Wilson. Their insights helped the students discard their preconceptions about apartheid that Christian National education had bestowed upon them. As Ian Macqueen argued, this perspective 'took the shape of an appeal to the values of Western civilization, the New Left critique of capitalist society and tapping into the spaces of South Africa's dialectical tradition'.[128]

The wages commissions, which began as research-based organisations, soon turned to a more activist agenda. The unions grew from the embryonic movements that were developed out of their work in Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. In just a few years unions were able to shed their formal links with the students, although individual students went on to take key union positions. The role of organised labour in undermining apartheid is beyond the scope of this article, but trade unionists played a critical part in the formation, strength, and endurance of the United Democratic Front, which was at the forefront of the successful attack on apartheid.[129] As has been indicated earlier, white students and academics were catalytic, and some paid a high price for their participation. However, it was the black organisers working with workers in factories, on the docks, and in other industries who built the unions. Nothing that has been said here should be taken as suggesting otherwise. The evidence is that SACTU knew little about conditions on the ground in the 1970s. This was borne out by the interviews conducted for this article, with only Favish indicating that she had any contact with organisations in exile. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the role that the ANC and its allies had in mobilising opposition to apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s and then again from the 1980s. Their work led to an indelible cultural shift in the townships and in rural areas. Men and women like Mehlomakhulu never forgot that experience. SACTU members who had escaped the repression in the 1960s or were released from prison in the early 1970s were active within the emerging unions on an individual basis, even though SACTU had been reduced to a marginalised exile organisation. As Mehlomakhulu acknowledged, the form of organisation adopted by the advice bureau was novel, as was its insistence on the consultation with and reporting back to workers on the shop floor. After apartheid was extinguished, the tradition that Mehlomakhulu and her colleagues had espoused of trusting workers and relying on their

128. Macqueen, 'Black Consciousness, Radical Christianity and the New Left', 168.
129. The Federation of South African Trade Unions did not affiliate to the United Democratic Front when it was formed, but its constituent unions played an important role in building and rebuilding the front when it came under attack from the government. J. Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983–1991* (Cape Town: David Philips 2000), 231; I. van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 22, 44.

judgement was gradually eroded. Union members entered parliament, frequently representing the ANC, but it is clear that – as Edward Webster argued – something of the 'Durban Moment' became submerged.[130]

One other point is worth noting. The ANC, through its Communist Party allies and its dependence on the Soviet Union and China for its arms and for some of its finances, had developed a Marxist-Leninist perspective in exile that had strong Stalinist tendencies.[131] The students and academics involved in the wages commissions were generally sceptical of this, seeking alternatives from the writings of the New Left, while also reading the Marxist classics. Many went on to play key roles in the judiciary, media, and civic movements that have been so critical to the development of the democratic character of the new South African order. It was a humanistic inheritance that has stood the test of time. Despite this, the role of the wages commissions and white students and academics is an aspect of history that has received relatively little attention. This is possibly because much of the literature has been written from an ANC perspective, which has limited interest in enhancing the status of others who shaped history, whether they are the Pan Africanist Congress, Black Consciousness, or white students.[132] This comment by Grace Davie sums up the problem:

> Why has the history of the Wages Commissions not received more sustained scholarly attention before? Perhaps it has to do with the current orientation of the field of African Studies towards the isolation of autonomous, agentive 'African voices'. In this case we see the considerable extent to which students' voices intermingled with workers' voices. Ironically, at the precise moment that stevedores began to follow students' advice and base their claims on the PDL [poverty datum line], they also felt empowered – as if they were finally 'speaking for themselves'. Grappling with the contradictions and complexities of this story need not, however, diminish our appreciation of the dramatic ways in which intellectuals, students and workers confronted race and class oppression in South Africa in the tumultuous decade of the 1970s.[133]

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130. E. Webster, '"Exodus without a Map": What Happened to the Durban Moment?', South African History Online, uploaded 9 September 2022, updated 14 September 2022, accessed 3 October 2025, https://sahistory.org.za/archive/exodus-without-map-what-happened-durban-moment-edward-webster.
131. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa'.
132. Martin Legassick used the concept of 'patriotic history' – the falsification of history for nation-building, developed by Terence Ranger in relation to Zimbabwe – to describe intellectuals aligned with the Congress Alliance who distorted the history of the union movement. Legassick, 'Debating the Revival of the Workers' Movement', 240–266.
133. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers', 419–420.

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