

# The Current Crisis of the South African Labour Movement

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# The Current Crisis of the South African Labour Movement

Peter Rachleff

FOR MOST OF OUR ADULT lifetimes active solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa has been an important element of progressive activism in the United States. Time and again, this struggle enabled American activists to connect constituencies and issues together in constructive ways. In the early 1970s, the divestment movement educated college students and the general public about the complicity of US-based corporations in the exploitation of people of colour halfway across the world. We were learning about – and challenging – the inner workings of the new global economy long before acronyms like NAFTA and WTO had found their place in our daily lexicon. In the 1980s as the new COSATU unions assumed a prominent role in the struggle, we built union-to-union support networks and challenged the AFL-CIO's underwriting of the "wrong" unions in South Africa. Our active support for the struggle against racism thousands of miles away helped us connect our labour organizations with community groups and workers of colour in our own neighborhoods and it helped set the stage for the change in direction of the AFL-CIO which emerged a decade later. In the early 1990s we celebrated the unbanning of the African National Congress and the freeing of Nelson Mandela and, in 1994, the transfer of power from the racist National Party to the popularly elected ANC. It taught us that committed activism, activism oriented to a grassroots base, activism grounded in the connections between labour, community, and political organizations, could succeed. Our work in support of racial and economic justice in South Africa had been an important school for a generation of American activists.

Today, I want to talk about what we can still learn from our brothers' and sisters' struggles in South Africa. These struggles reveal what the promoters of the global economy have in store for us, and they also reveal how difficult it is — and will continue to be — to struggle against them. At the same time, South African

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activists' unyielding activism can serve as a source of inspiration for us. *Having made enormous changes in their lives, they are not about to lapse into cynicism and despair. If we but listen to them, we will hear this message loud and clear, a message we need so desperately in these complicated times.*

I want to focus on a particular conflict in South Africa — the strike this past winter of several thousand Volkswagen workers in Uitenhage, outside of Port Elizabeth, a region known as “the Detroit of South Africa” — and I want to place it within the context of a worsening material situation for most South Africans and growing political confusion and tension within the ruling “Triple Alliance” of the African National Congress (ANC), the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP). At this moment, there is an intensifying struggle over privatization and restructuring, a pending battle between public employees and the ANC-run state; and growing enmity between COSATU and the ANC, driven by dissent within COSATU affiliates, over these issues of privatization, the pay of public employees, and a call for the revisions of labour laws in place since 1994. These particular conflicts and the overall situation rest, of course, on South Africa's location within the global economy and the different ways that internal forces are responding to it. In examining these internal forces we can learn more about not only the challenges of economic globalization but also the prospects for challenging it.

In January 2000, I was able to visit South Africa for three weeks, during which time I met with a wide range of labour, community, and cultural activists, in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Soweto, Durban, and Cape Town. The very day I left to return to Minnesota, 21 January, 300 workers walked off the job at the Volkswagen plant in Uitenhage, in an illegal strike protesting the dismissal of thirteen shop stewards. Over the next several weeks the strike would grow to 4,000 participants (1,386 of whom would eventually be fired), while recriminations would fly between VWSA management, NUMSA (the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, which represented the workers), and the strikers and their supporters within the community. As I began to untangle this strike and the wildly different stories its protagonists were telling, I began to see it as a microcosm of the vexed situation of black workers in South Africa today.

Volkswagen had opened this plant in 1946, in the wake of the destruction of German facilities at the end of World War II, just as the apartheid system was being institutionalized by the Boer-dominated National Party, among the Nazi regime's most dedicated supporters. For more than half a century the Uitenhage plant had been one of South Africa's most significant — and profitable — auto plants, located in a region shaped by government policies of “urban decentralization.” With its lines tooled for right-hand drive vehicles, it produced both for export to Britain and the domestic market. In the 1980s, between 4,000 and 6,000 men had worked there, most of them having left their families behind in their Ciskei and Transkei “homelands” while, regulated by the pass system, they lived in company-owned

hostels or thrown together shacks in KwaNobuhle and Langa townships. They had been active participants in the emergence of a militant labour movement which was an integral part of the anti-apartheid struggle. "So much resistance history lay here," a reporter noted in February 2000, "the very landscape seemed to exude it."<sup>1</sup>

VW eventually adjusted to the new unions and then responded to the international pressure for divestment by turning the plant over to local management, as did many other multinational corporations. After the lifting of such apartheid rules as the pass system and restrictions on migration, the townships, like others surrounding municipal areas across South Africa, had swollen to bursting. One labour activist estimated unemployment in Langa and KwaNobuhle at 60 per cent, while such public institutions as schools, housing, and hospitals were pushed to crisis levels. Despite — or was it because of? — these conditions, VW International increased its commitment to this plant in 1998 by bringing in a German management team to replace the locals, announcing a substantial investment in new machinery and the biggest export order in the history of the South African motor vehicle industry, and calling for the production in 18 months of 68,000 "A4" Golfs earmarked for the United Kingdom, and a total production worth some thirty billion rand over the next six years.<sup>2</sup>

Workers learned quickly not to celebrate these developments blithely. On the occasion of the announcement of the Golf contract, a South African business reporter noted: "The requirements of globalisation — a flexible and competitive business environment — appear to be in direct conflict with the intention of South Africa's new [that is, in the wake of the 1994 ANC-written Constitution] labour and social legislation." These workers were earning, I hasten to add, little more than 7 rand an hour (barely more than \$1), while the cars they were producing were being sold in the high income, high priced European market. Yet, the new VW management wasted little time pushing for the "flexibility" they "required" to "remain competitive in the global economy." This entailed a "continuous production" schedule which rested on a work week spread over six days with a rotating day off and no overtime pay for weekend work, compulsory overtime without advance notice, overtime up to twelve hour shifts and seventy hour weeks, the reduction of tea breaks from two to one per shift, the restructuring of annual holidays from the traditional three week Christmas-New Year's-early January shutdown to an individualized vacation schedule for each worker, the elimination of washing up time on the clock, the introduction of a "pass system" to control workers' movement

<sup>1</sup>Information from VWSA's website, <<http://www.vwsa.org>>. Background on union organization in Uitenhage from "Tough Times in VW Country," *The South African Star*, 4 March 2000, <<http://www.star.co.za>>; Ashwin Desai in the *Saturday Independent*, 19 February 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Cokayne, "South African Vehicle Exports Accelerate 78%," *Business Report*, 7 August 1998; "Tough Times in VW Country," *The South African Star*, 4 March 2000, <<http://www.star.co.za>>; additional information from <<http://www.vwsa.org>>.

from one part of the plant to another, the payment of wages through a local bank, which deducted 6 per cent for a service charge, and changes in the employer-funded pension fund which cost the workers 17 per cent in new interest charges. Binisile Mzeku, one of the workers fired in the strike, told VW workers in Germany in April:

With the end of apartheid and the fresh election of a new government, which had really been voted into power by us, we had big hopes that our situation would improve... Improvements which we had gradually won in the apartheid period were taken back. Wages and working conditions at VW are now worse than they were in the apartheid period.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the VW workers had only, starting in 1994, been able to live with their families while working. But the new work schedule took them away from their children who had Saturdays and Sundays off from school and a traditional holiday break at the end of December-beginning of January. The new schedule and payment system also squeezed their already meager wages and benefits, and stole even more time from them. And the new "pass system" reminded them of the single most hated feature of the apartheid system. These were profound and painful changes.

The strike revealed that the conflict was not merely between VW and the workers, however, but also between the workers and their union, NUMSA, known since its 1987 formation and its participation in the anti-apartheid movement as one of South Africa's most militant unions, had agreed to all of these changes without once giving the workers an opportunity to vote them up or down. Not only did the acceptance of these changes by union officials who did not have to work under them anger the workers, but it also contradicted the VW local's own traditions of internal democracy. While many of the workers were young and newly hired in the 1990s, the local included a cadre of veterans, described by one activist as "coming from the old FOSATU tradition, who say that the highest decision-making structure at plant level is the general meeting of the workers." He explained that these veterans embodied traditions and practices which were deeply embedded in the character of their local union:

FOSATU developed a tradition of having informal committees of 'veterans' who acted as worker control committees over the activities of the shop stewards. Despite their existence as informal groupings, they always subjected their recommendations to the final say of the general meeting of workers. When NUMSA was formed in 1987, these informal structures were formalized into what our union constitution calls *shopfloor committees*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Wolfgang Dreschler, "Moment of Truth for Car Firms," *Business Report*, 1 November 1998; Workers International Vanguard League, "Update to All NUMSA Members," 15 March 2000, <<http://wivl@sn.apc.org>>; Dietmar Henning and Andreas Kuckartz, "Interview with a South African Volkswagen Worker," *World Socialist Website*, <<http://www.wsws.org>>.

<sup>4</sup>Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Open Letter to all NUMSA Members, All Members of COSATU, and Last but not Least, All Members of the Working Class and Supporters," 24 February 2000, circulated on website set up by German VW unionists, to disseminate

In 1996 the veterans reduced their direct involvement in the union and encouraged the workers to "give new blood a chance" and elect a new set of shop stewards. Between their inexperience and the NUMSA leadership's apparent acceptance of VWSA's claims of the need for "flexibility," the situation in the plant deteriorated steadily. "As time went by," one activist reported, "it became clear that these new shop stewards would not hold themselves accountable to the general meeting and were more and more becoming co-opted by management." Another complained that VW "used black faces in the union to rubber stamp" their contractual changes. And a third linked the two elements of the situation: "Over the past seven years, there has been a growing tendency to suppress the voice of the workers. This has gone hand in hand with practices that attack the rights and living standards of workers." A South African scholar who sought an interpretive middle ground between the frustrated workers and their representatives noted that "this younger leadership was struggling with massive unemployment and other new and complex issues in a period where co-determination was the buzz-word." Most of the workers appear to have been less willing to understand the complexity of the situation and more determined to act to change it.<sup>5</sup>

Veteran activists began to organize and mobilize the workers' discontent. They held regular general meetings at lunch time where workers could voice their frustrations and discuss shopfloor strategy. They became known as *indlu ye ngwevu*, "the house of elders" or "the house of senators," and in March 1999, thirteen of them were elected shop stewards, despite the opposition of the NUMSA leadership. They stepped up their internal organizing against the changes in the contractual terms of employment and voiced their criticisms of the NUMSA leadership, including the accusation that union officials had been provided with VW cars by the company. In July, NUMSA assembled a city wide shop stewards' council which voted to suspend the VW stewards from the union. But when a general meeting of VW workers protested and then launched a wildcat strike which ended after three days when VWSA obtained a Labour Court injunction, NUMSA backed down and reinstated them. The union did inform the media, the stewards, and the rank-and-file:

All shop stewards should accept the authority of the union in respect of decisions, policies, and the constitution of the union. NUMSA would not tolerate any unprocedural conduct and/or act against its policies and would take disciplinary measures against those members transgressing its constitution; the shop stewards committee would act in the best interests of NUMSA and its members to promote unity of workers and the viability of the company;

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information and promote solidarity, <<http://www.labournet.de/branches/auto/vw/index.html#suedafrika>>. For an interpretation of these events which is more sympathetic to NUMSA, see Kally Forrest, "What Happened at VW," *South African Labor Bulletin*, Spring 2000.

<sup>5</sup>Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Open Letter," "Tough Times in VW Country," *The South African Star*; Kally Forrest, "What Happened at VW."

and any structure that existed within VWSA rather than those established by the company must be abolished with immediate effect.

When the dissident stewards conducted their own elections for additional steward positions and appeared to be planning a series of strikes, NUMSA once again suspended them for "inciting and misleading" the workers. It then turned to VWSA management, who suspended the thirteen stewards from their employment on 17 December 1999, a week before the abbreviated holiday shutdown.<sup>6</sup>

On 1 January, South Africa celebrated the turning of the Millennium with a dramatic series of festivals in Durban and Cape Town. Nelson Mandela was feted with fireworks at his former prison, Robben Island, and new president Thabo Mbeki waxed eloquent about the "African Renaissance" that he expected South Africa to lead the entire southern African region into. What were VW workers thinking in Uitenhage? While we may never know, it is worth listening to Mxolisi ('Wilfus') Ndandani's comments a few short months after the Millennial celebration. A veteran union activist, told a reporter from the South African *Star*: "For residents of Langa, the struggle has just begun. We want to claim our place in the sun and that means fighting the corporate predators who want to keep us in poverty."<sup>7</sup>

On 10 January, NUMSA obtained a court order demanding that the stewards, now suspended by both the union and the company, vacate their union offices, and they had the local sheriff serve the order. A week later, 2,000 workers assembled in a mass meeting to try to sort out their situation. They voted to boycott the upcoming "quarterly general meeting" of the union where, as a resolution passed at this rump meeting put it, "VW management seeks to instill in the workforce the need to improve company performance." Despite these objections, the meeting took place as scheduled. Not surprisingly, it was poorly attended. Despite the lack of a quorum, the NUMSA leadership treated it as a legitimate union gathering, which they used to endorse their action suspending the dissident stewards. Shortly afterwards, 300 workers walked off the job to demand the reinstatement of the stewards. When a journalist asked strikers whether they had struck against NUMSA, one responded: "It is exactly for NUMSA that we strike!"<sup>8</sup>

Both VW and NUMSA moved quickly to put their own spin, an anti-striker spin, of course, on the events. VW said that they were not involved at all, that this was a "wholly internal" union matter. While they warned the 300 strikers that they would

<sup>6</sup>Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Open Letter," "Tough Times in VW Country," *The South African Star*; Kally Forrest, "What Happened at VW." Ashwin Desai in the *Saturday Independent*, 19 February 2000; Roy Cokayne, "VW Obtains Interdict," *Business Report*, 21 July 1999; Roy Cokayne, "Work Resumes at VWSA as NUMSA Stewards Settle," *Business Report*, 22 July 1999.

<sup>7</sup>*The South African Star*, 4 March 2000, <<http://www.star.co.za>>.

<sup>8</sup>World Socialist Website, <<http://www.wsws.org>>, 17 February 2000; Kally Forrest, What Happened at VW; Ashwin Desai, in the *Saturday Independent*.

be dismissed if they did not report to work immediately, they also announced that they were closing the plant indefinitely. At a press conference in Port Elizabeth they threatened to "reassign production of vehicles for export to Europe to European plants" and announced their intention to take a "tough stance": "We are prepared to leave the factory in Uitenhage closed until such time as normal labour stability returns to the plant." NUMSA also called on the strikers to return to work and announced that they "would not be held to ransom by a clique of undisciplined shop stewards." Union spokesman Dumisa Ntuli charged that the stewards had "pressurized and intimidated" the other workers to strike, and he revealed that NUMSA would not oppose VWSA's quest for a court order against the strike, which they received after three days. On Wednesday, 26 January, VW announced it was suspending 350 "troublemakers," a move hailed by the local press as a step in the right direction.<sup>9</sup>

But the workers refused to heed either VW or NUMSA, and they prepared to widen their struggle. They organized marches, both to the plant and to the NUMSA office, which emphasized "workers' control and participative democracy" as their watchwords. Activists from nine Uitenhage plants organized a "crisis committee," headed by Mxolisi ("Wilfus") Ndandani, who had recently been discharged from the local Goodyear plant, which was also organized by NUMSA, and Myali Davis, a former NUMSA steward at the Uitenhage National Standards plant who had also been recently fired. They announced their intention to stand firm, as well as their expectation that many more workers would join their movement. "The NUMSA of today," they charged, "is not the fighting NUMSA of the 1980s. Today the union leadership has ever increasingly become incorporated into a partnership with the bosses."<sup>10</sup>

The NUMSA leadership and VW management sat down and negotiated a back to work agreement (even though the workers on strike no longer recognized NUMSA as their legitimate representative). The plant was to reopen on 31 January, they agreed, and there would be some new work rules in place. Being late to work would be grounds for dismissal. Workers would have to ask permission to go to the toilet. And suspended workers who were taken back would have to accept reassignment to new locations in the plant. NUMSA and VWSA released a joint statement that "condemn[ed] the illegal strike." Among the conditions it listed were the following:

<sup>9</sup>Roy Cokayne, "'Illegal' VWSA Strike Takes Its Production Toll," *Business Report*, 21 January 2000; Roy Cokayne and Frank Nxumalo, "Strikers Close Key VWSA Factory," *Business Report*, 22 January 2000; World Socialist Website, "Sacked South African Workers Appeal for International Support," <<http://www.wsws.org>>, 17 February 2000.

<sup>10</sup>World Socialist Website, "Sacked South African Workers Appeal for International Support,"; Workers International Vanguard League, "Update: Background History of the VWSA Crisis," <[wivl@sn.apc.org](mailto:wivl@sn.apc.org)>, 6 February 2000.



- 1) The parties agree to the urgent need to establish long term labour stability at VWSA ...
- 2) Should NUMSA members continue to participate in illegal strike action over this issue the National Union reserves its rights to take strong disciplinary action against these individuals.
- 3) Before they tender their services at the end of the strike, all employees will be required to sign an individual undertaking as follows: 'that both now and in the future, I will work normally in terms of my employment contract, which includes observing all collective agreements binding on me.'

There is not one mention in this document of any of the issues which had concerned the VWSA workers, from the changes in their employment conditions, work rules, pay, and benefits, to the suspension of their elected shop stewards. Critics of the NUMSA leadership were quick to point out that "true to form, the NUMSA officials signed this agreement without mandate from the workers."<sup>11</sup>

When VW tried to reopen the plant, the number of strikers grew to several thousand. By the end of the second week, management reported that "absenteeism" was still 45 per cent, despite threats to fire strikers and a stepped up police presence around the plant to guard against "intimidation" of workers by strikers. Pressure mounted on the strikers. On 1 February, COSATU's national secretary Zwelinzima Vavi called the strike "illegal" and said that a few "agents provocateurs" were to blame. VWSA issued an ultimatum — return to work by 3 February or be discharged. "Long queues" of "anxious job seekers," 3,000 according to one newspaper, applied for the strikers' jobs. "The crowd," they wrote, "was made up of all race groups, including some whites, and there was a significant number of women applicants." On 4 February, VW announced that 1300 workers had been fired — and replaced. They claimed that 23,000 job applicants had signed up at the plant in less than three weeks, while NUMSA shook its collective head and pointed to an unemployment rate in Uitenhage of 63 per cent. Silumko Nondwangu, a NUMSA spokesman, told the press that "it was unfortunate and regrettable that certain NUMSA members employed by VWSA had decided not to heed the call by the union to return to work."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>"NUMSA Urges End to VW Strike Action," *ZA Business*, 28 January 2000; Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 25 February 2000; "Agreement Between NUMSA and VWSA," appendix to Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Open Letter...."

<sup>12</sup>Roy Cokayne and Frank Nxumalo, "Brakes Still On at VWSA Plant," *Business Report*, 1 February 2000; Roy Cokayne, "Striking VWSA Workers Must Return to Work Today or Face Dismissal," *Business Report*, 3 February 2000; "Ultimatum to All Striking Volkswagen of South Africa Workers," 1 February 2000, reprinted on, <<http://www.labourmet.de/branchen/auto/vw>>; Roy Cokayne, "Production Resumes at VWSA Plant," *Business Report*, 4 February 2000; *ZA Business*, 6 February 2000; Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 6 February 2000; Dumisa Ntuli, "NUMSA Will Persist in Solving VWSA Dispute," *Business Report*, 13 April 2000.

Added pressure came from none other than national president Thabo Mbeki, who, in his "State of the Nation" address on 4 February, decried the 3.1 million days which had been lost to strikes in 1999 (compared to 2.3 million a year earlier) and then singled out the VWSA conflict. Such strikes "cannot be tolerated," he warned, because "the ANC's standing in the eyes of the investor community cannot be held hostage by elements pursuing selfish and anti-social purposes." The ANC program as laid out by its chief executive had little to offer VW workers or their counterparts across the country. He expressed his intent to lift exchange controls in order to facilitate foreign investment, to increase privatization of public enterprises, to extensively restructure the civil service, to cut public spending, and to amend national labour law to limit workers' protections against lay-offs. He also announced that the ANC had created an International Investment Council consisting of the leaders of thirteen transnational corporations, calling them South Africa's "all-weather friends." A month later, Mbeki met privately with VWSA and VW International management at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. The content of the meeting was never reported.<sup>13</sup>

Although the crisis committee worked energetically to raise food and money for the strikers, their situation became bleaker and bleaker. In late February, their "Update" reported: "The strike now goes into its sixth week. Dry white bread has long been replaced by a diet of dry brown bread and water. The children of the strikers go to school barefoot and without food." In early March, employer-provided medical benefits for the strikers and their families were cut off. One striker died when he was discharged from the local hospital for lack of insurance. Some strikers' families found their houses and their furniture being repossessed by creditors. When talk of a symbolic one day "stayaway" by all Uitenhage workers surfaced in late March, the government (yes, the ANC government) announced that it was stepping up the already heavy police presence in the city and sending in army troops to back them up, while NUMSA urged its members in plants throughout the city not to take part. Two hundred armed police now patrolled the city's streets on a regular basis. On one occasion, the VW workers' township of KwaNobuhle was cordoned off at 3 AM and a house-to-house search was conducted, and, on another occasion, a strikers' meeting place was raided in a search for "stolen goods." The Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, told reporters that "If people defy the law, that will scare investors." On Easter, the crisis committee put out a plaintive appeal: "While many millions are celebrating the Easter week-end, the VWSA dismissed workers and their families are left without even a loaf of bread."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Slaughter, "President Mbeki Threatens South African Workers," World Socialist Web Site, <<http://www.wsws.org>>, 4 February 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 22 February and 28 February; 22 June; and 11 July 2000; World Socialist Web Site, <<http://www.wsws.org>>, "Police Clampdown on South African VW Strikers," 9 March 2000 "Army, Police to be Deployed for Uitenhage Stayaway Threat," *Daily Dispatch*, 25 March 2000; James Lamont and Roy Cokayne,

Despite these pressures, the VWSA workers and their supporters refused to give in, even though 1450 workers lost their jobs, their incomes, and their medical insurance. They knew that they had cost, and were continuing to cost, VWSA tens of millions of rand in revenue. The strikers, led by their stewards, sought to communicate with workers in the plant and the local NUMSA organization. They organized mass meetings at community centers, marches on the plant and the NUMSA hall, and sit-ins by school children and women at the Uitenhage Town Hall. They pressured city officials to call on VWSA and urge them to bring the strikers back to work. In late February, they reported that VWSA had outsourced the tool and die shop and that conditions in the plant, restructured in the post-strike agreement between NUMSA and the management, "can only be described as a concentration camp." They also reached out to VW union activists in Mexico, Brazil and Germany, which resulted in the German unionists setting up a solidarity website to post news updates and issue calls for solidarity. Delegations from Brazil and Germany visited Uitenhage, and strikers sent delegates to VW union gatherings in those countries as well. The crisis committee sought to raise money and food for the strikers and to keep their morale up. The situation became further complicated when a new organization appeared on the scene — the Oil, Chemical, General, and Allied Workers Union (OCGAWU). About four years old, this union had been formed by dissidents from the Chemical Workers Union when its Executive Board had expelled its president, Abraham Agulhas, after a series of conflicts over the CWU's stance in relationship to multinational employers and the South African government's increasing turn towards neo-liberalism. Agulhas and the OCGAWU had urged a program of militancy, solidarity, and resistance. Now they appeared in Uitenhage, and hundreds of the replaced strikers were joining up.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, on 10 May, COSATU directed a well-orchestrated one day national "general strike" to protest worsening unemployment and the unions' lack of voice in situations of plant closings and restructurings. The strike had been planned for months, and it had always been clear that it would be limited to a symbolic expression on one day. Observers noted that perhaps four million workers participated, some of the marches and rallies were quite energetic, and some of the union leaders' speeches were quite militant. Demonstrations were particularly raucous in Johannesburg, and auto workers were prominent participants in the strike. Daimler

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"Violence Feared in VWSA Feud," *The South African Star*, <<http://www.star.co.za>>, 28 March 2000

<sup>15</sup>"Volkswagen Strike Slows Car Exports," 6 April 2000, <<http://www.labournet.de>>; Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 28 February 2000; 10 March 2000; 11 May 2000. Letter from dismissed workers to NUMSA, 21 February 2000; letters from stewards to VW Works Council, 5 February 2000, and 29 February 2000, posted on <<http://www.labournet.de/branchen/auto/vw>>. Henning and Kuckarts, "Interview with a South African Volkswagen Worker," <<http://www.wsws.org>>, 29 April 2000.

Chrysler, BMW, Nissan, Toyota, Samcor, and Delta Motors closed for the day, but the Uitenhage VWSA plant's workers did not participate. The continuing VW conflict in Uitenhage was beginning to show the threadbare quality of the relations between South Africa's once militant and popular unions and their own members. One striker explained to a German journalist:

In South Africa there is an advertisement for a chocolate bar. In response to his friend's request for a piece, the one with the chocolate replies: 'Don't spoil our friendship!' That is how it is for us with COSATU in South Africa.<sup>16</sup>

In May, the strikers applied to the Council on Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration (CCMA), a government agency created by the 1994 constitution, for reinstatement to their jobs. The practical results were disheartening. The examiners concluded that mediation had failed, and they adjourned the hearing until 31 July, when they would announce the results of their arbitration, thereby postponing any resolution for another six weeks. Even worse, the Department of Labour announced that since the strikers still laid claim to these jobs, they were to be cut off from unemployment benefits. This was the first time since 1994 that the government had denied unemployment benefits to any strikers. Of course, it was no coincidence that this may also have been the largest strike without official union sanction since then as well. Two weeks later, after a sit-in at the regional Department of Labour Office, the unemployment payments were restored.<sup>17</sup>

The CCMA hearing was not without its value. Testimony from the VWSA Human Resources Director during the hearings shed considerable light on how this situation had unfolded. He provided documentation that the strike had put VWSA 3,300 units behind on its "A4" Golf contract, for a loss of 275 million rand in revenue. He revealed that NUMSA had asked VWSA management to dismiss the thirteen shop stewards, that John Gomomo, a one-time VW union activist who had become president of COSATU in the region and now held office as a Member of Parliament, NUMSA officials, and ANC Secretary-General Kgalema Motlanthe had met with VWSA management after the strike began but before any strikers had been dismissed

<sup>16</sup>Workers' International Vanguard League, "May Day: Fight Against Capitalist Exploitation," <<http://wivl@sn.apc.org>>; Roy Cokayne, "Daimler Chrysler, BMW, and Nissan to Close SA Production Plants for COSATU's General Strike," *Business Report*, 10 May 2000; Cokayne, "Production Lines Curbed at Most Car Plants," *Business Report*, 11 May 2000; Henning and Kuckartz, "Interview."

<sup>17</sup>Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 22 April 2000, and 2 June 2000; "CCMA Confident of VWSA," *Business Report*, 26 April 2000; Ashwin Desai reported on a visit to Uitenhage: "Workers bemoaned the attitude of John Gomomo, former VW worker, COSATU head, new MP; he arrived and left in his imported Audi, taking time to denounce worker control of the union as being anti-social, anarchic, and undemocratic." *Saturday Independent*, 19 February 2000. *ZA Business*, 28 April 2000; Roy Cokayne, "Commission Sets July 31 Date for VWSA Arbitration," *Business Report*, 25 May 2000.

and replaced, and they had expressed agreement with the company's stance, that VWSA management had written to the Minister of Labour about the looming conflict the day before the strike even began, asking for his intervention, but that he had not even replied, that most strikers never received formal notice of the company's notification to return to work on 3 February or be fired, that VWSA's own employee relations handbooks call for hearings for any worker threatened with dismissal, but that there had not been even one such hearing, that the company's adamant stance was influenced by a public statement condemning the strike issued on 3 February by COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, that VWSA management had consistently refused to talk with the Uitenhage Crisis Committee, and that OCGAWU had turned over to VWSA management membership forms from 1123 fired and present workers, demanding a representation election between them and NUMSA.<sup>18</sup>

The VWSA conflict had become an embodiment, in microcosm, of the growing industrial relations crisis in South Africa as the "Triple Alliance" running the government remained committed to its neo-liberal "GEAR" (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution) program, while more and more workers expressed their opposition to it. As one reporter noted: "It is ultimately at VW in the Eastern Cape where workers are trying to reverse GEAR."<sup>19</sup>

In the late 1990s, as Nelson Mandela turned the reins of government over to Sussex University-trained Thabo Mbeki, globalization, privatization, deregulation, free trade, and flexibility were becoming the watchwords of economic transformation, while growing unemployment, housing shortages and deteriorating municipal services, a failing school system, worsening crime rates, a health care crisis highlighted by a veritable epidemic of AIDS, threats of higher prices for water and electricity, wage and benefit advances lagging behind the rising cost of living, and increased pressure in the workplace, became the lot of South African working men and women. Mandela's "RDP" (Reconstruction and Development Program) had been replaced by Mbeki's "GEAR" (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution), which endorsed all the neo-liberal measures advocated by such international organizations as the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, and promoted by transnational corporations as the *sine qua non* of capital investment. The ANC government offered substantial shares of major public enterprises like South African Airlines, the telephone and electrical utilities for sale to private investors, municipal governments prepared to do likewise with their water utilities while contracting out services like trash collection to newly created private firms under the guise of "black empowerment," and public universities were restructured with custodial and service jobs contracted out and courses assigned to part-time adjunct instructors. The national government, in the summer of 2000, also opened discussion of major labour law reform to increase "flexibility" by reducing employers' obligations to bargain with unions over plant closings and downsizings, by exempting smaller

<sup>18</sup> Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Update," 2 June 2000.

<sup>19</sup> *Saturday Independent*, 19 February 2000.

employers in industries from the standard employment conditions which had been bargained with larger employers, by allowing employers to require more than 45 hours' work a week and removing the legal requirement that Sunday work be paid at an overtime rate. It had also drawn a firm line at 6 per cent raises for public employees, despite union demands for 9 per cent and more. Despite the government's generally capital-friendly policies since the political transformation of 1994 (the ANC had not nationalized the mines, nor had it redistributed land, despite long articulated promises to do both, for instance), there continued to be a net outflow of private capital, a net out-migration of wealthy, educated whites, and a paucity of multinational investment. Unemployment among black citizens, difficult to measure precisely, has been estimated at 30-40-50 per cent in different regions of the country. The unions, tied to COSATU, which has been, in turn, tied to the ANC and its ideological spin masters in the SACP, have been little able to articulate an alternative economic agenda, despite their once outspoken advocacy of a grassroots socialism.<sup>20</sup>

The widening gap — in day-to-day experience, in perspective, in ideology — between leaders and members within unions has made it difficult for dissatisfied workers to find or create effective vehicles to express their views, let alone manifest any collective power. COSATU leaders have stuck to organizing symbolic protests like the 10 May one day "general strike" and demonstrations on Sundays and holidays to protest GEAR or privatizations or substandard wage proposals for public sector workers, but they have been reticent to call for strikes, slowdowns, or other forms of direct action, either against employers or the government at the municipal, provincial, or national levels. As the VWSA story suggests, union leaders have been more willing to serve as the enforcers of corporate management's agenda against

<sup>20</sup>Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (London 2000); A. Adelzadeh and V. Padayachee, "The RDP White Paper: Reconstruction of a Development Vision?" *Transformation* 25 (1994); Ari Sitas, "South Africa in the 1990s: The Logic of Fragmentation and Reconstruction," *Transformation* 36 (1998); David Jarvis, *Making Sense of Workplace Restructuring* (Durban 1999); Franco Barchesi, "Economic Adjustment, Political Institutionalisation, and Social Marginalisation: COSATU and the First Democratic Government," *Transformation* 38 (1999); International Labour and Research Group, *An Alternative View of Globalization* (Cape Town 1998), and *An Alternative View of Economic Crisis* (Cape Town 1999); National Institute for Economic Policy, *From RDP to GEAR: The Gradual Embracing of Neoliberalism in Economic Policy* (Johannesburg 1996); *Debating GEAR* (Johannesburg 1997); Peter Barron and Marian Jacobs, "Child Welfare and AIDs," and Peter LeRoux, "Social and Economic Development in South Africa," papers prepared for Macalester College International Studies Seminar, January 2000; "South Africans Who Fought for Sanctions Now Scrap for Investors — But They Find that Luring Back Capital is a Lot Harder than was Chasing it Out," *Wall Street Journal*, 7 February 2000. Interviews with David Monyae and Jeffrey Ndumo, Soweto, 8 January 2000; Kessie Moodley, Durban, 12 January 2000; Ari Sitas and Astride von Koltze, Durban, 13 January 2000.

rank-and-file workers. The deterioration of the inner life of the South African labour movement since the mid-1980s has been stunning.<sup>21</sup>

Participants in and observers of the VWSA struggle have made much of its symbolic significance. VW management — and other transnationals — wanted to rid themselves of the sort of militant workers who launched this strike. Veterans of the highly politicized struggles of the 1980s, as one reporter put it, “they continued to refer to management, whether white or black, as ‘Boers.’” Leaders of COSATU and NUMSA largely shared VWSA’s views. One COSATU official referred to *indlu ye ngwevu* as “left over radicals and ideological die hards” who “voiced unachievable demands and raised workers’ expectations.” He told a reporter that “a different type of unionist is required to sit down with management to participate in developing export and industrial strategies.” NUMSA leaders were even more hostile. They claimed the stewards “wanted to cause chaos,” in order “to discredit the labour movement and the alliance of the ANC, COSATU, and the SACP.” Minister of Labour Membathisi Mdladlana expressed his (and the government’s) concern that “strong” unions, that is, unions which can negotiate and maintain settlements, are desirable to the government, the labour movement, and employers “because the alternative are weak unions and breakaway factions that threaten to flout the labour laws with illegal strikes.” Mdladlana openly voiced fears of “nasty fallout” from the VWSA strike that could lead NUMSA to “lose control” over its membership and leave room for the “ultra left” to step in, creating a situation of a “proliferation of unions that employers will have to deploy greater resources to deal with.” Furthermore, the VWSA sort of “disruption entrenches perceptions ... that the country is burdened with unworkable industrial relations,” reiterating the mantra that President Mbeki has recited since he assumed office.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>The Labour Left Collective, *COSATU, the SACP, and the ANC: The Parting of the Ways?* (Athlone 1998); Oupa Lehulere, “The Political Significance of GEAR: The Transformation of the ANC into a Party of Monopoly Capital” (Cape Town 1999); “Are the Poor Being Heard?” (typescript, n.p., distributed in Cape Town by the Trade Union Library and Education Center); International Labour and Research Group, *An Alternative View of Privatisation* (Cape Town 1999). One can find ample rhetoric from COSATU, for instance their “1999 Special Congress: Composite Resolutions. Consolidation of COSATU for the New Millennium,” and “Labour Market Policy in the Era of Transformation,” presented to the Department of Labour, 7 June 2000, both available from <<http://www.cosatu.org.za>>. Also, “NUMSA Congress: Taking the Struggle for Socialism into the 21st Century,” 10 August 2000, <<http://www.numsa.org.za>>.

<sup>22</sup>“What Was Behind the Volkswagen Strike?” *Business Day*, 13 April 2000; Terry Bell, “Simplistic Scapegoating from Politicians,” *Business Report*, 7 April 2000; Dumisa Ntuli, “NUMSA Will Persist in Solving VWSA Dispute,” *Business Report*, 13 May 2000; Frank Nxumalo, “Unions Can Learn from the Strike at VWSA,” *Business Report*, 8 May 2000; Kally Forrest, “What Happened at VW,” *South African Labour Bulletin*; Dumisa Ntuli, “NUMSA Sets the Record Straight on VWSA,” 23 August 2000, courtesy of <<http://www.labornotes.org>>. Trade and Industry Minister Alec Erwin recently insisted (2 October 2000)

On the other side, the strikers and their supporters — the Uitenhage Crisis Committee, the Oil, Chemical, General, and Allied Workers Union, the Workers International Vanguard League, and others — have sharpened their criticisms of NUMSA, COSATU, the SACP, the ANC, and their shared practice of accommodating transnational capital in the name of development. Similarly, a growing number of local and even national unions have questioned COSATU's place within the "Triple Alliance." Their perspective begins on the ground, with the concerns of job security, wages and benefits, working conditions, the speed of assembly lines, workrules and schedules, and the rights of workers to control their own organizations. They then measure the existing labour and political organizations with the yardstick of workers' own definitions of their interests. Increasingly, they find these organizations not merely wanting in promoting the workers' interests, but actively opposing them. "One of the key proposals of the VWSA bosses," notes one recent Workers International Vanguard League position paper, "was for the union to support discipline of its own members." Not surprisingly, then, "it is not in the interest of NUMSA and the ANC and VW that militant worker leaders like the 1999 shop stewards should raise, as they did, essential questions such as the impact of new production techniques on the cultural life of workers." Interestingly, these criticisms were recently echoed by Dale McKinley, the chairperson of the Johannesburg Central Branch of the SACP until he was tried and expelled this summer, who questioned COSATU's "ideological shift" based on "two related assumptions":

- (1) that capitalism's new round of global accumulation (through more sophisticated means of imperial domination) means that the core role and character of unions has changed. It is becoming commonplace to hear COSATU leaders argue that, due to the 'hegemony of capitalism' and 'new global realities,' trade unions must fundamentally alter their strategic vision in order to remain 'relevant.' In other words, 'If you can't beat them, join them;' and
- (2) that the April 1994 democratic breakthrough signaled that the days of unions placing the active political struggle for socialism at the top of the agenda are over, or at the very least, must take deep cover in the bowels of an ongoing "national democratic revolution."<sup>23</sup>

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that South Africa's trade unions are "outmoded" in the new global economy and must, therefore, change, <<http://www.anc.org.za>>. Also, see "COSATU Reaffirms Support for ANC," *Daily Dispatch*, 9 September 2000.

<sup>23</sup>Workers International Vanguard League, "May Day: Fight Against Capitalist Exploitation," 29 April 2000; Uitenhage Crisis Committee, "Invitation to Cover the Arbitration Proceedings of the Case of 1300 VWSA Dismissed Workers," 2 May 2000; Workers International Vanguard League, "Position on the NUMSA-VWSA Crisis," 26 August 2000, from <<http://wivl@sn.apc.org>>; International Labour and Research Group, *An Alternative View of Workplace Democracy* (Cape Town 1999); Charlie Van Gelderen, "ANC Leaders Put Aside Old Rhetoric," *Socialist Action*, August 2000; Dale McKinley, "South Africa: Misdirected Strategy Weakens Workers' Movement," available at <<http://jinx.sistm.unsw.edu.au/~greenlft>> 17 May 2000.



These critics of the current direction of South Africa's labor movement are also pointing beyond shopfloor militancy and union democracy to the need to *organize internationally*. As we saw, the VWSA strikers reached out to their counterparts in Germany, Mexico, and Brazil, with some interesting results. Indeed, in late August, Mexican VW workers, organized in an independent union outside of the compromised Confederation of Mexican Workers, struck for a week and won a 15 per cent raise. The strikers credited international labour solidarity as having played a critical role, particularly in keeping the government from intervening. Internet communications have facilitated the exchange of information, the sharing of experiences, and even the occasional act of solidarity (just look at the footnotes to this paper!). Labor activists outside the South African mainstream have emphasized that transnational corporations like VW — or Ford, 3M, Honeywell, Siemens, and many, many more — cannot be corralled in one country alone, and that expanding economic globalization must be met with genuinely transnational labour organization.<sup>24</sup>

These organizations and individuals are not merely criticizing the ANC, COSATU, its affiliated unions, and the SACP. They are promoting action and *organization* to address workers' interests. The OCGAWU continues to put pressure on a number of COSATU affiliates by offering workers in a variety of industries an alternative to the officially sanctioned unions, while some of the public employee unions move into more openly oppositional stances every day. At the Uitenhage VWSA plant, they have signed up more than 1,000 workers inside the plant, and they are continuing to pressure NUMSA for the mantle of official recognition. The Workers International Vanguard League, the International Labour and Research Group, independent labour education centers in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town, and ad hoc groups like the Uitenhage Crisis Committee provide places to discuss critical ideas, raise funds for workers in struggle, and make connections with international sympathizers. In Johannesburg, an impressive anti-privatization coalition has come together around critics of the restructuring of the University of Witwatersrand (Wits 2001) and the selling off of municipal enterprises and resources (iGoli 2002). Township and labour activists in local unions and grassroots organizations Earthlife Africa, Jubilee 2000, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Campaign Against Neo-Liberalism in

<sup>24</sup> Workers International Vanguard League, "Capitalism Dominates the COSATU Alliance," 20 September 2000, from <<http://wivl@sn.apc.org>>; International Labour and Research Group, *An Alternative View of Globalization: An Alternative View of Economic Crisis* (Cape Town 1999); "Building Internationalism," special issue of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, December 1999; John Pape, "Will the Workers of the World Unite in Cyber Space? Critical Reflections on Information Technology and Labour Movements of the South" ILRG Occasional Papers, no.2, May 1999. On the Mexican strike, see Michael Kohut, "Making History: The 2000 Volkswagen Strike," *Mexican Labor News and Analysis* V, 6 (September 2000), from <<http://www.igc.apc.org/unitedelect>>.

South Africa, and the Human Rights Committee came together to form a "S26" Committee and join in coordinated international protests against the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. In Cape Town the "Local Government Transformation Forum," including local branches of COSATU and the SACP, locals of the South African Municipal Workers Union and the National Education, Health, and Allied Workers Union, Jubilee 2000, Catholic Justice and Peace Committee, International Labour Research and Information Group, Lotus River Grassy Park Residents Association, Athlone Concerned Residents and Ratepayers Association, and the Western Cape Civics Organization organized a mass protest of the municipal government's privatization plans.<sup>25</sup>

Labour activists have also been busy organizing workers outside of the parameters of the institutional labour movement. In Durban, veteran labour activists have organized Zulu women street vendors into the "Self-Employed Women's Union" (SEWU) to pressure the city government to meet members' needs for temporary housing, storage for commodities, childcare, and to protect them from crime and exploitation. SEWU also challenges the ways that economic structures reinforce traditional patriarchal relationships, raises public awareness of domestic violence, and promotes mobility between the formal and informal sectors of the economy by breaking racial and gender discrimination. Scorned by the government, the ANC (as Zulus in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, many of these women are affiliated with the Inkatha Freedom party), and COSATU (since they don't have bosses, how can they form a "labour" organization?), SEWU has used public rallies and demonstrations, the singing of songs ("When You've Touched a Woman, You've Touched a Rock," an anthem of the anti-apartheid movement has become their rallying song), the circulation of petitions, and political pressure to push their demands. They also provide political and economic internal education, encouraging members to rethink their relationships to public life in South Africa. In 1997, SEWU produced a pamphlet, *Understanding the Economy*, in English and Zulu editions, and distributed it to all their members. SEWU has also connected its members to women street vendors in other South African cities and in India.<sup>26</sup>

In Cape Town and East London, activists are facilitating the gathering of domestic workers to tell their stories, discuss their work situations, analyze the failures of earlier efforts to organize conventional unions (a union which included

<sup>25</sup>Interviews with Lucien van der Walt, Kessie Moodley, Ari Sitas, Martin Jansen, Linda Cooper, Premesh Lalu, and Jonathan Grossmann in South Africa, January 2000; Communication from Workers International Vanguard League from <<http://wivl@sn.apc.org>>, 11 July 2000; "An Open Invitation to Participate in the South African S26 Week of Action Against the World Bank and IMF," from <[Resist\\_Wits2001@onelist.com](mailto:Resist_Wits2001@onelist.com)>; "Cape Town Local Government Transformation Forum to Intensify Campaign Against Privatisation," South African Municipal Workers Union, 4 October 2000, from <<http://samwu@sn.apc.org>>.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Pat Horn, Durban, 10 January 2000. "A Labour Policy for All: The Self-Employed Women's Union," *Agenda* 35 (1997); Trade Union Education Project and SEWU, *Understanding the Economy* (Durban 1997).

80,000 members in 1989 has disappeared), and contextualize their own experiences under apartheid and since its "overthrow." They struggle with the ways that the discourse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has delegitimized their "chronicle of tears" and edited out their stories about "the ordinary suffering of everyday life" — the petty and not-so-petty indignities heaped upon Black domestics, rape and sexual abuse, starvation wages, work schedules that keep women from their families, being treated "worse than the dog." As these stories are told — and heard — these women begin to discuss their needs, goals, and dreams, and the possible vehicles they need to make them a reality. This is a slow beginning for a domestic workers' organization, but it is on solid ground.<sup>27</sup>

In Cape Town, the Trade Union Library and Education Center (TULEC) has begun a project with women workers in the food industry. They have organized an adult study circle, coordinated by a young woman staff member, which meets weekly. The ten women come together and discuss their workplace experiences, their struggles with their unions as well as management, the relationship between their work and family lives, and how they might develop strategies to improve their situations. They then sit down at a bank of computers where they email their stories to similar groups of food industry women workers in a dozen other countries. They receive stories in return, which they discuss and respond to. Like so many other South African workers, they increasingly see themselves in a wider context, even as they remain firmly on the ground.<sup>28</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that all of these grassroots projects are connected — consciously or organizationally — to each other, or that they are all explicitly critical of the ANC, the SACP, and COSATU, and their accommodations to the neo-liberalism of the global economy. I am suggesting that we — labour historians who are trained in the search for evidence of the "hidden transcript" of resistance and labour activists who seek to build international labour solidarity — ought to become more aware of these developments in South Africa. We will, as we have time and again in the past, see interesting reflections of ourselves in the mirrors our

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Jonathan Grossman, Durban, 10 January 2000. Jonathan Grossman, "'My Wish is That My Kids Will Try to Understand One Day': Domestic Workers in South Africa Communicating the Experience of Abuse, Resistance, and Hope," and "Violence and Silence: Rewriting the Future," unpublished paper, courtesy of the author. Brenda Grant, "Domestic Workers: Employees or Servants," *Agenda* 35 (1997). I also found valuable background in a paper written while participating in the SIT-Durban by Macalester College student Meghan Duddle, "Women's Work is Never Done ... or Valued: Domestic Labor in Durban, South Africa." Duddle's paper traces the collapse of the South African Domestic Workers Union in the early 1990s and the consequences for Black domestics in the Durban area.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with Martin Jansen, Cape Town, 16 January 2000. John Pape, "Will the Workers of the World Unite in Cyber Space?"

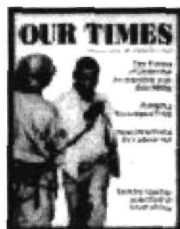
counterparts there hold up to us, and, out of these reflections, we can fashion a sharper and better defined understanding of our own situation.

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