

Labour and South African Literature in the 1980s

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Introduction

The real artist in the world is human labor. It's human labor which has created the social environment out of the natural environment. All the modern technology and science and the arts are a product of human labor. When the product of that social human labor becomes the property of an idle few, can the artist be said to be free? The liberation of human labor is the only condition for the true liberation of the human being, the artist (Ngugi 1983:67).

The class struggle is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist (Benjamin 1973:256).

Marxists have argued that the motivation of apartheid was economic exploitation, with racial oppression playing a significant role in the formation of classes. Given South Africa's history of colonialism and white minority domination, there has been a strong correspondence between racial stratification and class, and race has been quite a reliable index of class. Although much has been made of the white working class, it is tiny in comparison to the black working class (disproportionately so, as a result of apartheid). In addition, the income of the white working class under apartheid bore no comparison to the black working class, for instance white railway workers in the 1970s had wage packages that were better than those of qualified, 'middle class' black teachers. This was besides the other benefits that accrued from racial privileges, such as job reservation, conditions of service, pensions, housing, medical facilities, and so on.

Workers in South Africa have been systematically oppressed. They have had starvation wages and harsh working and living conditions. Many workers risked imprisonment under the influx control and pass laws, and they have faced a range of

dangers at the workplace. The experience of working life finds voice in various workchants and songs, of which 'Shosholoza' is the best known. Their singing is often all that a gang of workers has to sustain them through dull and exhausting manual work. Workers have used chants and songs to obviate the boredom induced by repetitious tasks or to keep time.

While poems about the struggles of workers tend to focus on male workers, and while the Black Consciousness Movement treated the subject of the struggle as a generic black man, many workers were women. Few black women found work in the industries (where they received the lowest wages, and the least secure conditions of employment). Most women who sought work could only find jobs as domestic workers: 'One in three African women workers in South Africa does a service job including domestic work' (Badsha & Wilson 1986:151). Research by Behardien, Lehulere and Shaw suggests that in general domestic workers, together with women in agriculture,

earn the lowest wages, work the longest hours, suffer bad living and working conditions and have little job security. Furthermore they have low status occupations and are in extremely vulnerable positions in relation to their employers (Badsha & Wilson 1986:151).

It is the absence of alternatives that leave women most vulnerable to exploitation. Unable to organise adequately, domestic workers have subsisted in alienation from their labour and from each other. Research done in the major metropolitan areas of the country suggests that

the wages, in cash and kind, of full-time domestic workers fell in real terms (taking 1975 as the base year) by 16 per cent over the period 1973-80 (Wilson & Ramphele 1989:60).

Employers of domestic workers tend to assume that wages in kind are equivalent to cash. But the accommodation and meals that are given in part-payment are only for employees, who must still make provisions for their families, on a reduced wage. The provision of live-in accommodation that many employers find convenient is particularly damaging to working class families because most black South African homes are headed by women. As Roseline Naapo, the poet, former domestic worker, and South African Domestic Workers' Union (SADWU) organiser has argued:

Domestic work is not nice. You live in a room which they call a home. But you are not allowed to have visitors, you are not able to live with your husband. You are separated from your family for many months. Your employer expects you to smile every morning when you come into her house.

When the employer leaves you with her kids, she expects you to be a good mother to her kids. You must be one hundred percent devoted to her kids. Meanwhile you feel a clot in your heart that you cannot even kiss your child in the morning when you wake up (Oliphant 1991:22).

Little tolerance has been shown by most employers for the social needs of domestic workers. Instead they have found it convenient to blame the severity of their conditions of service on the influx control and pass laws. Some employers actively connived with the police in using legislation, such as the 'key-law' (which operated in parts of Cape Town), to harass workers. This was done by supplying the police with duplicate keys to enter the rooms of workers at any time, making it impossible for workers to have children or partners with them (Badsha & Wilson 1986:151)¹.

Most of the 'worker women' in South Africa have been black. Subjected to a range of systems of oppression, their burden has been extreme. The National Household Survey found that the person responsible for the health of a household in South Africa is invariably a woman, to the extent of some 92% of the population (Hirschowitz et al. 1995:12). Most women are poorly educated and earn very little, yet they have the sole responsibility of keeping a family together with few resources.

Miriam Tlali's 'No Shelter for Cleaners' (1987:164-169) and Nise Malange's 'Nightshift Mother' (Eviol & Kromberg 1989:18f) represent women who have no option but to work as night-shift cleaners, at great cost to their family lives and their safety. In Tlali's story the office cleaner, referred to as Mrs T.H., tells of how the women finish work at 02h30 and battle to find somewhere to sleep because it is unsafe to travel home to the townships. In her working life she slept at Johannesburg Park Station until the police chased people away, then in the garage of the building where she worked, or she would 'travel up and down, to and fro like that until it was safe to get off at Nancefield and go home' (Tlali 1987:167). Mrs T.H. relates that other passengers would caution her:

'You'll get hurt in the trains here; going up and down alone, and a woman for that matter'.... Then I would answer: 'What can I do? I've got to try and save my life as I work. I have to work; I have no husband' (Tlali 1987:167).

The ironic statement in the second stanza of Malange's poem conveys the anger and bitterness of workers who fully realise that they are exploited but have no alternative:

Left with a double load
at home
my children left uncared

¹ For additional information see Barrett et al (1985) and Meer (1990).

Anxiety

at work

my boss insists we should
be grateful for the opportunities
he gives women to be exploited
(Evill & Kromberg 1989:18).

Malange exposes the isolated and alienating nature of the work in images that challenge the reader with the injustice of the dispensation:

And I work wandering on my knees
through these deserted and desolate spaces
the group of us lost in these vast buildings
forgotten and neglected
exploited as you sleep
(Evill & Kromberg 1989:18)².

Service sector jobs generally pay a little more than domestic work, but the money is never adequate, as Mrs T.H. relates:

We are holding on because What shall we do? We have children and grandchildren. We have to send them to school. How are we to feed them? There's not much we can do with that R34 [per fortnight]. We complain but it does not help The money only pays for the rent and for a few bags of coal. We just go on (Tlali 1987:168).

Some workers tried to deal with the precariousness of their situation by coming together in collectives, which have generally taken the form of church groups (the best known of which are the Zionists), but there have been skills and literacy classes (usually run by church or educational groups). The *Thula Baba* collective comprised a group of domestic workers involved in a literacy programme. The workers composed a poem 'Domestic Workers' (1987:11), which addresses the challenges and problems they have faced:

We are called girls. We are called maids.
It is like we are small.
It is like we are children.
We are told what to do.

² The stanza recalls the photograph by Lesley Lawson of an office cleaner working on her hands and knees in the middle of a large boardroom table, to polish it (Badsha & Wilson 1986:152).

We are told what to say.
We are told what to think.
We are told what to wear.

We are women. We are mothers.
Our bodies are strong from hard work.
Our hearts are big from suffering.

We struggle against hunger.
We struggle against poverty.
We struggle against sickness.
We struggle against suffering.

The workers identify the isolated nature of their work and lives as an important challenge:

Our problem is that we live alone.
Our problem is that we work alone.
Our problem is that we suffer alone.

But we find friendship if we meet together.
And we find answers if we talk together.
And we find strength if we work together.
And we find hope if we stand together.

While such efforts may be characterised as ‘provisional, rudimentary, hybrid forms where people were moved by events to represent themselves and their experience in the face of silence’ (Brett 1986:26), there is more to the poem than is immediately apparent. Given the nature of their working situation some domestic workers have learnt to count on their collective strength. The optimism and resolve that is expressed in the final stanza is based on an implicit recognition of the significance of solidarity. The (oral) technique of repetition is harnessed to underscore their only source of power. Further, repetition imparts momentum to their words, supporting their solution-oriented approach. They use poetry as a resource, and the poem is treated as a struggle manual as they anticipate the power of organised worker structures.

Few employers tolerated the rights of workers to organise even when black trade unions were legalised. People in domestic service were particularly vulnerable (because of the isolated nature of their work), but even workers in the commercial and industrial sectors suffered dismissals because employers were suspicious that they were attempting to form unions. Two plays show this very clearly: in *Woza Albert!*

(Mtwa, Ngema & Simon 1983) the character Zuluboy is dismissed from Coronation Bricks, and in *Asinamali* (Ngema 1985) Bongani Hlophe tells of how he was dismissed from the Savage and Lovemore company. Both companies are based in the Durban area, and they had poor records of industrial relations in the 1970s and early 1980s.

A poet such as Malange has not been strictly part of the working class since the 1980s, when she joined the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal. However, owing to apartheid, most black writers have functioned in a largely working class social milieu, and many have come from working class families that continued to remain so even though that particular individual, through education (scholarships in some cases) and work, could be considered as middle class. The handful of black writers who came from families considered middle class in the 1960s or 1970s often made the class transition during the working lives of their parents. As there were virtually no alternatives, such families generally continued to live in working class townships, among their working class neighbours, friends and relatives. As a result, the term 'middle class' does not accurately describe such a nebulous intermediate class, the members of which could just as easily move downwards as upwards in class terms, at the mercy of the vagaries of the apartheid state. The 'class' was not large enough or powerful enough to reproduce itself. There was no established middle class milieu in the 1970s and 1980s, although the Botha government attempted to develop such a group, particularly in the homelands. But their numbers were tiny and they did not act as a class any more than they did as part of another group.

The term 'middle class' often masked the huge discrepancy that existed between the black and the white middle classes, which Marxists and liberals tended to gloss over. Marxist discourse has tended to essentialise class to the exclusion of other variables. The poet Mafika Gwala (1984:52) challenges this approach: 'When whites talk of a "middle class" there springs up the immediate question: middle class between what?'. Gwala was justified, for the position of local Marxists was further weakened by the way in which they dealt with the racial categories that privileged themselves: they tended to respond defensively by dismissing various black writers of the 1970s as being petty bourgeois, without unpacking how that correlated with their own subject-positions. Their silences regarding their own enormous race- and class-bound privileges was deafening. Writers like Gwala and Serote were well aware of the contradictions that were obscured under the class rubric. Yet class analyses have immense theoretical and practical value, catalysing the formation of working class organisations, and disclosing the hesitations and contradictions in the black intermediate classes' contributions to social change³.

³ Among the oppressed minoritics (Coloureds and Indians were the largest groups) class distinctions were far more discernible (although most of the middle class people in these groups were

Trade unionism

you shall settle accounts with the oppressor
You shall settle accounts with the exploiter
(Qabula & Hlatshwayo 1986:56).

The working class has always been creative (Hlatshwayo *Weekly Mail* 17/7/87:28).

During the 1970s unions of black workers began to emerge from the repression. Some unions were the spontaneous products of shop floor activity, some were linked to the activism of radical white students who participated in Wages Commissions and worker benefit groups, while some had support from church or trade union organisations abroad. In 1972 the BC movement set about establishing a workers' council to serve the needs of black workers, to build solidarity and to create a sense of black development (Mothlabi 1984:125). BAWU, the Black Allied Workers' Union, was established in the same year. However, the worker organisations tended to be divided and vulnerable, and under constant security police surveillance. The material conditions of capitalism, repressive legislation and security force action hindered the development of black working class organisations and consciousness. Nevertheless,

[a]ll the unions were part of a ferment of popular struggle, evidence of the remarkable capacity of oppressed people to evolve ever new forms and instruments of struggle in the face of suppression (Mashinini 1989:138).

The 1972-1973 strikes which began in Durban and spread across Natal, the Transvaal and the eastern Cape signified the rebirth of black trade unionism after the silencing of the 1960s. However, the unions' struggle for factory-level recognition met with few successes, and the frequency of strikes signalled growing political frustration. The government and capital were faced with worker militance, which challenged the cheap labour system. Given the close links between itself and local capital, the apartheid state was pressured to undertake reform. Transnational capital (which had traded for a long time on the subordination of the black working class) was under pressure to disinvest, and was therefore moved to support superficial reform. As a result the government appointed the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry. Acknowledging the right of African workers to form and belong to trade unions, the Wiehahn Commission (1979)

about a generation away from having been part of the working class/peasantry). But these groups were often too tiny or too hegemonised by the ideology of apartheid to play a significant role in building class solidarity across race.

recognised that the unions were growing rapidly and that to leave African workers outside the official system would weaken the state's chances of controlling them.

The non-racial Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was formed in 1979, and by the end of 1981 had 95 000 members. The Black Consciousness Council of Unions in South Africa (CUSA) was formed in 1980. By 1982 it had 130 000 members, of whom 100 000 members were from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Other trade union blocs were formed in the 1980s, culminating in the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 with 450 000 workers (NUM had joined in), while the smaller BC/Africanist National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) was formed in 1986. Ari Sitas (1989b:36-45) conveys the momentum for worker representation in graphic images in 'The Origins of Today's Tribulations':

A trickle of workers
pock-marked with worry

A downpour of issues
Then the flood.
Factory gates burst
a trampling of humanity
and poured it into tiny rooms
then big church halls
and then the stadiums

Unions emerged
on the back
of a galloping grievance (Sitas 1989b:43-44).

The launch of the giant trade union federation COSATU in November 1985 inspired workers across the country to organise to improve their conditions of work:

The federation was born into a state of emergency. It was a product not only of worker organisation, but also of a climate of uprising and even insurrection (Baskin 1991:89).

COSATU's launch caused great panic among the opponents of black working class power: the state, most employers and reactionary black political organisations⁴. 'The Tears of a Creator' by Alfred Temba Qabula and Mi Hlatshwayo (1986:49-56) was

⁴ In 1986 Inkatha founded the United Workers Unions of South Africa (UWUSA), which started out by launching a series of bitter attacks on COSATU.

performed at the COSATU launch, at Kings' Park Stadium, Durban. The poem begins with an address to the worker, one of the most exploited and neglected subjects of society, in terms that elites usually reserve for the divine:

O' maker of all things.

The analogy is as pertinent as it is ironic, and it is sustained in the questions that follow, which have Biblical overtones (of Christ's suffering):

Your sin
Can it be your power?
Can it be your blood?
Can it be your sweat? (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:51).

The power of COSATU is celebrated through the comparison to the mythical tornado-snake *Inkhanyamba*, which, once liberated, is impervious to its enemies:

Here it is:
The tornado-snake of change! *Inkhanyamba*,
The cataclysm
Clammed for decades and decades

By a mountain of rules.
The tornado-snake
Poisoned throughout the years
By ethnicity
And tribalism (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:54).

COSATU is perceived as being part of the long struggle to establish trade unionism in South Africa:

Where is the ICU of the 1920s to be found?
Where is the FNETU of the 1930s to be found?
Where is the CNETU of the 1940s to be found?
And the others?

They emerged
They were poisoned
Then
They faded!

COSATU

Today be wise! (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:55).

Qabula and Hlatshwayo perform the praise in Zulu, although it has been published in Zulu and English. COSATU has had a strong tradition of promoting communication through translation, whether in meetings, on the shop-floor or in its documents. The loss of time in meetings is made up in accessibility and increased participation, which is vital to the democratic character of the trade union federation.

COSATU and NACTU played a vital role in preparing their members for the struggles that were necessary to obtain optimum class leverage in the turbulent period that followed:

The trade union movement as a key pillar of the broader working class is an important factor in the struggle for a complete transformation of our society. It has secured this position not merely through mass mobilization and protest action, but through building working class confidence, raising consciousness, developing grassroots leadership and mass education which form part of campaigns that fundamentally question the present organisation of society (Meintjies 1989:25).

COSATU, with its huge membership and highly developed organisational bases, was well positioned to challenge the state, as Peter Horn (1991:123f) suggests in 'Canto Thirteen: There is a Writing on my Body':

as a union together we will write our history
on the body of the South African state.

There were important challenges related to gender inequalities. Nise Malange (1989:78) has pointed out that as more and more women become part of the organised labour force, they were better able to struggle to 'change patriarchal attitudes, share the double shift, and achieve higher wages and better working conditions'.

The harassment and persecution of workers

Before the development of the independent trade union movement, the state's reaction to worker activists was as visceral as it had been towards its other black political opponents. Many workers, most of them unionists, died in detention: Masobiya Joseph Mdluli died while being detained in Durban in March 1976, and Neil Aggett, an organiser in the COSATU-linked Food and Canning Workers' Union, died after being tortured in detention in February 1982. The state claimed he committed suicide, but this was unconvincing, and in an unprecedented show of solidarity a hundred thou-

sand workers went on a thirty-minute work stoppage. Workers continued to die in detention, among them the trade union leader, Elija Loza, who died in 1987.

In May 1985 Andries Raditsela, who had been a prominent leader from the time of FOSATU and was a senior shopsteward of the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union, died shortly after being released from detention under the Internal Security Act. Raditsela died of a head injury sustained when he fell out of a police Casspir at the time of his arrest some ten days earlier (Cooper 1988:632). There were mass work stoppages and his funeral was attended by thousands of people. Nise Malange composed an elegy 'This poem is dedicated to brother Andries Raditsela' (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:63), which begins with striking images that contradict the claim of the first line:

I have a few words to say—my mouth is a
 grave without flowers

It is like a river without water
But it has faith in your death.

If I had strength enough I would go and avenge
 your blood

Our blood

The middle section of the elegy issues a defiant challenge to the government:

Comrade, I did not come here to open a wound
 nor to mourn

I am here to challenge the minister of law
 and order

I am here to condemn death in detention
 (1983:63).

Malange nears her conclusion with a pledge reminiscent of the Mozambican poet Noemia da Sousa's 'Poem for Joao' (Soyinka 1975:197-199) which was written during a strike in the capital (Lourenco Marques, now Maputo) four decades earlier:

Your blood, Andries will not be in vain
Your blood will be a moral lesson for us to punish the oppressors,

Treason, detention and murders

Your blood will give power to your comrades,

To the workers, to your family and to us all (1983:63).

Despite pressure and harassment, and the possibility of dismissal or death, workers

chose to continue with the process of unionisation, as Mlungisi Mkize (himself a victim of the war in Pietermaritzburg) argues in 'echo sounds in maritzburg' (Ndaba 1986:118f):

the gun that walloped
graham hadebe
the gun has harnessed
my people together
the gun has fuelled the struggle (Ndaba 1986:118).

The polarisation of political interests (the UDF/ANC versus the IFP) led to the violence delineated in the following lines, which also show the impact of worker unity:

oppressors are now standing to lose
for i have
once more
seen union taking root-
at the stroke of death
once more there is
awareness, togetherness
solidarity, fraternity
take heed for
once more foes have turned to comrades (Ndaba 1986:118f).

However, the crisis was escalating for the labour movement:

For unions, the 1985/6 emergency was tame compared to the one declared on 12 June 1986. The second emergency was better planned, more harshly implemented, and gave virtually a free rein to the army and police. In contrast to the first emergency, it was applied to every region of the country (Baskin 1991:134f).

Within six weeks of the declaration of the June 1986 emergency 2 700 unionists were detained, of whom 81% were from COSATU. Some 320 elected trade union leaders and officials were detained. (The figures necessarily refer only to the detentions that were known.) Union offices were raided, members were intimidated, and the work of the unions was disrupted. It was difficult to run a mass union movement from hiding (Baskin 1991:135). In addition to the ban on outdoor meetings, indoor meetings were also prohibited, making organising extremely difficult for workers. Some Eastern Cape factory workers were detained for up to three years. In Northern Natal virtually every COSATU organiser and most key shop stewards were detained. Unions struggled over

job security for detainees, as well as for payment during detention. In Johannesburg 950 dairy workers were detained for two weeks for protesting the detention of two unionists. On their release they discovered that they had all been fired (Baskin 1991:139). The trade union movement was subject to dirty tricks campaigns, including fake pamphlet campaigns. But the conditions of the second emergency failed to suppress the resistance:

it became simply another hurdle to be overcome, another obstacle to organising the workers. For COSATU it reaffirmed the need to remain strong at the factory level, and not to centre unions around offices (Baskin 1991:145).

Most employers were silent about the emergency clampdown, some supported it, and some, such as Premier Milling's Tony Bloom complained that 'we are now faced with attempting to run our factories and enterprises by dealing with the mob because the leaders are in custody' (Baskin 1991:137).

While some of the harassment of the state was directed at union and shopfloor leadership, the everyday harassment of ordinary workers was unremitting, as the expression of resistance through song and other genres demonstrates. People have always sung on South African trains, although in the past the songs were mainly of a religious nature. Njabulo Ndebele (1991:32) recounts having 'listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work' and in the short story 'Fud-u-u-a!' Miriam Tlali (1989) focuses on the struggles of women workers on the packed trains to and from the Johannesburg townships. By the mid-1980s the resistance meetings held on the trains were supplemented with dances and songs. A sacked worker made a play to show on trains, pointing out, 'If we entertain people, they are more likely to support our struggle' (Slovo in Corrigan 1990:60). There was also a train play called *Workers Lament*. A play performed by women passengers was called *Women stand up for your rights*. The police responded by raiding the trains daily and in three months in 1989 some 460 people were arrested for disturbing the peace on trains (Slovo in Corrigan 1990:61). In August 1989, when 47 workers (most of them members of COSATU) were charged with 'disturbing the peace' by singing on the trains, some 500 workers took the Johannesburg-to-Kempton Park train to attend the trial. On the way they sang and chanted freedom songs and praises of their unions, the ANC, SWAPO, the Sandinistas and their own strength. When the workers arrived at Kempton Park they were dispersed with sjamboks by the police. Some 15 workers were injured. More police harassment was experienced on the road to the court. It seemed that the security forces were determined to stop the singing of political songs. However, the workers were not to be quelled. Eventually the 'singing trial' of the original accused was postponed indefinitely (*Weekly Mail* 11/9/89:2f).

Mining

.... we begin to understand that the truly heroic is the ordinary, the everyday of the South African working class (Cronin 1987:19).

The focus of several writers on mining clarifies the nature of the exploitation that occurred in one of the largest and most profitable sectors in the economy in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Mtutuzeli Matshoba's story 'To Kill a Man's Pride' (Mutloate 1980:103-127) addresses some of the problems migrant workers experienced with accommodation in Johannesburg. The play *Egoli*, by Matsemela Manaka (no date)⁵, which was banned in 1979, portrayed the troubled lives of two miners. Alfred Temba Qabula addresses the exploitation many migrant labourers experience in the ironically-titled poem 'The Small Gateway to Heaven' (1989a:49-51). The poem is based on his own bitter experience of leaving the impoverished eastern Cape for a compound (the 'small gateway') in Carletonville ('heaven'), which he alternately describes as the 'place of gold, dagga, drink and oppression':

When the recruiters invaded our homes
To get us to work the mines,
They would say:
'.... Come to the place of the
 Hairy-jaw
 Where starvation is not known'.

And we joined the queues through the small
 gate to Heaven
And we found the walls of our custody,
And degradation,
And of work, darkness to darkness,
With heavy shoes burdening our feet with worry,
For nothing,
At the place of the Hairy-jaw,
Away from our loved ones.

I have seen this prison of a Heaven,
This kraal which encircles the slaves

I saw it as the heart of our oppression,
I saw the walls that separate us
 from a life of love (Qabula 1989a:51).

⁵ Chapman offers two different dates for the playscript, 1979 (1996:353) and 1981 (1996:498).

Qabula's juxtaposition of hope and cynicism, desolate homesteads and makeshift mass accommodation, the oral tradition and an urban idiom, offers a poignant expression of the experience of millions of workers against a formidable system:

Popular art can be seen as a new kind of art created by a new emergent class, the fluid heterogenous urban mass The syncretism of their art, drawing as it did on both indigenous (hinterland) and imported (metropolitan) elements was therefore an expression and a negotiation of their real social position at the point of articulation of two worlds (Barber 1987:14).

Discrimination has been rife on the mines. While the gold mines were very profitable the wages of black miners remained poor and inequitable, as various analysts have indicated:

In early 1987 the lowest monthly wages, according to NUM [the National Union of Mineworkers], were R200,00 on gold mines, and R194,00 on coal mines. While most miners earned more, their wages were still low: in 1986 the average black mine-worker earned a mere R427,00 per month. During that year mine industry profits reached a new record of R8,3-million (Baskin 1991:226).

Ben Magubane (1990:142) points out that black gold miners earned an average of R5 127 per annum, while white miners earned an average of R27 679. Goodman Ntsasa (1988:9) of the NUM offices in Carletonville wrote the poem 'What have you done to us?' which challenges the lack of transparency on the part of the mine managements:

They give you pay with a lot
of deductions
But they don't give you full
details about them.
They don't show deductions of food
and rent in your payslips.

However, the discrepancy in the earnings of the black labour force is only part of the picture. In the mid-1980s whites got 35 days paid leave while blacks were given only 14 days. There were safety incentive bonuses for whites but not for blacks, yet it was the white staff who had responsibility for the production quotas of the blacks under them (Magubane 1990:142-3). This meant that such staff were rewarded for placing productivity above the safety of the black staff. Discrimination also extended to racially segregated lift cages and inferior canteens (*Weekly Mail* 29/9/89:10-11).

Mining, and deep-level mining in particular, is a very dangerous activity, as Cyril Ramaphosa pointed out: 'Between 1973 and 1984, more than 8 500 miners were

killed on the mines' (Baskin 1991:149). In 1985 alone, 'over 500 men were killed (a fatality rate of one per one thousand people employed) and 13 000 were disabled for at least 14 days by accidents in the gold mines' (Wilson and Ramphela 1989:80). The overwhelming majority of the casualties were black miners.

In addition to the high number of fatalities, the lives of hundreds of thousands of miners were ruined by accidents or by occupational illnesses. Compensation for disability or death has been inadequate. A NUM study concluded that

a mineworker who spends 20 years working underground risks one chance in 30 of being killed and a 50% chance of being permanently disabled. Since 1900 over 68 000 miners have died in mining accidents, while a further one million workers have been permanently disabled (Baskin 1991:152).

As COSATU contended, 'Black miners were paying with their lives for a profit they did not share' (Baskin 1991:149).

In the context of such data stand the last two lines of the first stanza of Jeremy Cronin's (1983:58) poem 'To learn how to speak':

The low chant of the mine gang's
Mineral glow of our people's unbreakable resolve.

Cronin's poem celebrates the real wealth of the country: the people, whose will to be liberated has been more durable than the prized mineral. Unionisation offered the only hope of relief for the mineworkers. In the 1980s the National Union of Mineworkers was the fastest growing union in the world, with a paid up membership of more than 260 000 mineworkers (Baskin 1991:224). The size and the strength of the National Union of Mineworkers attested to the capacity of migrant workers to unite despite the conditions that worked to divide them and to prevent the development of a homogeneous working class culture: a large proportion of workers were employed on contracts (even though many stayed for their working lives), while the hostels for migrant labour were segregated on the basis of 'ethnicity'.

Millions of women's lives were affected by the conditions on the mines. In an untitled poem, Boitumelo (1979:60)⁶ writes of the grim toll of industrial accidents, from the point of view of a rural woman:

Here I stand
With no child in sight
Did I conceive to throw away?

⁶ The poet's surname has not been supplied, but it is quite likely that she is Boitumelo Makhema.

My children have gone to the towns
To seek bread
They never returned
They went to the mines
To dig gold
They died in Shaft 14
My children
Children of blood, blood of my children.

A similar sense of catastrophe and powerlessness is depicted in Matsemela Manaka's play *Egoli* (n.d.:25), where the character John learns that his young son Oupa, whom he thought was still living at home on the farm, has died in the mining accident that he himself was lucky to survive.

The worst mining disaster in this period occurred at the Kinross mines in September 1986 when 180 miners died. The disaster highlighted the dangers of secretive, management-controlled safety procedures. It also indicated the necessity for a strong union movement to act as a check. The full extent of the Kinross disaster was uncovered only because NUM, which had been established under the slogan 'organise or die', had challenged the mineowners on safety issues and racist procedures (*Weekly Mail* 29/9/89:10f). As Qabula and Hlatshwayo declared in 'The Tears of a Creator' (1986:49-56), which they performed at the COSATU launch a few months earlier:

We
Have dared to fight back
Even from the bottom of the earth
Where we pull wagons-full of gold
through our blood (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Nise Malange 1986:52).

May Day

The struggle over May Day in South Africa was an index of the power struggles that occurred between organised labour and the state. The government first demonised the demands of workers for the recognition of the day, and then struggled over conceding it in the face of unremitting pressure from organised labour.

Initially commemorated in 1896, the first day of May has long been recognised in many countries as International Labour Day. May Day was first observed in South Africa in 1904. Since 1926 workers have battled to have the day officially recognised. By 1961 May Day was excluded by law as a paid holiday from all industrial council agreements. Attempts in the 1980s to revive the day met with severe state repression (Baskin 1991:120). In 1985, workers involved in cultural groups were determined to

use May Day to demonstrate their solidarity, and for three months they made time after work and on weekends to have rehearsals at their union offices (Von Kotze 1988:61).

COSATU tried to transcend the boundaries drawn by the state and business in their conceptualisation of May Day, as is evident in the poem that the trade union cultural activist Nise Malange read at the 1985 May Day function at Curries Fountain, 'I, the unemployed' (Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:59f):

I'm here
Living under a Black cloud
Here, living in thinning light
Here
Freedom is nailed to a tree
To die.
Here I am living: in a matchbox

I am here dying of hunger
And my country is also dying
My children are dying too
Look at them.

The identification with the unemployed shows the larger social interest of the trade union movement represented by COSATU. The federation saw itself not only as a representative of workers, but took into account the welfare of those unable to secure work in an economy that was slowing down (as a result of the political pressure on the state). The fact that unemployment has affected more than half of the African population (Hirschowitz et al. 1995:50) clarifies COSATU's concern. Malange's second stanza, in particular, represents the expanded consciousness of organised workers, implicitly challenging the narrow self-interest of the state and its business allies.

By 1986, the conservative liberal press acknowledged that the unions had won the right to May Day: 'If there was ever any doubt about workers' May Day wishes, it was removed yesterday', noted *The Star*, arguing that: 'An undeclared holiday is disruptive, bedevils industrial relations, creates anomalies, undermines the authority of law, makes a mockery of statutory holidays' (Baskin 1991:126). Even the more conservative *Sunday Times* recognised that

South Africa's black workers have for all times unilaterally declared May 1 a public holiday. Government acceptance of this week's holiday by public fiat would not only be wise but gracious (Baskin 1991:126).

Many employers grudgingly conceded the development.

In May 1986 Premier Foods was the first major employer to recognise both May 1 and June 16 as paid holidays for all employees. Recognising that the government had lost the initiative, many companies followed:

The government was unwilling to concede to COSATU's demands, which it had labelled both communist and subversive. Having labelled 1 May a communist day with Marxist links, it had painted itself into a corner (Baskin 1991:127).

Most large employers had a more sophisticated approach than the government: realising that it was not possible to destroy the union movement, they sought to curb the power of the unions. But the government's intransigence was consistent with its programme of repression. Having focused on curbing the power of the 'young comrades' in the emergency declared in June 1986, the security establishment seemed to have decided that it was time to act on the union movement:

In 1987 the state declared that the first Friday of every May would be known in future as Workers' Day. The unions rejected this and stuck to their 1 May demand. However, conflict was avoided during 1987 since 1 May happened to coincide with the first Friday in May that year (Baskin 1991:127).

However, COSATU's Living Wage Campaign, due to be launched on May Day 1987, was declared a communist plot by the state, and the rallies around it were banned. Nevertheless, the May Day rallies went ahead, to the reading of much poetry and the performance of songs and music. The academic and activist Peter Horn's 'Canto Seven: One and Many' (1991:113f) was performed on 1 May 1987 at Athlone Stadium in Cape Town:

You were all alone until you understood
that you were not alone. Until you looked and saw:
 There are others alone like me, but together
we can lick them. Because we are many.
Because we are many, and we, many, are one,
we can win this war for freedom
we can win this war for a human existence.
Because we are many more than them,
we can win this war for food and housing
and comfort and knowledge and power (Horn 1991:114).

Celebrating the meaning of solidarity, Horn delineates the material significance of the unity that COSATU workers sought to develop with other workers across the country and the world:

alone we are helpless and victims of power,
together we win the war and we win our life:
together means union, united in struggle,
together means workers united to win (Horn 1991:114).

The political situation was tense because of the election scheduled for 6 May 1987, when the white electorate was polled for its support on two issues: the government's reform moves, and security force action to crush 'communist subversion'. COSATU, with other sections of the democratic movement (principally the United Democratic Front and the National Education Crisis Committee), supported the call for a two-day stayaway on 5 and 6 May. Almost 1,5 million workers and 1 million students responded. In regions such as the Eastern Cape almost 100% absenteeism was recorded (Baskin 1991:190).

On 7 May 1987 two explosions, clearly the work of professional saboteurs, destroyed COSATU house. Two weeks before, in the midst of intensified government attacks on the union movement, police had warned COSATU members during a raid of the premises 'that the building would either be burnt or bombed 'to the ground'' (Baskin 1991:191). COSATU and five unions lost their head offices. The regional, branch and local offices of many affiliated unions were also destroyed. Besides accommodating the offices of the federation and several unions, COSATU House had also been used to co-ordinate the broader labour movement and the mass democratic movement. Some news reports implied that COSATU itself had been responsible for the bombings. During this period there were many attacks on union offices throughout the country. COSATU launched a 'Hands Off COSATU' campaign.

In 1988, May 1 fell on a Sunday. Organised workers decided that in addition to observing the day, they would also take off the first Friday, 6 May: 'What the government had sown, it should reap, they argued' (Baskin 1991:127). The government, though out-maneuvred, remained intransigent and declared that in future Workers' Day would be observed on the first Monday in May. Conveniently, this coincided with 1 May 1989, as Baskin (1991:127) commented ironically. Peter Horn's (1991:126-128) 'Canto Fifteen: We demand a living wage!' which was performed on May Day at Athlone Stadium picked up on the Living Wage Campaign that the government had attempted to crush in 1987. This was a more strident call than the one that he made in the May Day poem two years previously:

Comrades,
the cost of living has made a hole in our
pockets
and the wealth of the country is not there!
The rent goes up, and the landlord thrives,
and the pay packet shrinks (Horn 1991:126).

Demonstrating a sense of solidarity that goes beyond the divisions of class and race, the poet challenged the position of the authorities:

When we want to live,
I mean just to live,
they tell us
that living is seditious
that living is revolutionary
that living is treason to the state
that living is bad for business

But we say: (Let me hear you!)
We demand a living wage! (Horn 1991:126f).

The government first (though qualified) recognised May Day as a public day of commemoration on 1 May 1989. On that morning David Webster, an academic and a human rights activist with strong links to the labour movement, was killed. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1997) has heard evidence that Webster's killers were part of a security force death squad.

Only in 1990, after the declarations of February 2, did the apartheid government finally accept that 1 May would be observed as Workers' Day. 'It had taken four years to acknowledge what the majority of the people had proclaimed in 1986' (Baskin 1991:127). The battle for the recognition of a day that is observed internationally characterises the struggle for power in South Africa: enormous effort was required to secure basic rights.

The MAWU strike and *The Long March*

Since the 1950s workers at the British multinational in Howick, B.T.R. Sarmcol have struggled to gain union recognition. In April 1985, some 870 workers affiliated to the Metal and Allied Worker's Union (MAWU) at B.T.R. Sarmcol went on a legal strike over their demands. Two days later the entire workforce was fired. Most workers had an average of 18 to 25 years of service with the company. Scab labour was hired with the help of government labour bureaus. MAWU instituted court proceedings on the grounds of unfair labour practices and began solidarity campaigns. Developments arising out of the MAWU strike are of significance because they show that 'cultural activism established itself as an organised consolidated form of struggle alongside labour organisation and a strong worker leadership' (Von Kotze 1988:18).

Owing to overt government and other ruling class controls, engaging with the social order has never been easy for workers. Working-class people, whose lives are

dictated by the inimical interests of capital and by various social agencies (e.g. the media), rarely see their interests fairly represented in the public arena. After six months of being on strike, the B.T.R. Sarmcol workers established co-operatives to sustain unity, to provide some income, and to establish participatory methods in production and distribution which the strikers hoped to see introduced at B.T.R. Sarmcol. One of the co-operatives was the Sarmcol Workers' Co-operative (SAWCO). Through the process of a week-long workshop, a group of workers with no experience of acting developed the play *The Long March*, with assistance from the Durban Workers' Cultural Local and the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal. As with its bulk-buying and silk-screening co-operatives, SAWCO made a deliberate effort to engage in democratic production practices.

MAWU workers 'organised themselves around cultural activity because they realised that united action does not just mean political struggle and the fight for union issues' (Von Kotze 1988:14). The plays that they workshopped helped them explore collective ways of reflecting on their experiences and articulating their vision for the future (Meintjies 1989:25). Besides enabling workers to think through their challenges, play-making helped them test their concepts with other workers who shared their experiences and frustrations; to establish relations of solidarity across unions, regions, ethnicity and even race; and to explore options and challenge imposed points of view. Organised worker culture has served to counter the helplessness, isolation and alienation that industrial work in particular generates. It allows workers in the audience to learn about the experiences of fellow workers and recognise the bases for solidarity and unity. It also enables exposure to the experiences of workers who have gone before, as well as access to the history of working class struggles, from the point of view of working class people. As Von Kotze (1988:12) explains, the plays give workers the chance to do what is too dangerous to express at work: disagreement, anger, frustration, rejection, or even contempt for managers. Although worker plays often show the exploitation and abuse of workers, they do not show workers being defeated or crushed: 'The notion of a depressed "down-trodden" workforce is as unacceptable to the makers of plays as it would be to the audience' (Von Kotze 1988:13).

The Long March traced the history of the workers, many of whom experienced forced removals twice before being settled in Mpophomeni (where 40% of the strikers lived). Typical of worker plays, *The Long March* was interspersed with many songs that clarified the main messages, such as 'Sophinda siteleke' (We shall strike again), and the poem 'It's a long, long march to freedom'. Everyday language was used. The play addressed the exploitation at work (through parodying assembly-line mass production), and the long struggle for union recognition that resulted in the strike. Through the creation of characters such as 'Maggie Thatcher' (by means of a vivid mask donned by one of the male actors), the play exposed the collusion between neo-imperialism and capitalism in South Africa. It also addressed the resulting poverty and the police

attacks that the Mpophomeni community endured, as well as their attempts to defend themselves.

The play was first performed in November 1985, for the Mpophomeni community, the shopstewards and other unionists. In 1986, under the state of emergency, it played to workers across the country. The aims of the tour, according to a worker (identified as 'Peter, the spokesperson for the players'), were:

to spread our struggle right through the country so everybody should know what is really happening about the Sarmcol strikers. To inform the people was our major objective. Fundraising was meant to provide the families of strikers with food parcels (Von Kotze 1988:80f).

Besides union newspapers and meetings, workers have not had the means to express themselves publicly over issues that affect them deeply. By touring, the Mpophomeni workers were able to share their struggles with workers across the country.

In December 1986 armed Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) vigilantes and people dressed in the uniforms of KwaZulu police tortured, murdered and then burnt the bodies of two MAWU shopstewards and the daughter of a striker. A day later Mpophomeni township was attacked, a youth was killed and others were injured. SAWCO decided to dedicate the play to the deceased, who were the township leader and head of the MAWU shop stewards, Phineas Sibiyi; the actor and the play's main motivator Simon Ngubane; the SAWCO activist Flomin Mnikathi; and the youth activist Alpheus Nkabinde. The killings were characteristic of the struggle in Natal, where a sustained campaign of assassinations against COSATU and the UDF was being waged. The workers responded by strengthening their unity and productivity. In this *The Long March* was like the earlier *Clover Worker's Play*, which showed the capacity of drama to articulate the feelings of workers under attack, and to mobilise collective power. Later, *The Long March* players were invited, in an expression of international worker solidarity, to play in Britain, so that the unfair labour practices of a British multinational in the 'third world' would be exposed.

At COSATU's second national congress in July 1987, a resolution to the effect that 'culture cannot be left in the hands of the enemy' (Von Kotze 1988:18) resonated with the struggles around the country and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. Across the country community and worker structures have been involved in making and performing plays about their living conditions and struggles, with the understanding, as Hlatshwayo explained that the plays 'have the potential of popularising our worker politics' (*Weekly Mail* 17/7/87:28). Drawing on the oral history of the Mpophomeni area, SAWCO developed the play *Bambatha's Children*, which used sophisticated dramatic devices, powerful mime and songs to recount the hidden history of three genera-

tions of dispossession⁷:

Bambatha's Children breaks new ground in workers' theatre. It not only focuses on a single union issue or struggle but it also attempts to contextualise current repression historically Plays like these, drawing on the popular memory of resistance heroes of the past, help to shape and articulate popular resistance in the 1980s (Purkey, *Weekly Mail* 2/10/89:33).

In September 1987 the courts found in favour of BTR Sarmcol. The judgement suggested that '[c]ollective democracy of the kind practised by unions should not be tolerated in South Africa' (*Weekly Mail* 18/9/87:8f). However, on appeal, the Natal Supreme Court ruled, in March 1989, that the Industrial Court had acted incorrectly. The union continued to seek negotiation with the management to resolve the matter⁸.

A few months before these judgements the successor to MAWU, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) was launched. A powerful union with strong socialist-leanings, NUMSA was created through a process of unity among unions who managed to overcome deep historical divisions. When NUMSA, the second largest COSATU affiliate, was launched in May 1987 Moses Mayekiso was elected as the general secretary. This was an expression of solidarity and defiance, for Mayekiso and other Alexandra Action Committee activists were detained for a long time before being charged with treason, for attempting to improve the Johannesburg slum in which they lived. It would be two years before Mayekiso was acquitted of treason and could take up his post. Alfred Temba Qabula, who had been a member of MAWU/NUMSA, composed the praise poem 'Jangeliswe: For Moss Jangeliswe Mayekiso' (1989b:135f):

Jangeliswe -
live up to your Israelite name
and lead.

Qabula's poem celebrates Mayekiso's long record of struggle, both in the trade union movement and in Alexandra township, in terms that express reverence for Mayekiso's sacrifices and his ability to teach by example, despite the onslaught of the security forces:

⁷ In 1906 the dispossession of African people resulted from the British imposition of crippling poll, cattle and hut taxes. To try to meet their debts, many people were forced to seek work in the white mines and factories. Any resistance, such as Bambatha's, was ruthlessly quelled.

⁸ For developments in the 1990s see Bonnin (1995:9-12).

Like Mandela
you pushed around the seat of their kingdom
and now you are thrown in kwanongqonqo [prison]
the sealed box of endless nights
trying to stop you in what you were up to
trying to erase you from popular memory
they put forward sellouts and they prize people to praise them
but you resurface and they shout that 'it is getting hot at Alex
we can't stand all this pressure'
then they charge you
to put you away forever
but you look them in the face
and you speak out the truth
about how the people are crushed and exploited
and how they light fires to help see through the darkness
and how to choose stones to erect new bridges
to pass over the floods
and how to trail through the thornfields
how to care for each other on the road
with such heavy burdens
with your own life neglected
your own homesteads in tatters
you move on and speak the truth.

SARHWU workers and *Township Fever*

Mbongeni Ngema's play *Township Fever* (1989)⁹ stands in stark contrast to plays of the Clover workers and the Sarmcol workers. Ngema's play which dealt with the 1987 strike by the South African Railways and Harbour Workers' Union (SARHWU), unwittingly showed the need for the involvement of workers in representations of their struggle.

During the troubled SARHWU strike involving 20 000 railway workers, three workers were shot dead and many were injured by police on 22 April 1987. Police then occupied COSATU headquarters for five hours, holding workers at gunpoint, spread-eagled and facing the wall¹⁰. A few days later some strikers killed four scab workers and burnt their bodies using the 'necklace' method¹¹. When the bodies were

⁹ The play was staged in 1989-1990. A version of the script appears in Ngema's publication *The Best of Mbongeni Ngema: An Anthology* (1995:127-191).

¹⁰ This was captured in a well-known photograph by Eric Miller (*Weekly Mail* 24/4/87:1).

¹¹ Paulus Zulu offers the following explanation of the growth of physical violence among the oppressed, in a society with a long history of repressive structural violence: 'As the state meets

discovered a day after the killings, the police, claiming to be looking for the killers, laid siege to COSATU house again, and videotaped thousands of workers whom they led out at gunpoint past masked police informants: '11 were arrested, including a 12-year old child' (Baskin 1991:179). Eventually eighteen people were tried for the murders, eight were found guilty and four were sentenced to death. COSATU and SARHWU condemned the killings, but they denied responsibility for them, stating that the first that they had heard of the murders was after the raid on COSATU House (1991:179).

The local reception of *Township Fever* was in stark contrast to the reception of *Woza Albert!* (1983) and *Asinamali* (1985). Ngema's earlier work had demonstrated a thorough grasp of the social and political problems of oppressed South Africans. Ngema defended himself against the outcry by explaining that he had been overseas touring with *Sarafina!* when he heard from his lawyer about the SARHWU strike. On his return, he visited the workers who were on death row for the murder of the strike-breakers, disguised as a legal interpreter. Ngema argues that he based *Township Fever* on the stories of the strike breakers, the court reports and the attorney's reports (1995:viii).

Workers, unionists and others who were involved in or familiar with the SARHWU strike were in an uproar over the play. The workers believed themselves to have been oppressed thrice, twice by the state as an employer and as a repressive force, and then by the playwright who misrepresented their struggle. As the playwright and director, Ngema was accused of treating the industrial action as a curiosity, evidently because he was more interested in appealing to foreign (possibly United States) audiences, whose remoteness from the context explained his liberties with complex issues. Ngema was criticised for behaving like the stereotype of an arrogant and misinformed visitor, who was merely interested in framing the quaint locals to fit a reductionist and self-serving theatrical model. It was also charged that he sacrificed the facts of the strike to create an impressive musical and choreographic spectacle, e.g., most of the songs had little to do with the subject. There is little explanation in the play of the connection between the actions of management and the police, and the attacks made by a few workers on the scab labour.

Some of Ngema's critics argued that he demonstrated a lack of comprehension of the complex forces that had shaped the violence, and of the connection between workers' daily experiences and apartheid. In the play there is the suggestion that the

each challenge with growing repression, from sheer brutal forms such as baton charging to teargas and shooting, to more sophisticated forms such as banning and detention, so has the potential for violence from the resistance groups grown. In essence, violence is not on the formal agenda of resistance groupings, but is often a momentary response or retaliation to more organised violence by the State' (Meer 1989:18).

workers became militant because they were drugged by a 'sangoma' (a traditional healer), an inaccurate and sensationalist misrepresentation of the conditions of labour that gave rise to the national strike. Further, Ngema's critique of the actions of a small group of SARHWU workers failed to contextualise the role of the labour movement in uniting and mobilising severely oppressed workers to challenge the combined might of the state and capitalist systems of oppression (*The Weekly Mail* 30/3/90; *New Nation* 20/4/90).

COSATU's Living Wage Group claimed that Ngema had misquoted and misrepresented SARHWU and COSATU in the play. The issue of responsible representation was elaborated by Carol Steinberg (1990:73):

Ngema made a play that purports to represent real historical events. Clearly he has a responsibility to depict those events as accurately as possible. That responsibility deepens when there is so much at stake in the way the events are interpreted. In this case four people's lives are in the balance: the SARHWU members sitting on death row.

The problem of representation grew more complicated as certain newspapers reported that the COSATU Living Wage Group had attempted to censor the play, which the union denied. Of related concern was the issue that, since the state had placed severe restrictions on the media (under the various states of emergency), South African plays had represented resistance struggles abroad. Therefore inaccurate and damaging dramatic representations were particularly harmful.

The play and its personalities offered unintentionally incisive insights into the shortcomings of populist literature, particularly in the playwright's manipulation of topical industrial-political themes to give his play token credibility at the expense of workers' movement. Bheki Mqadi, who played the most controversial character in *Township Fever* (which he has described as 'a tragic comedy'), unwittingly summed up the contradictions in an interview:

I see nothing wrong in the way the play is done. Sometimes people do not understand stage plays If you get on to the stage as simply as you are—in real life—you will not be interesting to the people watching the play (*Weekly Mail* 18/5/90:23).

It is the liberties that are taken with the construct of 'the people' that are enlightening, and in stark contrast to the labour movement's struggle to affirm the rights of one of the largest and most exploited sectors of society.

Long before the *Township Fever* debacle Mi Hlatshwayo, the national culture co-ordinator of COSATU, recognised that '[c]reativity without a base, without direction, without the support of a democratic movement, is easily manoeuvred into com-

mercial art' (*Weekly Mail* 17/7/87:28). In another remark, which could well apply to the challenges and contradictions facing individual dramatists like the talented Ngema, Hlatshwayo pointed out that:

It takes a lot for an artist to deprive himself of money and glory and stick to principles, to say I am not selling my principles, my nation, my class. This is people's culture (1987:28).

Focus on cultural production

The people are the real producer of culture, just as they are the real producer of material wealth (Machel in Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:25).

We have been culturally exploited time and time again: we have been singing, parading, boxing, acting and writing within a system we did not control. So far, black workers have been feeding all their creativity into a culture machine to make profits for others from penny-whistle bands to *mbaqanga* musicians, from soccer players to talented actors they are taken from us, from their communities, to be chewed up in the machine's teeth. Then ... they are spat out—an empty husk, hoboos for us to nurse them. This makes us say it is time to begin controlling our own creativity (The Durban Workers' Cultural Local, *Weekly Mail* 17/7/87:28).

The *Dunlop Play* was initiated in 1983 to pressurise the Dunlop tyre company to recognise the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU). The play examined the history of the Dunlop tyre company from the point of view of the workers. Some of the players had been working at Dunlop for 25 years (Von Kotze 1988:29).

Through culture, the working class affirms its identity and its interests, and rediscovers its history; it also unravels, in a dynamic and life-giving way, the hidden patterns and structures which underpin subjugation of the working class (Meintjies 1989:24).

Recognising the importance of encouraging workers to take control of their creative powers COSATU created structures to focus on cultural production. Through cultural activity workers developed the content and form of worker culture, as has been evident in their posters, graphics, banners, songs, poetry, plays and T-shirts (such as those produced by the unemployed workers' cooperative, *Zenzeleni*, in Durban). Articulating their identity as a class, workers clarified their relationships to other groups.

In 1983 the *Dunlop Play* created space for cultural activity within the labour movement and led to the formation of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local. Von Kotze

points out that the workers' cultural local was initiated in 1984 and established in 1985 (1988:54). Following recognition within COSATU that the struggle for cultural transformation was central to the liberation struggle, there was a surge of cultural activity in the labour movement. COSATU established cultural locals, which paralleled shop stewards' structures, in Durban, Howick and Pinetown. COSATU also established a culture office and created the post of national culture co-ordinator. Workers were able to acquire extensive training at the Culture and Working Life Project in Durban and the Community Arts Project in Cape Town. These initiatives demonstrate the seriousness with which the worker federation attended to the cultural development of workers even as it fought for its existence under the various states of emergency.

Many worker plays deal with the dismissals arising from strikes. During the state of emergency members of the Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU) at Clover Dairies went on strike against an alleged conspiracy between management and the Inkatha-aligned United Workers Union of South Africa, and 168 workers were dismissed in July 1986. Workers developed *The Clover Workers' Play* to publicise their version of the dispute. The process by which the play was created is explained by Mi Hlatshwayo:

This is the story of things that really happened to these workers. As such one person couldn't really sit down and write it. Shop stewards suggested an outline for the play and the worker-actors then workshopped each scene, in no particular order, for four weeks. We didn't put people into parts, but tried each scene with different actors, until someone got it right. The scenes were then woven together into a whole which, however, keeps getting unpicked. Workers from Clover branches and other factories would tell us to put other things in (Chapman 1988:28).

The workshop method is an established characteristic of South African resistance drama (Fleischman 1990). In a country based on hierarchical structures of exclusion the co-operative method of production represented an ideological move towards a society based on the social process of democratic communality, although there were many contradictions in practice (Gready 1994:179-183). Working class theatre is not merely an event but a process that involved a huge range of participants. Chapman (1988:28) points out that the worker play has a communicative function for fellow workers that is real rather than merely symbolic. But it also had a developmental function for the strikers and for other workers facing similar conditions. That *The Clover Workers' Play* was effective may be gauged from the strong community support it generated, which resulted in a boycott of Clover products. In October 1987, after a long court hearing Clover agreed to pay the dismissed workers R200 000 in severance pay and to drop charges against FAWU.

Worker literature has been an integral part of organised labour's discourse of resistance:

through organisations the labour movement is forging a language of resistance that powerfully contests the language of domination and articulates the deepest aspirations of the people (Meintjies 1989:25f).

This is not a straightforward process. Many workers were turned into artists by the pressure of events. Recognising that consciousness is not fixed (and that the consciousness of the most oppressed class is vulnerable to manipulation by various interest groups), the trade unions invested in cultural production as a means of consolidating worker consciousness. Hlatshwayo remarks on worker enthusiasm for dramatic performances:

No union gathering passes without poetry recitals, chanting and singing. There is no way we can begin to articulate the richness of worker poetry which sometimes erupts spontaneously during union gatherings (Oliphant 1991:7).

Meintjies and Hlatshwayo (1989:5) argue that given the conditions of its production, worker culture represents a greater investment of commitment than the cultural production of any other class:

Workers face the most crippling effects of economic exploitation: long work hours, long travel distances, low wages, poverty, and a serious lack of cultural resources in the bleak townships, settlements, compounds and hostels. These conditions make every cultural work an act of sacrifice as much as an act of creation and imagination.

This is supported by a statement that the Durban FOSATU Local Cultural Group made about their public presentation of plays, music, dance and poetry:

we are involved in this, however hard it is for us after work, because we believe that our struggle is not only there to destroy the oppressive powers that control us. It is there to also build a new world. To do this, we must begin now (Meintjies & Hlatshwayo 1985:72).

Nise Malange (1989:78), who was a member of the Durban FOSATU Local Cultural Group, has addressed the nature of women's participation in performance culture:

Participation in performances—both acting and the performance of poetry—is a powerful experience and [t]he absence of women in this field is therefore particularly distressing, because in performance culture they have a platform for expressing their

anger, their perspective and an opportunity to conscientize their audience. Furthermore, it is important for women to realize their potential and extend their self-confidence as participants in the struggle for cultural transformations.

Malange (1989:79) further pointed out that the campaigns on women's issues that succeeded 'were pushed by women themselves'. This is evident in the position of Roseline Naapo, a South African Domestic Workers' Union organiser and writer who believed that encouraging domestic workers to tell their stories was an integral part of the work of a labour organiser:

I encourage other domestic workers to write short stories to be a writer does not mean you have to go to school. You can say whatever you want to say without knowing how to write. The next person can write it for you. I regard it as my duty to assist other domestic workers [a]s an organiser for the South African Domestic Workers' Union (Oliphant 1991:22).

Naapo's statement supports Malange's (1989:78f) argument that 'each person has a story to tell you do not need to be well-educated or specially gifted to tell a story or to write'.

Most worker-artists have been obliged to use the materials near to hand. Fugitive forms of expression have come into existence amidst indifference and hostility from the dominant, and without cultural precedent or authority, as Brett (1986), Barber (1987) and Mattelart and Siegelau (1983) have pointed out. By adapting traditional forms to suit the demands of the period, the industrial environment and the new political challenges, worker poets have made significant contributions to the development of South African literature through oral poetry:

oral poetry, thought by many to be a dead tradition or the preserve of chiefly praises, resurfaced as a voice of ordinary black workers and their struggles (Sitas in Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:3f).

When he was a shop steward Alfred Temba Qabula composed *izibongo* for a Metal and Allied Workers' Union annual general meeting in 1984. Qabula drew upon the praise form, a distinctive and old art form with socio-political resonances, to raise workers' consciousness of their union and its role in their lives. His performance acted as a catalyst:

he released an untapped source of popular energy which, without warning, exploded everywhere in the context of labour struggles and their mass-gatherings.

Ordinary black workers with performing and rhetorical power began orating

their poetry in Zulu, using all the elements they could gather from their cultural formations to express a new sense of self-identity. Hundreds of workers have been performing their poetry since 1984—some of it vibrant, some of it an index of assertiveness and defiance, some of it written first and then recited, some of it totally spontaneous (Sitas 1989a:47).

Qabula related that after he started performing, ‘all the poets came out’ for, as Sitas (1989a:56) explains,

[f]ar from being the product of colonial domination, or a sign of backwardness the poetry of Vilane, Zondi, Qabula and Hlatshwayo, and many more is the consummate result of a struggle by people who have a large immediate audience, a clear organizational project, to create a popular poetry that is OF the people, as the people are changing themselves and the world around them.

Through poems that are innovative while expressing continuity, the worker poets contested the monopoly of the Inkatha Freedom Party over Zulu cultural traditions, just as they challenged the IFP’s claim to inheriting the mantle of Zulu resistance to colonialism. In their use of the praise form the poets Qabula, Vilane, Zondi, Hlatshwayo and Ntanzu showed the

symbols of the Zulu past being lured away from an aggressive ethnic nationalism and put to the service of a wider, more egalitarian cause [which] challenges the notion that oral forms belong to the margins of contemporary life (Gunner 1986:37).

Sitas (1986:52) confirms this view of the progressive politics of the worker *izimbongi* in his reference to the work of Hlatshwayo as a chronicler, who

consciously transform[s] tradition propelled by a future he longs for as opposed to the *izimbongi* of KwaZulu who are attempting to *preserve* social hierarchy by linking it to the past.

Gunner (1986:37) went on to argue that the *izimbongi* ‘hold the centre stage in the attempt to define contemporary worker consciousness in South Africa’, which is supported by Sitas’ (1986:56) assessment of the COSATU oral poets: ‘They do not have to imagine themselves to be people’s bards, they are that’.

Dikobe wa Mogale’s written poem ‘bantwini ngcipe’s testament’ (1984:46-49) represents the confidence and authority of the oral poets:

i come from a lineage of warriors
and we know martyrs are not born
but tempered like steel in the furnace of struggle.

While the poem as a whole focuses on the national liberation struggle, there is reference in these lines to conservative and reactionary forces among the oppressed, who tried to draw their legitimacy from past heroes. Like Qabula and Hlatshwayo, Wa Mogale (who was a COSATU organiser in Pietermaritzburg) treats Bhambata and Shaka as an integral part of the history of the liberation of the working class (as the industrial image of the furnace suggests). For Wa Mogale (as for Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Madlizinyoka Ntanzi) the subject in the line 'i come from a lineage of warriors' refers as much to the political activist as to the poet.

Many poems began to appear in worker newspapers, pamphlets and other publications. To (partially) address the problems of access and linguistic diversity, poets like Qabula, Malange and Hlatshwayo published Zulu and English versions of their texts (e.g. *Black Mamba Rising* (1986), *izinsingizi* (1989), *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief* (1989) and *Ear to the Ground* (1991)). Because a great deal of worker literature is dual medium worker poets 'do not have to worry about "proper" English, they compose in the languages they know leaving the translation of their work mostly to others' (Sitas 1986:56). However, while the print medium increases access among (literate) workers, the printed poem that is extracted from the context of performance tends to lose much of its oral power, its songs, chants, ululations, improvisations and audience participation (Sitas in Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange 1986:2). Other media, such as video and audio tapes are more effective than print.

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