



Black women workers in the struggle...

The women of South Africa have in the past and continue to this day to take a leading role in the struggle against apartheid employers and the state. As SACTU has said:

"It must be the task of the entire trade union movement to...organize all women in industry, so they can take their rightful place in the trade union movement of South Africa and make an end of the system which uses women as the source of cheap labour...The key is organization."

Black women workers experience triple oppression -- as blacks, as women and as workers. Although all black workers in South Africa are heavily exploited in the interests of profit, black women workers carry an additional burden under apartheid. Not only do they face greater discrimination in employment and wages, but they are also subjected to patriarchal laws which ensure that women remain as perpetual minors, legally under the guardianship of men.

The migrant labour system is a particularly abhorrent form of control over black women. Under this system, black South African women are stripped of basic rights -- the right to choose where to live and work, the right to live with their partners and husbands, the right to bring up and care for their own children.

Termed "superfluous appendages" by the apartheid regime, the majority of African women are forced to eke out a miserable existence in the barren reserves -- apartheid's dumping grounds for the aged, the sick, the women and children. These women are forced to depend on the wages of their husbands and sons who are migrant workers in the "white" cities.

Apartheid employers, in turn, justify the poverty wages paid to African workers by suggesting that these workers are partially supported by their wives carrying out subsistence farming in the "homelands".

Since the 1940s, more and more black women have themselves become wage labourers in "white" South Africa. The majority were channeled into domestic service and agriculture and remain among the lowest paid and most exploited workers in all of South Africa.

Wages in these sectors are 200% or more below the poverty line. Many work 10-12 hours a day, seven days a week. Rooms provided by bosses seldom contain toilet facilities or running water. Little, if any, daylight and air reach into these dwellings...these are the conditions of modern-day slavery for thousands of women migrant workers.

Women in secondary manufacturing industries are concentrated in low-wage jobs, mainly in clothing, textile and food processing -- accounting for 73% of all African female production workers. The average wage for women in these sectors ranges from \$180 - 190 per month.

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WOMEN ORGANIZING

"It is the women of South Africa who have demonstrated to all progressive forces the true meaning of militancy and organization and we in the trade union movement are determined to follow your courageous example."

SACTU, 1956

For over three decades, women have played a leadership role in workers' resistance to apartheid. Viola Hashe (SACTU Vice-President), Phyllis Altman (Assistant General Secretary of SACTU), Mate Mfusi (Hospital Workers Union), Elizabeth Mafekeng, Liz Abrahams, Frances Baard, Mary Moodley and Ray Alexander (African Food and Canning Workers Union): these SACTU women established a legacy of struggle that continues to the present day.

These women leaders not only organized and fought for workers at the workplace; they participated as well in community and national struggles against pass books for women, against bus fare increases, against municipal beer halls, against apartheid resettlement schemes throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The strength of their collective actions is carried forward in the current struggles of the 1980s:

- *** The Food and Canning Workers Union and African FCWU, long-standing sister unions that typify political and non-racial trade unionism, remain in the forefront of struggles for women workers;
- *** The National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) is courageously challenging a large number of multinationals, including Bata Shoes of Canada;
- *** The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWU), expanded from 261 members in 1975 to an estimated 20,000 today, has won crucial struggles for recognition agreements in the retail trade;
- *** The newly formed Domestic Workers Union is demanding an 8-hour day, a living wage, pregnancy and illness leave, and an end to child labour; and
- *** The Farm Workers Union has emerged to challenge decades of gross exploitation by white capitalist landowners.

The apartheid state, threatened by the extent of this organization of workers, has directed its wrath against women trade union leaders.

Sisters Emma Mashinini (General Secretary, CCAWU) and Rita Ndzanga (Organizing Secretary, General and Allied Workers Union) were among the 306 trade unionists detained in November, 1981. Ndzanga's husband, Lawrence, a member of the SACTU National Executive, was murdered in prison in 1976.

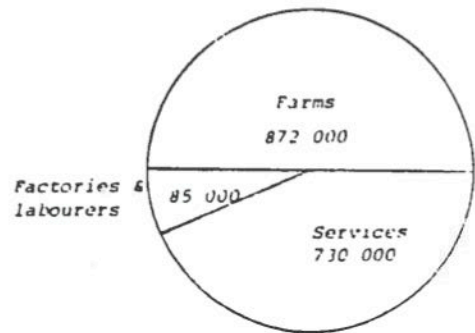
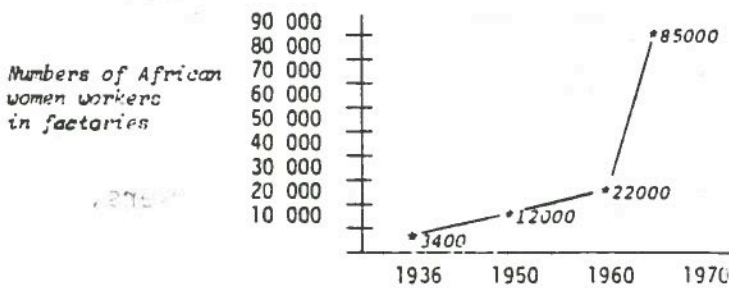
Repression has also been directed against those women forced into exile. The murder of SAAWU activist and SACTU leader, Sister Jabu Nzima, in Swaziland in June, 1982, indicates once again the threat posed by SACTU to the apartheid authorities.

The enemy will kill one trade unionist and hundreds more will join the ranks of SACTU!

Naked repression has never and will never deter black women workers in South Africa. They realize that freedom from exploitation for the women of South Africa requires the destruction of apartheid capitalism. As blacks, as women and as workers, they are involved in the struggle for equal rights for all in a non-racial, non-sexist society where wealth is redistributed to benefit all South Africans.



Pattern of Employment of African Women Workers



WAGES-

CLOTHING INDUSTRY

| Race and sex | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| White male | 212 | 200 | 124 |
| White female | 3 745 | 1 104 | 362 |
| Coloured male | 395 | 493 | 334 |
| Coloured female | 6 185 | 6 134 | 2 437 |
| Black male | 3 636 | 3 116 | 2 054 |
| Black female | 4 207 | 13 859 | 15 368 |
| Totals | 18 380 | 24 906 | 20 679 |

The Fight For Equal Pay

The large reserve army of labour in South Africa has made women's labour easily replaceable. African women are engaged in many struggles to obtain even the most basic rights as workers.

Black women are concentrated in domestic and agricultural work and in industries where wages are particularly low. The majority are in jobs classed 'unskilled' and so are at the bottom of the wage scale within those industries. In many cases the actual work may be the same as that done by men, but under different job titles.

The law has stopped Industrial Councils - quasi-legal employer bodies - from setting different minimum rates of pay for men and women. However, employers are free to pay women lower wages than men, so long as they are not paying below the minimum.

CASE STUDY:

Letter from a shop steward at SA Fabrics, Durban, taken from FOSATU publication, Women Workers.

SA Fabrics is a textile factory at Rossburgh in Durban. It is under the umbrella of Courtaulds, a British group of companies. This factory was first organised by NUTW in 1974, but the organisation collapsed in 1976, due to the Government's detention of Union leadership. It was reorganised in 1979.

The factory at that time had a total workforce of 600 male workers, of which about 60 per cent were union members. Then in January 1980 the company started hiring and training female workers. These women were paid even less than half of what was paid to the male employees.

In mid-1980 there were already about 35 females in the plant, and the number was growing fast. The intention of the management was not only to fill the empty vacancies, but also to employ more workers at the cheapest possible prices. During October right up to December of that year, the Company and the Union were negotiating on two major issues, the first being the Procedural Agreement. What was important in that agreement was a clause which stated that the Union and the Company would try and solve disputes jointly, failing which the matter would then be referred to arbitration. This agreement was finalised and signed in 1981.

The second issue was the question of the January wage increase. Under this issue the workers were putting forward two demands:

- 1) a 15 per cent increase of wages to all the workers, and
- 2) that the company should 'close' the discriminatory gap between the male and female wages.

This issue came to a deadlock. The result was a 3 day strike in February 1981. After the strike, the two parties accepted arbitration as the only means of resolving the matter.

So while the company was hiring the best lawyers in the country, the Union decided to bring Bro. Charles Ford, who is the General Secretary for I.T.G.L.W.F. (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation) to be present at the hearing. He gave evidence of what is happening in Courtaulds as far as women labour is concerned.

What happened after the arbitration is that the Judge's finding became very sweet to the Union, and very sour to the Company. The workers won 12 and a half per cent increase, with 3 months' back pay, and the Company was ordered to close the wage gap between the male and female workers.

Thereafter the Company became so hostile to the workers that they started retrenchments. In those retrenchments most of the workers were women.

The Company has now only two female workers left from those who were employed during the big rush. One of those two workers has been saved because she is making tea for the big bosses. The other one is just there by sheer good luck.

(Signed)
SHOP STEWARD, SA FABRICS

Maternity Rights

"They expect you to say, 'please sir, can I have a baby this year?'"

-chemical worker

At this stage, winning the simple right to retain employment after bearing a child is in itself a major victory for black women in South Africa. The form below is a standard form used by one South African company for all of its female employees:

(Pty) Limited

I, the undersigned hereby declare that I am currently not pregnant.

I furthermore agree that should I fall pregnant in the next twelve months, my services could be terminated immediately.

Signed:.....

Date:

Witness:

"I, the undersigned hereby declare that I am currently not pregnant.

I furthermore agree that should I fall pregnant in the next twelve months, my services could be terminated immediately."

MATERNITY BENEFITS

At present the majority of working women are not eligible for Unemployment Insurance Fund benefits. Amongst those excluded are agricultural workers, seasonal workers, pieceworkers, and domestic servants. It is only fully available for women who have been employed for a fairly long period and then only at 45% of weekly earnings.

Women can only claim 1 week's benefit for every 6 weeks employment, thus they are only eligible for the full 26 weeks benefit (18 weeks before birth, 8 weeks after) if they have paid 3 years worth of UIF. This means that to claim the full amount a woman could only have a baby approximately every four years.

MATERNITY AGREEMENTS

- * Many women in South Africa are still not protected from the loss of their jobs when they become pregnant
- * Some factories say women will be re-employed after 3 months maternity leave if there is a job.
- * A few factories say women will definitely get their jobs back if they return within 3 months.

Unions are challenging the employers.

Union Victories: The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) recently won an agreement with OK Bazaars (a department store chain) which allows for 12 months off without pay.

The Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU) won an agreement with Kelloggs which pays women workers for 3 months but it does not guarantee them their jobs.

Both are steps forward in the struggle for full maternity benefits for women workers in South Africa.

Contraception

South African women workers, like women elsewhere, are fighting for the right to choose if and when they want to bear children. The fight for safe contraception is universal.

One of the current struggles in South Africa is against employers' attempts to force contraception on women as a condition of employment. Management run clinics are set up to administer such unsafe contraceptive methods as the Depo-Provera injection. Dangerous side-effects resulting from the use of this drug have been well documented - delayed return to fertility, vaginal discharge, disruption of the menstrual cycle and even permanent sterility.

The American manufacturer of Depo-Provera - Upjohn - claims that poor countries ask for the drug. But Upjohn has admitted paying \$2,710,000. in bribes to employers and foreign governments to get orders for their drug!

The use of this drug is linked to the racist governments propaganda deploring the growth in the size of the black population. The struggle against forced contraception is being increasingly taken up by the unions in South Africa.

Women as Trade Union Activists

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At a recent education workshop on women workers organized by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), the following comments graphically demonstrate the restraints that women workers and trade union activists operate under. These constraints directly relate to their position in the household, and in particular, the expectations placed on them by men.

Tembi Nabe presented a graphic description of the household life of the average woman worker. Endless rounds of providing tea and food for her husband; making the bed; cleaning the house; carting the baby around; making the fire; ironing; etc...In contrast to her husband who feels free to read the newspaper and watch t.v. ('always with his 'little darling' bottle of whisky beside him') on returning home from work. She very bravely also dealt with the bedtime demands made of women 'When he gets to bed he then starts to demand another overtime from you' (the third overtime), she said. 'if you refuse that's when the divorce starts and then his 'little darling' makes him think to batter you'.

Lydia Kompe, a union activist, called for the need to develop more women union leaders and explained the difficulties facing union activists:

'They start to feel the pressures at home. Not only is it dangerous for a woman to attend meetings late at night, but she also knows that when she gets home she will find everything as she left it. Her husband will be sitting idle. And he might not believe she's been in a meeting he will accuse her of going around. This makes her retreat. She doesn't want to lose her family for the union, even if she's committed to it. So the organisation becomes weakened. The people who weaken it are those who say they are committed but don't see the need to assist in the liberation of women.' Again she appealed for serious consideration to be given to the problem.

Some union executives have to write letters to their members husbands. Such letters ask for permission for members to attend union meetings!

There are many other issues around which South African women are organizing: 8
sexual harassment, health problems affecting women workers, childcare and the
threat of unemployment.

In South Africa today, the independent unions are organizing around the specific
issues like those outlined above. They are also fighting on the broader issues
facing both women and men workers alike, issues such as unity.

It is important to link the struggle of women workers to the general struggle
of the trade union movement in South Africa. It is also important to view this
struggle as operating at two levels--being waged by the independent unions above
ground and cushioned by the underground work of SACTU--a network of organizers
and activists throughout the country.

SACTU's Policies

SACTU's time tested policies are being increasingly taken up by the above-ground
unions. These policies include:

1. Unity: The creation of a united union movement in South Africa. From its
underground network, SACTU is deeply involved on a daily basis in the process
of assisting the independent unions in overcoming obstacles to unity. As an
example, the SACTU Declaration of Principles" from its 1955 Constitution was
adopted by the unions participating in the Unity Talks as the guideline for
the proposed unity at the August 1983 Unity Summit. More recently, all major
unions representing the highly exploited domestic workers in South Africa came
together in a National Rally November 10-11--only one week ago. The major aim
here is to further the process of forming one union encompassing the existing
four organizations according to SACTU's policy of "One Industry, One Union."
2. Non-Racial Trade Unionism. Although recognizing that African workers are the most
exploited workers in South Africa, SACTU has since 1955 fought for the principle
of non-racial trade unions.

Recently, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa,
formerly representing only African workers, changed its constitution to endorse
non-racialism in theory and practice. Membership in Commercial and Catering
is now open to Africans, Indians and so-called Colored workers. At the present,
the union represents mostly women working in the retail sector.

3. Organizing the Unorganized . This continues to be one of SACTU's major priorities for both women and men workers. Women in the domestic service sector and manufacturing and commercial sectors will all be important priorities in this process.
4. Linking the Economic and Political Struggle. As history has shown, it is impossible to separate the struggle for economic gains from the general struggle for political emancipation. For this reason, SACTU allied itself to the African National Congress in 1955, an alliance which continues to this day. As developments of recent months have shown, the struggle for trade union rights cannot be divorced from community struggle against rent increases, bus fare increases, an inferior education system, the pass laws and influx controls, migrant labour--all of which women have been in the forefront of fighting throughout this century.

Another extremely important area of SACTU's underground work is that of education. The Education Department of SACTU provides basic trade union training for both organized and unorganized workers--but "alternative programs to those offered by the AFL-CIO and ICFTU which focus only on economic concerns."

On the importance of educating women workers, SACTU has said: "In our education work, SACTU is putting more and more emphasis on women workers and womens' issues. Women's participation is lower than we would like. But over and above that we feel that the issues facing women workers must be taken up by all workers."

Women Leaders of SACTU

Many of the SACTU leaders of the 1950s and 1960s continue to be leaders of their unions inside South Africa today: e.g., Rita Ndzanga, Liz Abrahams, etc.

Other new SACTU women working in the underground have been subjected to severe repression, e.g., Jabu Nzima, who was killed by a car bomb in Swaziland in 1981.

Solidarity with Women Workers Through SACTU

Since 1980, Canadian unions have been contributing to the SACTU Strike Fund. This Fund has been set up to assist striking workers in South Africa but also to assist in the general underground organizing work.

One important expression of solidarity from women in Canadian unions would be to

contribute financial assistance specifically for a woman organizer in SACTU.

Another concrete activity would be to record a 10-20 minute radio program on the struggle of women workers in Canada. This would be sent to SACTU for its weekly radio program beamed into South Africa from the frontline states.

Women Unite!

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL!