LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

BEYOND DECENT WORK

Fighting for Unions and Equality in Africa

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→ The International Labour Organisation's Decent Work agenda has positive aspects, but is not feasible or desirable in the neo-liberal epoch.

→ African labour should rather build class-based counter-power and counter-hegemony, aiming at a new system: common ownership, self-management and bottom-up planning.

→ This means rejecting corporatism and union involvement in electoral politics; instead opting for autonomy, globalisation-from-below, alliances with peasants, the unemployed and the poor, as well as union-backed healthcare, media and production.

→ Union reform, driven by rank-and-file movements, must learn from Africa's dramatic history of union successes and failings.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the rich history of Africa's unions and argues that instead of adopting the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Decent Work agenda, unions should learn from past successes and failings and promote change from below. My overall argument is that while the Decent Work agenda has some positive elements that unions could perhaps appropriate, it also has serious problems. Its faith in state-based social protection and advocacy of social corporatism (or 'tripartism') assumes that states can serve as guardians of the popular classes – the working class, peasantry and poor. This is false, and fails to consider how state welfare systems, electoral politics and all forms of corporatism profoundly damage working-class movements. The core propositions of the Decent Work agenda also fail to seriously appreciate how neo-liberal capitalist globalisation and the changing balance of forces have eroded the basis for sustained reforms.

Real changes must be driven by a class-based movement of self-activity that mobilises from below to replace the current system with common ownership, popular self-management and bottom-up planning. This requires direct action, internal reform of the unions and autonomy from states, electoral politics and tripartism – in alliance with unions and other sectors of the popular class. It must be a prefigurative politics that stresses debate, pluralism and critical thought, and opposes divisions and oppression. A bottom-up, democratic, internationalist working class practice is needed. Other than faith-based organisations, unions are the largest, most stable and most influential popular organisations in the world; their very existence reflects the reality of class division and the failings of the existing system.

Africa's unions have a far richer, more radical and creative history than is often acknowledged, and have a toolbox of valuable experiences and lessons for this project. Africa's unions build on the class struggles of commoners, serfs and slaves that preceded modern European colonialism. They have impressively defeated casual labour, defied state controls, helped overthrow oppressive colonial and post-colonial regimes, united workers despite great barriers, elaborated radical alternatives and even taken direct control of production. They are key to building the counter-power and counter-hegemony needed today.

To discuss whether Decent Work is achievable in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to first look at the ILO and understand the origins and limitations of both the ILO and its Decent Work agenda. Secondly, it is important to consider the factors that enable large-scale reforms under capitalism, and the extent to which these exist in Sub-Saharan Africa in this era of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation. This will allow, thirdly, a realistic assessment of the Decent Work agenda's feasibility for Africa's unions – and show why something else should be pursued.

This leads us to consider how Africa's unions might pursue substantive equality and justice with an alternative project. Their roots, experiences, achievements and failings need to be taken into consideration, and African working-class intellectual and organisational traditions engaged. A pan-African survey of unions is needed to locate these developments in larger global processes like eras of capitalism, strike waves and radical politics.

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THE ILO, THE DECENT WORK AGENDA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S UNIONISM

2.1. IS THE DECENT WORK AGENDA A SOLUTION?

The ILO has championed Decent Work as the key to a fairer form of capitalist globalisation.[1] For the ILO, Decent Work represents secure and productive employment based on adequate remuneration and core workers' rights, including health and safety, along with freedom from discrimination, forced and child labour. It embraces social security and income protection schemes (usually envisaged as state-run), as well as social dialogue, especially social corporatism (or tripartism), which entails institutionalised, centralised co-operation between union leaders, the state and business associations. This is seen as a means of achieving social cohesion and class compromises that benefit workers, capitalists and states.[2]

The Decent Work agenda has been attractive to many in Africa, where huge numbers of people work under wretched conditions and for whom job security, useful work and union rights would be major advances. In recent decades, the world economy has grown slowly and erratically, yet world output doubled from 1980 to 2002 alone.[3] Economies in Sub-Saharan Africa have done relatively well in recent years, with economic growth averaging 5.7 per cent between 2001 and 2012.[4] After a long period of decline, foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into Sub-Saharan Africa grew six-fold between 2004 and 2014.[5]

Given such growth, the endemic suffering across the region cannot be explained as due to a lack of economic development. There is no direct link between rates of economic growth or the size of an economy and the living conditions of the popular classes. Despite the boom, two thirds of the world's most impoverished people live in Africa.[6] Some of Africa's fastest growing economies, like Ethiopia, have some of the worst labour conditions and the highest levels of poverty.[7] Nigeria, which in dollar terms is the largest African economy, has overtaken India as the country with the highest proportion of extremely poor people.[8] South Africa, an upper-middle-income country with a huge financial and industrial sector, its own large multinational corporations (MNCs), and less than ten per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in agriculture, is the most unequal country in the world – besides Brazil – and is ravaged by 35 per cent unemployment.

Deep-seated inequalities in power and wealth have ensured that the primary beneficiaries of growth have been local ruling classes – politicians, senior state officials and members of the military, capitalists, including those in state corporations, and landlords – along with their partners in ruling classes abroad. Humanity's 'pie' is getting bigger all the time, but the working class, peasantry and poor keep getting smaller 'slices' – in many cases, shrinking ones – although they provide the 'ingredients' and do the 'baking'.

2.2 THE ILO'S DECENT WORK AGENDA WILL FAIL – IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIONS

Can the Decent Work agenda help? Considering the ILO's aims, history, powers and structure… no.

Firstly, the ILO as an organisation is unable to enforce its own Decent Work agenda. Secondly, while the agenda has many valuable elements and commendable goals, it also

1   Gerry Rodgers, Lee Swepston, Eddy Lee and Jasmien van Daele, 2009, *The International Labour Organization and the Quest for Social Justice, 1919-2009*, Geneva: ILO, pp. 222-235.

2   ILO, 1999, 'Decent Work', Report of the Director-General of the ILO to the 87th session of International Labour Conference, Geneva, online at https://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/rep-i.htm (accessed 12 Aug. 2018). Also see Dharam Ghai, 2003, Decent work: Concept and indicators, *International Labour Review (ILO)*, 142 (2), pp. 113-145.

3   Maria Barriel and Mark Dean, 2004, Why has World Trade Grown Faster than World Output?, *Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin*, 44, p. 310.

4   ILO, 2014, *Global Employment Trends 2014: The risk of a jobless recovery*, Geneva: ILO, p. 68.

5   World Bank, 2014, Foreign Direct Investment Flows into Sub-Saharan Africa, *Science, Technology, and Skills for Africa's Development*, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, pp. 1-2.

6   Bukola Adebayo, 2018, Nigeria Overtakes India in Extreme Poverty Ranking, *CNN*, 26 June, online at https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/26/africa/nigeria-overtakes-india-extreme-poverty-intl/index.html (accessed 6 Aug. 2018).

7   Graeme J. Buckley, 2004, *Decent Work in a Least Developed Country: A Critical Assessment of the Ethiopia PRSP*, International Labour Office (ILO) Working Paper No. 42, pp. 1-5.

8   Adebayo (2018).

includes means that deeply undermine workers' movements: reliance on the state, emphasis on state welfare and a commitment to tripartism. These approaches have deep roots in the ILO's history as an organisation that was formed in 1919 to forestall more radical change. Thirdly, the overall aims of the Decent Work agenda – sustainable decent jobs, wages and welfare, entrenched and meaningful roles for unions, and social dialogue that results in real gains – are unrealistic in the era of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation. This is a period of relatively low and unstable economic growth, sustained class war from above, and a global race to the bottom. The conditions that enabled substantial economic and social reforms like those in the 'golden age' of post-war capitalism no longer exist.

These points have significant implications for working-class movements in Africa. Only the mobilised power of the masses fighting for something both better and convincing can put an end to inequity, inequality and injustice. In the next sections, I explain these claims.

2.2.1 The Problem of the ILO and Decent Work

The ILO was created in 1919 to promote cross-class consensus, dialogue and reform in response to the wave of mutinies, strikes and revolutions sweeping the globe. Its basic framework is consensus seeking, which means accommodating ruling class interests and accepting the existing social order. The bakery should stay in the hands of its current owners, who, it is hoped, will peacefully allow the working class to have more and better pie. The size of slices and the recipes will only change when and if the current owners agree. This approach ignores the conflict between classes and the demonstrable inability of capitalism and the state to eradicate poverty, create pleasant work and unify humanity in any sustained way.

The ILO prospered most when an enormous boom in the global economy – the capitalist post-war 'golden age' that ended in 1973 – made significant reforms economically possible at a time that they were socially and politically *essential* in the face of new and massive popular insurgencies. During the neo-liberal era that followed, the value of unions and the need for major reforms, including of the ILO, were heavily attacked. The ILO nearly collapsed. After many years of crisis, in 1999 the ILO adopted the Decent Work agenda as its core project – not only to make capitalist globalisation fairer, but also to reverse its own declining fortunes.[9]

The Decent Work agenda has major problems. The first is that the ILO is a fundamentally weak organisation that cannot enforce its agenda. To keep states on board, the ILO has long permitted its conventions to be flexibly applied and widely flouted. For example, it leaves decisions on

minimum wages to states 'in consultation' with 'social partners'.[10]

2.2.2 The Problem of the State and Decent Work

This means that the Decent Work agenda is framed to appease ruling classes and says nothing about the right of workers to directly and democratically control the workplace. For example, the ILO promotes the Decent Work agenda but simultaneously accepts the neo-liberal principle of flexible labour, arguing that 'policies must be tailored to the specific needs of a country' and 'national development frameworks'.[11] These 'needs' and 'frameworks' are devised by ruling classes.

While the ILO rejects crude neo-liberalism, which would destroy it, its models of workplace democratisation are workplace co-determination and tripartism,[12] both of which assume the necessity of partnering with capitalists and states, rather than giving the working classes control.

ILO proposals assume that states can, and should, be used by the popular classes, and that states act as levelling agents with a pro-worker bias. Its vision of social security has consistently fostered state welfare that posits the state as a key agent for progressive change, and does not promote alternatives like worker-based mutual aid organising.

The problem is that states, like private corporations, are essentially undemocratic, centralised organisations controlled by the ruling classes that dominate and oppress the popular classes. As daily life across Sub-Saharan Africa shows, the state itself is a violent, oppressive force and site of accumulation that is not fundamentally different to a private capitalist corporation. States and corporations are the two main pillars of ruling-class power, the structural basis for overlapping political and economic elites.

This helps explain why state-run welfare systems are usually inefficient, normally inegalitarian and always top-down. They undermine popular systems of mutual aid by promoting division, passivity and patronage politics. They are structured to provide additional benefits for the ruling classes in the form of vast funds that can be used for both direct corruption and investment schemes.

10 ILO, 2015, *Report VI: Labour Protection in a Transforming World of Work –Recurrent Discussion on the Strategic Objective of Social Protection (Labour Protection)*, International Labour Conference, 104th Session, Geneva, ILO, p. 51.

11 ILO, 2006, Bringing Decent Work into Focus, *World of Work: Magazine of the ILO*, 57, p. 5.

12 Madeleine Herren, 2013, Global Corporatism after the First World War: The Indian Case, in Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux (eds.), *Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour Organization and Beyond*, pp. 137-152; Pauli Kettunen, 2013, The ILO as a Forum for Developing and Demonstrating a Nordic Model, in Kott and Droux, eds., pp. 210-230.

9 Rodgers, et al., (2009), pp. 222-235.

2.2.3 The Problem of Corporatism and Decent Work

This analysis helps explain why involvement in the state through links to political parties, parliamentary politics, and both authoritarian state corporatism and social corporatism (tripartism) has cost Africa's unions a great deal yet delivered no gains (see below). This is why involvement in tripartism, as advocated by the Decent Work agenda and the ILO, also needs to be viewed very critically.

State corporatism was designed by post-colonial governments to control workers and unions starting in the 1950s; Africa's unions championed tripartism from the late 1980s. They saw it as a means of giving organised workers a direct say in the law, as well as in economic and social policy, and to thus deepen democracy.[13] Workers won tripartism in the 1990s in a number of countries (notably Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa). It appeared more sporadically elsewhere (such as in Zambia), and was stillborn in some cases (like Zimbabwe), where incumbent regimes found it easier to just use guns.

Tripartism, however, has failed to deliver.[14] Sophisticated union proposals for alternative, non-neo-liberal growth paths were sidelined[15] and most union demands and complaints fell on deaf ears, while union resources and decisions were taken from ordinary workers and given to technocrats and full-time officials as required by tripartism. Thus the tripartite system in Africa helped contain unions while undermining them by fostering union bureaucracies and eroding workers' control. This is perfectly consistent with its record elsewhere. This does not mean that there have never been any gains through tripartism – simply that the costs vastly outweigh the benefits.

Tripartism threatens strong unions by weakening the democratic culture and ethos of self-activity and direct action that are the basis of union power, and by sidetracking unions into trying to fix the problems inherent to the capitalist system. If the Decent Work agenda's proposals for expanding state welfare and tripartism were adopted, they would damage working-class movements.

2.2.4. The Problem of Neo-liberalism and Decent Work

In any case, it is exceedingly unlikely that states will adopt the Decent Work agenda. This is because the project is unrealistic: It does not grasp how the current era is inimical to the reforms the ILO is proposing.

A very specific conjuncture of forces enabled substantial economic and social reforms during the capitalist 'golden age' of the 1940s to the 1970s – that ended more than three decades ago.

During that period, there were great advances in education, health, employment and wages worldwide. The most dramatic changes took place in the west, in the Keynesian welfare state (KWS): almost full employment, major investments in education, housing and sanitation, generous unemployment benefits, low-cost or free healthcare and higher education etc.[16] By the late 1980s, income transfers through methods like social welfare came close to 30 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) of western countries.[17]

These global advances rested on unprecedented worldwide economic growth, which was fastest in the poorer countries, and on massive improvements in productivity. In the west, booming industry made it possible to fund significant reforms without significantly undermining capitalist profits: Although the rate of profit accruing to capital declined, the volume increased dramatically – without shifting control over the means of administration, coercion or production to the popular classes.

The structure of capitalism also facilitated national-level class compromises that shaped the distribution of welfare and enabled an expansion of social rights. When the KWS began in the west, many private corporations were operating primarily within their home countries, where the working class was the main source of labour and a significant part of the domestic market upon which these firms relied. These firms directly benefited from industrial peace, rising labour productivity and expanding consumption and demand-led growth at home – fostered by Keynesian policies. The massive upheavals of the 1920s and 1930s – depression, war and revolution – had caused many to lose faith in free markets. Such conditions predisposed many firms to approaches like tripartism and peak-level collective bargaining to hammer out trade-offs between the classes.

In the post-war KWS, policies assumed a redistributive form, rather than the military Keynesianism of 1930s Nazi Germany, for example. This can only be explained by the fact that the KWS was profoundly shaped by sustained popular rebellion.

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13 FFor example, in the course of a two-day general strike in 1991 against rising sales tax: *South African Labour Bulletin,* 1991, National General Strike: 'It's more than VAT, it's the entire economy' – Interview with Jay Naidoo, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 16 (2), p. 15.

14 For a partial overview, see Pauline Dibben, Gilton Klerck and Geoff Wood, 2015, The ending of southern Africa's tripartite dream: the cases of South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique, *Business History*, 57 (3), pp. 461-483.

15 Notable examples include NEDLAC Labour Caucus, 1996, *Social Equity and Job Creation: The Key to a Stable Future – Proposal by the South African Labour Movement*, Johannesburg; Godfrey Kanyenze, 1996, *Beyond ESAP: Framework for a Long-Term Development Strategy in Zimbabwe beyond the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP)*, Harare: Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions.

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16 There was a substantial "de-commodification" of labour in the words of Gøsta Esping-Andersen, 1990, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton University Press, pp. 3, 21-23.

17 Eric Hobsbawm, 1994, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, 1914-1991, Abacus, London, p. 572.

By the 1920s, the working class and peasantry had demonstrated their great strength through direct actions like strikes and mass organisation, especially by unions – and posed a very real challenge to the status quo. In the 1940s and early 1950s, massive, powerful struggles by the working class and their allies, especially peasants and other small farmers, ensured that a substantial proportion of growing tax revenues went to welfare.

It was the fear instilled by this power from below that led key sectors of the western ruling classes to accept that massive reforms were needed in the form of the KWS. They were profoundly worried about popular militancy, not least because the Soviet Union seemed to show a powerful, credible alternative.[18] The mass strikes, revolts and instability in the period from the 1910s to the 1940s created enormous pressure. The KWS was a compromise that emerged when class struggle presented 'a chronic threat to the stability of the system'.[19]

In other words, the working class won larger slices of the pie. At the same time, the pie was growing so rapidly that although the ruling classes' slices shrank in proportion, they grew absolutely.

The so-called golden age ended decades ago. Growing economic problems in the 1960s were followed in 1973 by a global crash and worldwide depression that caused tax revenues and wages to drop. Since then, the world economy has experienced decades of low, erratic growth.

There are few possibilities economically for the major reforms needed for implementing the Decent Work agenda now, while at the same time, the social and political conditions that made major reforms essential in the 'golden age' no longer exist.

In the 'golden age', sustained economic and social reforms for the popular classes were created through compromises at the national level with country-level pacts. Today's dominant form of capital is the MNC, but MNCs have no direct interest in either national-level class compromises or Keynesian demand management systems. Neo-liberal capitalist globalisation generates enormous pressures to cut costs – both corporate taxes and workers' wages – as trade barriers erode and possibilities to relocate production and finance expand and undercut redistributive policies.

Meanwhile, the core of the 'golden age' compromises were the basis for their collapse. Despite reforms like the KWS, the ruling classes still controlled the bakery. Major decisions remained vested in small, overlapping economic and political elites: The very limited democratic control of production and daily life enabled elites to impose neo-lib-

eralism from above because the ruling classes still controlled society. Capitalism persisted, and its changing structure and inescapable cycles of crisis gutted the 'golden age'.

Thus, with a global crisis and an increasingly global capital structure, starting in the 1970s, as models like the KWS failed to restore growth, the ruling classes instituted neo-liberalism from above. Rather than embracing state intervention, as they had 40 years earlier, dominant capitalists sought freedom from intervention. Instead of accepting redistribution and welfare like in the KWS, they promoted the neo-liberal philosophy of chipping away state welfare systems and working-class movements.

Western unions, as elsewhere, fiercely resisted the rise of neo-liberalism but were unable to stop it. Long years of tripartism and alliances with political parties had sapped unions' organisational ability to block changes from above, much less create real fear from below. No popular insurgency terrified ruling classes with the spectre of revolution: The elites were triumphal.

Ideologically, too, the faith in state-centred solutions that had dominated workers' movements made them unable to deal with the new era. Many sought solutions in state interventions – like the KWS – that were no longer feasible. Failing that, they scaled back their expectations and voted for the lesser evil amongst competing neo-liberal parties or disintegrated in the face of relentless neo-liberal attacks, crude identity politics and the siren songs of demagogues and right-wing populists.

2.2.5 Interim Conclusions: A Huge Push from Below is Needed to Forge a New Path

From the preceding, we can see that the single most important factor in achieving major reforms has been massive struggle from below – not just protest, but organised movements that led real fights inspired by plausible alternatives. The scope for reforms depends on how much the ruling class can *afford* to concede and how much they are *compelled* to concede by effective organising and sustained action.

Tripartism and other entanglements with the state, including alliances with political parties, largely helped weaken bottom-up struggles. Relying on states to secure popular-class gains will always fail because of the very nature of states: States are ruling-class organisations, not potential allies or instruments for the masses. Massive struggle and popular politics, that are not state-centred but at a distance from the state, are needed.

Older models like the KWS are no longer feasible. Neither is the Decent Work agenda. Neo-liberal capitalist globalisation was born of the global crisis that ended the 'golden age'. It led to profound restructuring that continues to

18 Eric Hobsbawm, 2011, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, pp. 412-413.
19 Gary Teeple, 1995, *Globalisation and the Decline of Social Reform*, Toronto, Garamond Press, p. 16.

boost the relative power of ruling classes. Working-class movements largely lost the class war: Even before neo-liberalism, their unions had been weakened by state-centred policies and the growing bureaucratisation attendant on close involvement with state structures and party politics.

While neo-liberalism has damaged unions by promoting precarious employment and cutting jobs, unions were *already* weak. In the KWS, unions were sapped of organisational power and ideological clarity, while in Africa, where the 'golden age' was centred on import-substitution-industrialisation (ISI), the most sustained attacks on unions took place in the early post-colonial period – the 1950s and 1960s – *before* neo-liberalism. African political parties and states sought to control unions through state-run, authoritarian corporatism, co-opting leaders and political repression in a (failed) effort to remake unions into state agencies to control labour, and suitable for ISI. This damaged union democracy and drove down wages.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Africa's unions had revived enough to lead mass struggles that toppled dozens of dictatorships. But instead of developing real alternatives to nationalism and neo-liberalism, they embraced tripartism and backed new parties and new governments that continued the old neo-liberal attacks, thereby squandering their power and crippling their internal democracy.

In the era of neo-liberal capitalism, there is very limited scope for reforms: It is very unlikely that the Decent Work agenda will be implemented. Yet the working class is winning even less than it could because the *pressure* from below for reforms is also very limited. Unions have lost influence and power, not just because of changing labour markets and workplaces,[20] but also through their failure to articulate serious alternatives to the current system that would make it possible to move from defensive and partial struggles to a larger, transformative project to change society fundamentally.[21] Most unions lack any transformative project at all. Those that do have one prefer to return to either the KWS or ISI, or a combination of the two – which is not feasible now: Pursuing the impossible leads into a dead end.

The most important way to win even basic reforms is serious organising and action – especially by unions – linked to serious consideration of the deep changes needed to transform society in the interests of the immense majority. Not only are reforms won from below generally more far-reaching but the struggle and victory are also valuable forms of empowerment and self-activity. They strengthen movements and build capacity for even more profound changes. The stronger the unions are, the more scope there is for reforms; and the more democratic and militant the unions are, and the more they are deeply rooted in the working class – with educational programmes and allies throughout the popular classes – the stronger they are.

Winning bigger slices of the pie is an important step to winning control of the bakery. Without that, the working class remains dominated and exploited, as happened even in the KWS. Both efforts require class struggle. Without profound social changes shifting control of the means of administration, coercion and production to the popular classes – that is, breaking the ruling classes' iron grip on these three core resources – worker and popular-class gains are always limited and threatened. This is because workers are part of a subordinate, disempowered and exploited class in a social order that is stacked against them. Ruling classes only make concessions when forced, and never concede real power and wealth.

20   Michael Fichter, Carmen Ludwig, Stefan Schmalz, Bastian Schulz and Hannah Steinfeldt, 2018, *The Transformation of Organised Labour: Mobilising Power Resources to Confront 21st Century Capitalism*, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p. 3..

21   Lucien van der Walt, 2014, "Reclaiming Syndicalism: From Spain to South Africa to Global Labour Today," *Global Labour Journal*, volume 5, number 2, p. 241.

3

RESOURCES TO REVIVE UNIONISM: RECOV-ERING THE HISTORY OF AFRICA'S UNIONS

Africa's unions can appropriate the parts of the Decent Work agenda that help build effective and democratic workers' movements: job security, useful work and union rights. The ILO is incapable of winning these for workers, and Africa's ruling classes have every interest in blocking such reforms. However, unions should reject ILO proposals about getting involved in the state and tripartism, and for state-run welfare. They must learn from the past and avoid enervating, corrupting alliances with political parties and governments, all forms of corporatism and the assumption that states can act as guardians of the masses.

Instead, unions need to adopt politics and policy issues from a position of working-class autonomy in a project of direct action, self-management and globalisation from below. A class-based project of autonomy and struggle is needed to create a better world. Workers and unions have a crucial role in this process, not least in Africa. The working class is continuing to grow rapidly, and is now the majority of humanity. Wage work has become the main source of income for households worldwide.[22] Between 1999 and 2005, the number of employees rose from 22 to 25 per cent in Africa,[23] increasingly concentrated in rapidly growing urban areas.[24] Even where it is a minority, the working class is a reservoir of immense potential power.

The traditions, history and experiences of African labour and leftist movements provide powerful lessons and resources for a renewed unionism that can draw in Africa's rapidly growing working class and build alliances with other popular-class movements. Africa's unions have a far richer, more radical and creative history than is often acknowledged, which in turn builds on the long history of class struggles by commoners, serfs and slaves that preceded modern European conquests – a history that is disgracefully forgotten in mainstream analyses. But it is equally important to critically reflect on the unions' past failures and the forces that have undermined workers' organising efforts.

3.1. FROM PRE-COLONIAL CLASS STRUGGLES TO MODERN UNIONS

An historical perspective and a pan-African survey of union history reveal remarkable and innovative actions, ideas and achievements that have defeated repressive states and won secure, well-paid and safe work, with rights and major gains under conditions far worse than neo-liberalism, along with cases of taking direct control over production.

Africa's unions began in the late 1800s, but build on an older history. They began to organise well before modern European colonialism. From at least the days of the pharaohs, common people have mobilised to improve their lives, assert their power and defend their rights and dignity. Sub-Saharan Africa wageworker strikes in the modern era reach back to the 1700s.

Both African nationalists and European colonialists have obscured this long history of class struggle in Africa by presenting Sub-Saharan Africa as comprised of classless, egalitarian, harmonious and static villages or by focusing on the histories of emperors, kings and states. In both cases, class conflict is represented as unknown in Africa, at least before the modern European empires.

However, as African scholars on the left have noted, these notions of a timeless and universal African culture and society ignore difference, conflict and change: They reproduce key elements of colonial racial thinking.[25]

Obviously there were egalitarian and classless societies in Africa, just as elsewhere. But as Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane has argued, Africa was no 'Eldorado of egalitarianism' before it was incorporated into world capitalism: It included numerous societies based on serfdom, slavery,

22   International Labour Organisation, 2015, *Global Wage Report 2014/15: Wages and Income Inequality*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, pp. 4, 14 (Figure 14).

23   Ibid., p. 14 (Figure 14).

24   Mike Davis, 2004, Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat, *New Left Review*, 26, p. 7.

25   See Samir Amin, 1998, The First Babu Memorial Lecture, *Review of African Political Economy*, 25 (77), p. 482; Abdulrahman M. Babu, 1981, *African Socialism or Socialist Africa?*, London: Zed Press, pp. 52-72; Michael Nassen Smith and Tafadzwa Tivaringe, 2016, From Afro-Centrism to Decolonial Humanism and Afro-Plurality: A Response to Simphiwe Sesanti, *New Agenda*, 62, pp. 41-43.

tributary modes of production and other class systems.[26] Samora Machel, too, noted that in many places 'slave-owners, feudalists, kings, and emperors ruled society until the colonial conquest' when the 'colonialist bourgeoisie … established itself in power and imposed its wishes upon all strata'.[27]

Class division was important, for example, in the southeast African kingdoms of Gaza, Mapungubwe, Mwenemutapa, Tembe and Zimbabwe.[28] It is probable that 'even at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, there were many more African slaves serving within Africa than outside'.[29] There were indigenous systems of wage labour, forced labour, plantation slavery, conquest and national oppression.[30] Some African elites – including those in coastal Dahomey (now part of Benin), Sokoto (in Nigeria), and Zanzibar (in today's Tanzania) – created their own slave plantations as a way of engaging in global commerce. Some responded to the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by importing and using more slaves.[31]

Furthermore, recent work reveals commoners, serfs and slaves resisting in indigenous African class societies – through small daily acts of insubordination, desertion and the creation of fugitive communities, as well as open struggles. These include strikes at the pyramids in ancient Egypt, peasant unrest in feudal Abyssinia, slave revolts in the Songhai Empire in the 1500s, waves of popular unrest in the late Ottoman colonial period in North Africa and resistance to labour demands imposed through tribal regiments in southern Africa.[32] Slave resistance escalated across the

continent in the early European modern colonial period.[33] There were strikes, mutinies and revolts by slaves, servants, sailors and soldiers by the early 1800s in the Cape of Good Hope,[34] and labour unrest in Senegal was so substantial that the colonial state froze wages to protect employers from 'intolerable' demands.[35]

Socialist currents like anarchism, syndicalism and Marxism developed in Africa from the 1870s, and starting in the 1880s, unions were founded that included Arab, Asian, black African and Coloured (and *mestiço*) workers by 1905. They all built on ages of local class struggle and resistance.[36]

3.2. CHALLENGING COLONIAL AND APARTHEID ORDERS

Africa's unions played a major role in challenging forced labour, precarious employment and racist and despotic labour relations. Modern European colonialism had largely phased out slavery by the mid-1800s in favour of cash-crop-

26   Bernard Magubane, 2000, *African Sociology: Towards a Critical Perspective – The Collected Essays of Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, pp. 205-207.

27   Quoted from Samora Machel, [1971] 1985, Establishing People's Power to Serve the Masses, in Barry Munslow (ed.), *Samora Machel: An African Revolutionary – Selected Speeches and Writings*, London: Zed Books, pp. 6-7.

28   E.g., Thomas N. Huffman, 2005, *Mapungubwe: Ancient African Civilisation on the Limpopo*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, pp. 32-54 and Henry Slater, 1976, *Transitions in the Political Economy of South-East Africa before 1840*, PhD thesis, University of Sussex, chapters 3, 5, 6.

29   Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, 2001, *Medieval Africa, 1250–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 230.

30   Stephen Ferguson, 2011, The Utopian Worldview of Afrocentricity: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy, *Socialism and Democracy*, 25 (1), pp. 61-62; Jonathon Glassman, 1991, The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast, *The Journal of African History*, 32 (2), pp. 277-312.

31   Frederick Cooper, 1989, From Free Labor to Family Allowances: Labor and African Society in Colonial Discourse, *American Ethnologist*, 16 (4), p. 747; Frederick Cooper, 1994, Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History, *The American Historical Review*, 99 (5), p. 1521.

32   See e.g., Guillemette Andreu, 1997, *Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press; John Chalcraft, 2016, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54-98; Catherine Coquery Vidrovitch and Paul E. Lovejoy (eds.), 1985, *The Workers of African Trade*, Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications; Humphrey J. Fisher, [1971] 2001, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa*, New York: New York University Press, esp. pp. 152-176; Glassman (1991) pp. 277-312; Paul Lovejoy, 1986, Fugitive Slaves: Resistance to Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate, in Gary Y. Okihiro (ed.), *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean and Afro-American History*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, pp. 71-95; Richard Pankhurst, [1990] 1992, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Cen-

tral Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II*, Ewing NJ: Red Sea Press; John Romer, 1984, *Ancient Lives: Daily Life in Egypt of the Pharaohs*, London: Phoenix Press, especially pp. 116-123. For comments on resistance to regimental labour imposed by chiefs see Christian John Makgala, 2007, The Role and Development of the Labour Movement to 1994, in Christian John Makgala (ed.), *History of the Botswana Manual Workers Union: A Story of Courageous Struggle for Democratic and Economic Advancement in Southern Africa*, Gaborone, Botswana: Botswana Manual Workers Union, pp. 29-30.

33   Cooper (1989), p. 748.

34   See especially the work of Nicole Ulrich, who locates these in the larger radicalisms, rebellions and solidarities of the eighteenth century 'Atlantic working class'. Nicole Ulrich, 2010, Abolition from Below: The 1808 Revolt in the Cape Colony, in Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 193-222; Nicole Ulrich, 2014, International Radicalism, Local Solidarities: The 1797 British Naval Mutinies in Southern African Waters, *International Review of Social History*, 58 (Special Issue 21), pp. 61-85; Nicole Ulrich, 2014, Popular Community in 18th-Century Southern Africa: Family, Fellowship, Alternative Networks, and Mutual Aid at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1795, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40 (6), pp. 1139–1157. Also see Nigel Worden, 2005, Artisan Conflicts in a Colonial Context: The Cape Town Blacksmith Strike of 1752, *Labor History*, 46 (2), pp. 155-184.

35   Iba der Thiam, 1993, *Histoire du Mouvement Syndical Africain 1790-1929*, Paris, Editions L'Harmattan, pp. 18-21.

36   The first seems to have been the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners in South Africa, formed in 1881 amongst white workers as a branch of a British union. The first unions of Arab, Asian, black African or Coloured (and *mestiço*) workers included the General Workers Union in South Africa (1905, started by anarchists), the *Association des Ouvriers Sénégalais de Kayes* in Senegal (1907), the Ligue Internationale des Ouvriers Cigarretiers et Papetiers du Caire in Egypt (1908, anarcho-syndicalist) and the *Associação das Artes Gráficas de Lourenço Marques* in Mozambique (1911). See, respectively, Lucien van der Walt, 2011, Anarchism and Syndicalism in an African Port City: The Revolutionary Traditions of Cape Town's Multiracial Working Class, 1904-1924, *Labor History*, 52 (2), pp. 139, 143, 146; Iba der Thiam (1993), p. 70; Anthony Gorman, 2010, 'Diverse in race, religion and nationality . . . but united in aspirations of civil progress': the anarchist movement in Egypt 1860-1940, in Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (eds.), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 1-31; José Capela, [1981] 2009, *O Movimento Operário em Lourenço Marques, 1898-1927*, Porto: Centro de Estudos Africanos da Universidade do Porto, pp. 127-132.

ping peasants and wage labour. Wageworkers in Sub-Saharan Africa were mostly black Africans. Many were migrant men who retained rural homesteads, and there were many black urban workers and farm labourers. But there were also significant populations of Asian, Coloured, *mestiço* and white workers. Slavery was ending, but often wage labour was not free labour: *Corvée* (unpaid labour) on public works and indenture systems including those applied to black migrant miners and Asians were common.[37] Precarious employment was always widespread. This was also the case in the apartheid regimes of Namibia and South Africa.

While the ILO must be credited for objecting to colonial and apartheid labour systems,[38] the main changes were instituted from below by Africa's working classes.

In large swathes of the British and French empires, for example, the mid-1930s saw the start of a massive wave of strikes and riots that led directly to major reforms in labour conditions and laws, and played a key role in undermining colonial rule.[39] A 1947 dockers' strike in Dar es Salaam spread across Tanganyika (now Tanzania), drawing in railway workers and teachers as well. It ended after twelve days and was followed by a tribunal that recommended huge wage increases and union rights for 'each category of workmen'.[40] A general strike across West Africa in 1952 forced the French state to grant black workers a 40-hour week, paid vacations, accident insurance and union rights – measures modelled on laws in France.[41] Decades later, the same pattern was seen in Namibia and South Africa, where powerful new unions built from the early 1970s played key roles in challenging apartheid and won major workplace reforms with a series of stunning victories by the late 1990s.

The ethnic and racial divisions of European colonialism impacted union movements. For example, powerful unions of white workers in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) waged fierce class struggles in the face of severe state repression – but demanded racial colour bars at work and in the larger society.

There are, however, remarkable examples of Africa's unions forging solidarity across such barriers to fight for equality. Unions in Sub-Saharan Africa have often been amongst the only organisations that have systematically challenged

divisions of ethnicity, nation, race, language and religion with universalist projects – by organising on class lines.

In 1922 in Kenya, for example, the short-lived Railway Artisans' Union organised both Indian and black African workers. In 1934, the Kenya Indian Labour Trade Union became the non-racial Labour Trade Union to 'harness and mobilise the energies and fighting spirit of the African, Indian and other workers of Kenya'.[42] By 1937, this union had spread into Tanganyika and Uganda, and was renamed the Labour Trade Union of East Africa.[43] It engaged in a wide range of actions, inspired a mass strike in Mombasa in 1939[44] and led general strikes in Mombasa and Kisimu in 1947.[45] By 1948, it had twelve affiliate unions, and close ties to a range of others.[46] In 1949 it merged with other unions to form the East African Trade Union Congress that covered Kenya and Tanganyika and had connections in Uganda.[47] In May 1952, in the face of massive repression, it pulled off the biggest general strike in Kenyan history in all the main towns,[48] and re-emerged as the Federation of Registered Trade Unions in 1952.[49]

In short, while African workers never came near to winning control of the colonial bakery, they were able to win larger slices of the pie and better conditions for eating. These victories were won in conditions worse than under neo-liberalism: not just massive casualisation and unemployment, but also authoritarian, racist and violent colonial regimes who made extensive use of forced labour.

These cases underline Africa's unions' historic ability to develop as democratic, popular movements and build alliances across the popular classes.

3.3. BEYOND WAGES AND THE WORKPLACE: UNITING THE POPULAR CLASSES

Africa's unions have often engaged in politics through direct action independent of the state and developed a counter-hegemonic project. Kenya's Labour Trade Union and its successors developed an impressive multilingual

37 On the centrality of forced labour in the colonial period, see J. P. Daughton, 2013, ILO Expertise and Colonial Violence in the Interwar Years, in Kott and Droux, eds., pp. 87-89; Daniel Maul, 2007, The International Labour Organization and the Struggle against Forced Labour from 1919 to the Present, *Labor History*, 48 (4), pp. 480-483; Albert Nzula, Albert, Ivan Potekhin and Aleksander Zusmanovich, [1933] 1979, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, London: Zed Press.

38 Daughton (2013), pp. 85-97; Maul (2007), pp. 477-500.

39 Cooper (1989), pp. 752-756.

40 George Gona, 2007, Towards a Concrete East African Trade Union Federation: History, Prospects and Constraints, *African Studies*, 66 (2/3), p. 280.

41 Cooper (1989), pp. 753-754.

42 Makhan Singh, 1969, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, pp. 48.

43 Zarina Patel, 2007, Makhan Singh and the Ghadrites, paper presented at 'Eyes across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean' conference, 20-23 August, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, p. 4; Singh (1969), pp. 58-59, 66, 70-75.

44 Singh (1969), pp. 77-88; Patel (2006), pp. 89-93.

45 Shiraz Durrani, 2006, *Never Be Silent: Publishing and Imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963*, London: Vita Books, p. 83; Zarina Patel, 2006, *Unquiet. The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*, Nairobi: Zand Graphics, p. 100; Singh (1969), pp. 103-124, 129-171; Sharon Stichter, 1979, Trade Unionism in Kenya, 1947-52: The Militant Phase, in Peter Gutkind, Robin Cohen and Jean Copans (eds.), 1979, *African Labour History*, Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, p. 159.

46 Stichter (1979), pp. 160-164.

47 See Gona (2007), pp. 277-279; Patel (2007), pp. 8-9; Patel (2006), pp. 207-221; Singh (1969), pp. 202-287.

48 Durrani (2006), pp. 181-182; Patel (2006), pp. 232-236; Singh (1969), pp. 270-287.

49 Patel (2006), pp. 336-337; Singh (1969), p. 288.

media, built connections with unions in Britain and South Africa, and linked with the Chinese and Spanish anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s.[50] It formed a tenants' association to fight for fair rents and related issues in Nairobi, ran education classes and set up a co-operative farm.[51] It did not just campaign for the eight-hour day, full union rights, and 'equal pay for equal work' – but also for universal franchise on an electoral list for the colony's legislature.[52] The East African Trade Union Congress was probably the first organisation in the colony to demand a democratic and independent Kenya,[53] swhich it soon expanded to call for the 'complete independence' of Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Zanzibar.[54]

ather than being narrowly focused on industrial workers, factories or mines, Africa's unions have long included clerks, dockers, drivers, post office workers and teachers.[55] Then and subsequently, Africa's unions have shown a remarkable capacity to move well beyond enrolling members, winning higher wages and running strikes. Union and worker actions, especially general strikes, were often able to move from the shop floor and mobilise housewives, the unemployed, the 'urban crowd' and whole neighbourhoods. Expansive general strikes linked unionised workers to the broader working class. For example, in 1946, a two-month-long strike movement in Dakar, Senegal included an eleven-day general strike that drew in labourers, civil servants, clerks and street traders.[56] In the end, it won higher wages and family allowances and other perquisites for some workers.

3.4. POLITICS, PARTIES AND UNIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO ALLIANCES

The belief that unions should be allied with political parties and use them to win reforms for the people remains widespread. So, too, does faith in corporatist systems.

The history of Africa's unions, however, clearly shows that union alliances with political parties, their participation in state elections and use of corporatist systems have profoundly *damaged* unions, and limited their aspirations and potential. It also shows that unions have been able to successfully engage in politics *from below* without being allied with political parties – often with more radical platforms.

Nationalist accounts and official histories have long presented an image of seamless unity between Africa's unions and nationalist parties, with unions merely stepping stones in a neat struggle for freedom that culminated in national-

ist parties taking state power in the 1950s with the unions blessings. African labour studies have used a somewhat similar argument, suggesting a natural affinity between unions and parties based on their common agendas for independence and development.[57]

While it is true that some of Africa's most important unions did back nationalist parties and some key nationalist leaders did emerge from the unions, many unions kept their distance from nationalists – but were nonetheless militant and vehemently anti-colonial or anti-apartheid, and often far to the left of the nationalists.

Nationalist leaders were often deeply fearful of autonomous unions and the independent power they could wield,[58] as well as their capacity to engage in politics through direct action without the state and develop a counter-hegemonic project independent of political parties. In French West Africa, nationalists often distanced themselves from the mass strikes of the 1930s and 1940s, and some even actively undermined actions like the great railway strike of 1947/48.[59] In Kenya, while leading nationalists like Jomo Kenyatta aimed at a better deal within the colonial order, unions demanded a sharp break with the British Empire. Even when these unions started to work more and more closely with the nationalists, they articulated a distinctive agenda for sweeping changes that would ensure that workers 'have their own share'.[60]

In South Africa, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), formed in 1979, refused to ally with the African National Congress (ANC) or its partner, the South African Communist Party (SACP). This led it to be vilified in nationalist and Communist circles as 'economistic'. In fact, FOSATU's 'workerist' politics rejected nationalism in favour of an independent, bottom-up 'working class movement' with unions that could fight both apartheid and capitalism to establish a 'just and fair society controlled by workers'.[61]

3.5. WINNING BATTLES, LOSING WARS: UNIONS AND NATIONALIST STATES

FOSATU's distrust of the ANC was heavily informed by the experience of unions across Africa where, on taking power,

50   Singh (1969), pp. 68-70.

51   Ibid., pp. 89-93, 134-144, 200-204, 213, 139-142.

52   Ibid., pp. 171-181; Stichter (1974), p. 164.

53   Stichter (1974), p. 169.

54   Patel (2006), pp. 222-227; Singh (1969), pp. 103-124, 129-171, pp. 259-262.

55   Bill Freund, 1988, *The African Worker*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 91.

56   Cooper (1989), p. 753..

57   E.g., Björn Beckman and Lloyd Sachikonye, 2010, Introduction: Trade Unions and Party Politics, in Björn Beckman, Sakhela Buhlungu and Lloyd Sachikonye (eds.), *Trade Unions and Party Politics: Labour Movements in Africa*, Cape Town: HSRC Press, pp. 2-3, 5; Sakhela Buhlungu, 2010, *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, pp. 1-4.

58   Frederick Cooper, 1994, Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History, *American Historical Review*, 99 (5), p, 1536.

59   Ibid., pp. 1535-1536, note 71.

60   For the progamme, see Singh (1969), pp. 202-206, 228-237. For the quote, see Stichter (1974), p. 169.

61   Sian Byrne, Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van der Walt, 2017, Red, Black and Gold: FOSATU, South African 'Workerism', 'Syndicalism' and the Nation, in Edward Webster and Karin Pampallis (eds.), *The Unresolved National Question in South Africa. Left Thought under Apartheid*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, pp. 261-263.

nationalist governments actively suppressed independent unions. In authoritarian state-corporatist systems, nationalists repressed workers, co-opted union leaders and passed laws that gutted worker and union rights.

Local ruling classes used such measures precisely because nationalist regimes and unions had no common agenda or natural affinities. Nationalist ruling classes were bent on ISI, which typically requires low wages. Marxist-Leninist states were even more oppressive, with state-run pseudo-unions as transmission belts between their 'vanguard' party and working class, and Stalinist central planning.

Regardless of ideology, the new ruling classes were not only the main employers of wage labour who deeply resented industrial unrest, wage demands and political challenges – but they also depended on state resources and posts to develop into 'bureaucratic bourgeoisies'.[62] Strong unions that could demand more pie and oust politicians from senior state positions, depriving them of their slices, presented a deadly threat to the class interests of the new elites – and were also feared by local private capitalists, landlords and foreign investors, mostly MNCs.

Unions sometimes received benefits, including grants, buildings and stop-order facilities from the nationalists' state-corporatist order. The authorities were not seeking to empower unions, however: They were attempting to restrict wage demands, prevent strikes and maximise productivity.[63] Workers were presented as a selfish, privileged elite sabotaging the nation. In Tanzania, the self-described 'African socialist' Julius Nyerere insisted that workers keep their demands to within what 'society' could afford and clearly saw his government, rather than unions or workers, setting those limits. Nyerere labelled any who disagreed as holding 'capitalist ideas' that needed to be 'coerced by the government'.[64]

Efforts to place unions under state control negatively impacted union democracy and working-class autonomy and struggle. Union finances were often put under state control, and key union positions appointed by the ruling party; union leaders were expected to show fealty to the ruling party and its projects. Meanwhile, factional divisions in ruling parties and patronage politics spilled over into unions.[65]

So, while unions played a central, determinant role in the

struggle to end colonialism, after independence they found themselves under attack at the hands of local elites. Nationalism – the idea that all people in a given country must unite for the common good and use the state to express the national interest – had played a relatively progressive role in the anti-colonial struggle. But its inherent limits were finally obvious: It primarily served the interests of small, local ruling classes.

3.6. SUBTERRANEAN FIRE: STRIKES AND UNREST UNDER STATE-CORPORATISM

It is sometimes suggested that stable class compromises were forged in this period of African history, with labour quiescent in return for a social wage and better conditions, and committed to the state's development project.[66] However, this is unconvincing: Across Sub-Saharan Africa, wages rose significantly in the 1940s when unions were powerful, autonomous and militant. Yet in the 1960s – *during* the 'golden age' when unions were progressively weakened, wages dropped.

Nevertheless, the working class and unions repeatedly challenged states' claims to represent the nation. In Zambia, which became a one-party state in 1973, many workers believed the ruling nationalists 'sided with exploiters just like the colonial Ministers did'.[67] The state created an official Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in 1964, but in 1966 alone there were 241 strikes, often called by local ZCTU union branches and structures.[68] When the state introduced 'works councils' to contain workplace conflict, workers used them to block management demands for discipline.

Tanzania, a one-party state from 1965, set up 'workers committees' in larger workplaces as adjuncts to the state-run National Union of Tanzanian Workers. Nonetheless, militant workers were elected to key posts and used the committees to express rank-and-file dissent.[69] In Ghana, a wave of mine strikes from 1968 to 1971 was deeply entangled with a 'revolt by the rank-and-file against a wilfully oligarchical leadership' in the unions closest to the government. In Marxist Mozambique, workers used the state-founded Mozambican Workers Organisation (*Organização dos Trabalhadores de Moçambique*) to make demands.[70]

Expansive general strikes were also used in the post-coloni-

62   E.g., Claude Ake, 1976, Explanatory Notes on the Political Economy of Africa, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14 (1), pp. 1-23; Issa G. Shivji, 1978, *Class Struggles in Tanzania*, London: Heinemann, chapters 7-8.

63   See e.g., Emmanual Obliteifi Akwetey, 1994, *Trade Unions and Democratisation: A Comparative Study of Zambia and Ghana*, PhD thesis, University of Stockholm, Stockholm Studies in Politics, 50, pp. 45-47.

64   Julius K. Nyerere, 1962, *'Ujamaa': The Basis of African Socialism*, Dar es Salaaam, p. 7. Also see Shivji (1978), pp. 77-78.

65   See, for example, Richard Sandbrook, 1975, *Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenya Case, 1960-1972*, New York, Cambridge University Press, chapter 6.

66   Buhlungu (2010), p. 3.

67   Michael Sata, quoted in Henry S. Meebelo, 1964, *African Proletarians and Colonial Capitalism: the origin, growth and struggles of the Zambian Labour Movement to 1964*, Lusaka: Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, p. 520

68   Akwetey (1994), p. 46

69   Shivji (1978), pp. 129-131.

70   See e.g., Peter Sketchley, 1985, The Struggle for New Social Relations of Production in Industry, in John S. Saul (ed.), *A Difficult Road: The Transition to Socialism in Mozambique*, New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 268-270.

al period – directed at nationalist governments. In Ghana in 1961, for example, dock and railway workers led a massive strike to protest a new property tax on houses and a compulsory state-run savings scheme, winning enthusiastic support from unskilled workers, market women and the unemployed. It raised issues around housing, the national budget, top union leaders and the 'increasingly oligarchical and authoritarian style' of Kwame Nkrumah's government, with strike leaders openly threatening 'If Parliament does not give way to the demands of the people', they would disband that body by force.[71]

In Nigeria, the relatively divided union movement came together in 1963 with a Joint Action Committee that fought a wage freeze with a three-day national strike by the civil service, followed by a general strike. Strikers demanded a new wage policy and extensive nationalisations as a 'post-colonial measure to restore the national economy from old and new neo-colonialists … and to give a democratic basis for our independence'.[72] The strike thus provided a rallying point for popular discontent in independent Nigeria.

3.7. DIRECT ACTION AND EXPERIMENTS IN WORKER-RUN PRODUCTION AND SERVICES

Equally remarkable in this period were efforts by Africa's unions and workers to push back the frontiers of control through workplace occupations, and union-based co-operatives, production and services – in the face of state repression.

In Tanzania, for example, the tension between the state's rhetorical radicalism and its repressive labour policies exploded in 1971 when the state issued a set of industry guidelines. The *Mwongozo* declaration included the state's commitment to self-management. Workers took the declaration's promises literally and a wave of strikes spread in which workers downed tools, expelled management and took over factories, sometimes using the state-sanctioned workers' committees.[73] At the Mount Carmel Rubber Factory, for example, a 'revolutionary council' captured the workers committee: Workers barred the personnel manager from entering and took control of production:[74] 'We are ready to work night and day if allowed to take over the factory'.[75]

Union-based co-operatives, production and services were another important way in which workers sought to push back the frontier of control, with one attempt to set up a co-operative farm in Kenya. In 1920s South Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) experimented with schemes to buy farms and establish factories.[76]

The General Factory Workers Benefit Fund was set up in South Africa in 1972 to organise workers and over time developed into a mutual aid fund that provided them significant services, such as immunisations. The Food and Canning Workers Union, which operated its own large medical aid scheme, used its funds to establish the Ray Alexander Workers Clinic in Cape Town.[77] South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers established 30 producer co-operatives amongst miners who had lost their jobs following a titanic strike in 1987 on the apartheid-era gold mines. Co-operatives were not just formed in South Africa, but also in Lesotho and Swaziland, which were major sources of migrant mine labour.[78]

3.8. AFRICA'S UNIONS AND THE ONSET OF NEO-LIBERALISM

Workers in Sub-Saharan Africa were an integral part of the global strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s that protested efforts by the colonial, post-colonial and apartheid states to dampen struggles. Major events include strikes in Ghana from 1966-1970,[79] the 'May' revolt in Senegal in 1968,[80] an unprecedented upsurge in strikes in Botswana that culminated in a massive miners' strike in 1975,[81] the 1971-1973 *Mwongozo*-era strikes in Tanzania,[82] the 1971-1972 strikes in Namibia, the mass strikes in 1972 in Madagascar,[83] and the 1972-1973 strikes in Durban, South Africa that launched the new union movement that developed into FOSATU, and then, in 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

The global crisis that marked the end of the 'golden age' of capitalism directly contributed to serious economic decline

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71   Richard Jeffries, 1975, Populist Tendencies in the Ghanaian Trade Union Movement, in Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen (eds.), *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action,* London: Longman, p. 204.

72   Quoted in Iaon Davies, 1966, *African Trade Unions*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 144.

73   Shivji (1978), pp. 134-146. Also see M. A. Bienefeld, 1975, Socialist Development and the Workers in Tanzania, in Sandbrook and Cohen, eds. pp. 239-260.

74   Shivji (1978), pp. 130, 142-145.

75   Placard at the Mount Carmel Rubber Factory, quoted in Shivji (1978), p. 143.

76   See Sylvia Neame, 2015, *The Congress Movement: The Unfolding of the Congress Alliance, 1912-1961*, volume 2, Pretoria, HSRC Press, pp. 469-475.

77   L. London, 1993, The Ray Alexander workers clinic: A model for worker-based health services in South Africa?, *Social Science and Medicine*, 37 (12), pp. 1521-1527.

78   See Kate Philip, 2018, *Markets on the Margins: Mineworkers, Job Creation and Enterprise Development*, Woodbridge UK: James Currey.

79   Akwetey (1994), pp. 75-76.

80   FFrançoise Blum, 2012, Sénégal 1968: révolte étudiante et grève générale, Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine, 59 (2), pp. 144-177.

81   Dave Cooper, 1984, Unions in Botswana: Comparisons with Lesotho, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 10 (8), pp. 109-110.

82   Shivji (1978), chapters 11-13.

83   Françoise Blum, 2011, Madagascar 1972: l'autre indépendance – Une révolution contre les accords de coopération, *Le Mouvement Social*, 236, pp. 61-87.

across Sub-Saharan Africa, where both ISI and Marxist central planning had been funded by the rapidly rising exports of raw materials for western industry. The crisis gutted demand for raw materials and prices collapsed, causing African states to become deeply indebted. Coupled with widespread corruption and maladministration by local elites, the external shocks sunk ISI and Marxist central planning. A growing number of African states had to borrow extensively to stay afloat, and after a while, simply to service debt.

As private lending dried up in the early 1980s, indebted African states increasingly turned to the lenders of last resort: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Although in the past, the two agencies, whose roots lay in Keynesianism, had been perfectly willing to fund 'African socialist', ISI and even Marxist projects, as the western countries that controlled them embraced neo-liberalism, they did, too. Suddenly, the IMF and World Bank began to demand harsh Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in exchange for loans.

However, the IMF and World Bank are not to blame for African neo-liberalism. The conditions that had made ISI feasible had disappeared, like those of the KWS: This is the backdrop for African states shifting to neo-liberalism. Had they not already been in the grips of debt crises caused by external shocks and internal resource extraction by bureaucratic bourgeoisies, neither agency would have been able to impose SAPs on them.

The changing economy removed the scope for ISI and Marxist central planning in Africa, just as it had for the KWS in the West. This also helps explain why a number of African states adopted home-grown equivalents of SAPs although they were not suffering from debt and had no substantial IMF or World Bank loans. For example, apartheid South Africa, which from the 1920s had operated a racist form of ISI, embraced neo-liberalism in 1979. Independent Zimbabwe initially continued the Rhodesian regime's ISI, which dated from the 1930s, but invited the IMF to design an SAP in 1991 – despite having a low debt burden, low inflation, a positive current account balance and an expanding manufacturing sector. Namibia, which gained independence in 1990, has never had debt crises and little to do with either the IMF or the World Bank, yet has consistently followed neo-liberal policies.[84]

In these three cases, neo-liberal policies were mainly adopted because powerful sections of the local economic and political elites promoted neo-liberalism as the way to resolve economic crises and develop capitalism.[85] Neo-liberalism in Africa thus cannot be seen simply as an external imposition, but must be explained in the context of African

class structures. SAPs also appeal to local ruling classes precisely because they throw 'the cost of restructuring onto the poor' through job cuts, rising prices and declining state services,[86] and simultaneously provide new opportunities for accumulation – such as privatisation deals.

3.9 UNIONS AND THE END OF THE NATIONALIST ERA

SAPs and domestic African forms of neo-liberal restructuring were part of a global class war, in which the share of pie for the popular classes was shrinking everywhere as the bakery experienced a crisis and was rebuilt along neo-liberal lines.

Africa's unions and working classes resisted bitterly, but, as in the West, they were weakened by the years of entangling with the state before neo-liberalism and the absence of a feasible alternative to neo-liberalism.

Although Africa's unions had been damaged by post-colonial regimes, they still retained significant capacities. The big class battles of the 1970s and 1980s threw up new layers of worker militants, many of whom, including Frederick Chiluba in Zambia and Morgan Tsvangirai in Zimbabwe, rose rapidly in the official unions with their programmes for ending state control. In Zambia in 1987, as food prices skyrocketed, riots broke out in the Copperbelt mining towns, and the offices of the IMF and the ruling party were attacked. Independent unions in apartheid South Africa and apartheid Namibia played central roles in combatting privatisation.
Across the continent, unions moved from fighting neo-liberalism to demanding major political reforms.
For example, Zambia's Copperbelt and the ZCTU became strongholds of anti-government sentiment. In South Africa and Namibia, opposition to neo-liberal policies was enmeshed with demands for the end of apartheid and independence, respectively. Despite skyrocketing unemployment, state repression and efforts at containment and co-optation, unions grew rapidly[87]

By the 1990s, unions were the heart of the demand for a 'second liberation' and were often the only countrywide, popular, permanent organisations with any significant base or resources – besides churches and other faith-based organisations. By that stage, large sectors of the population identified nationalist parties as corrupt, incompetent and repressive – the cause of their pauperisation.[88]

84 Tor Skálnes, 1993, The State, Interest Groups and Structural Adjustment in Zimbabwe, *The Journal of Development Studies*, 29 (3), pp. 408-409.

85 Regarding Zimbabwe, see ibid., pp. 407, 417-423..

86 Neva Makgetla, 1993, Should South Africa Fear Rule by IMF?, *The Star*, 13 October.

87 In South Africa, FOSATU grew to 140,000. Its successor, COSATU, launched with 462,359 members in 1985, reached 1,258,853 in 1991 and 1,768,000 in 2003.

88 Samuel Decalo, 1992, The Process, Prospects and Constraints of Democratisation in Africa, *African Affairs*, 91 (362), pp. 12-13.

African states faced pressure from below on a scale unseen since colonial rule had ended a generation earlier.[89] When the Berlin Wall fell, 38 of 45 Sub-Saharan African states were governed by authoritarian civilian or military governments; 18 months later, half of them had been forced to commit to multi-party elections and significant limitations of their executive powers. Some had even held elections in which incumbent elites were expelled.[90]

There were, of course, cases where the pro-democracy movements and the unions that backed them were defeated. Zimbabwe is the best example. But in most cases, as the nationalists who had dominated states since decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s were unceremoniously ousted, an era came to an end. Unions played a major role in this process, most dramatically in Zambia where the union-backed Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) swept the 1991 elections and installed Chiluba as president.

3.10. WINNING BATTLES, LOSING WARS: UNIONS AND EMPTY DEMOCRACIES

However, if unions often won the battle against incumbent governments, they always lost the larger war for change – just like, a generation earlier, they had lost when foreign rule was replaced by local ruling classes.

This was because Africa's unions – like those in the west – generally failed to develop plausible alternatives to neo-liberalism. This weakened their power, and wasted what power they were still able to mobilise. Most unions had no transformative projects. Those that did favoured a return to ISI – as, in 1986, Zambian workers forced the ruling party to reintroduce food subsidies and break with the IMF. Some, like COSATU, wanted a variant of the KWS, or a combination of KWS and ISI. But these projects had not just failed, they also were no longer feasible.

While the state corporatism of the old nationalist governments and the state-run industrial relations of Marxist-Leninists were widely rejected, a number of African worker movements championed tripartism. These forums enabled some union input into labour law reforms, but failed to make it possible for workers and unions to win alternative economic and social policies.[91] Instead, they often legitimised reforms that harmed the working class and simultaneously eroded union democracy by fostering a layer of full-time officials who, unaccountable to the rank and file, engaged in negotiations based on highly technical processes of policy formulation.

Once again, getting involved in state machinery delivered problems rather than solutions. In any case, it was pointless. The unions proposed non-neo-liberal growth paths that were sidelined – and were impossible.

Unions ended up being kingmakers, never kings; their revolts were often spurred by neo-liberalism, but neo-liberalism was never ousted. The pro-democracy movements were captured and transformed into political parties that used the unions to build countrywide bases; they absorbed union monies and personnel, and acted as roads to state power for a small elite, much of it drawn from disaffected elements of the old ruling class.

People from other backgrounds who took office – for example, trade unionists like Chiluba – joined the ruling class, usually adopting its political culture and developing class interests that were at odds with the working class, peasantry and poor. The old nationalist parties had turned on the workers and unions once they were in office; so did the new parties: In office, the Zambian MMD embarked on the largest privatisation programme in the country's history, and became increasingly corrupt and intolerant. In both Namibia and South Africa, when the last generation of nationalist parties – the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the ANC – finally got into office in 1989 and 1994, respectively, they adopted neo-liberal measures, although neither country was beholden to the IMF or World Bank.

This second wave of neo-liberal policies further damaged the unions through economic restructuring. After the state corporatism and repression in the 1950s and 1960s, the economic crisis and early neo-liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, and the elites' capture of the pro-democracy movements in the 1980s and 1990s, this was yet another blow.

Then factional and leadership battles in the new ruling parties spilled over into the unions and generated toxic conflicts. Unions split over which party faction to support – in Namibia and South Africa – or whether to support parties at all, as in Zambia. Meanwhile, the dismal outcomes of the great pro-democracy struggles – including the two anti-apartheid struggles – demoralised workers and working class people.

Workers had waged great battles to defend and expand their slices, but generally failed to get more. By winning major political reforms and ending states' statutory control of unions, they had helped make the bakery safer and better ventilated, and changed some of the owners. But they were still just the workers.

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89   Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, (1992), Towards Governance in Africa: popular demands and state responses, in Goran Hyden and Michael Bratton (eds.), *Governance and Politics in Africa*, Boulder CO: L. Rienner, pp. 27-55.

90   Decalo (1992), pp. 7-35.

91   Dibben, et al. (2015).

4

BUILD MOVEMENTS AND PRESSURE FROM BELOW!

I would now like to draw a few major conclusions.

4.1. FIRST CONCLUSION: WIN CHANGE FROM BELOW

My first conclusion is that major changes can be won from below. These usually go far beyond what ruling classes wish to concede. Historically, big changes have been imposed on capital, landlords and the state through direct action and mass organising, with unions playing a central role. Organised, sustained struggle that has a clear vision of a better world is especially potent. A body like the ILO is no substitute for class power. Appropriating parts of the Decent Work agenda – job security, useful work and union rights – might be rhetorically useful, but the Decent Work agenda as a package is decidedly not.

The stronger the unions, the more scope for reforms – especially because unions can exert extraordinary and unique leverage as mass-based, permanent organisations located at the point of production. This dynamic is shown clearly by western examples, like the battles that helped create the KWS, and Africa's unions' fights against colonial, apartheid and independent labour systems and states.

4.2. SECOND CONCLUSION: GREAT VICTORIES IN HORRIBLE CONTEXTS

Second, the strength and impact of popular movements like unions does not depend on ideal economic, political and social conditions but rather on effective organising.

It is often argued that the strength of unions is undermined by the decline of the 'standard employment relationship' of 'continuous, regular and full-time employment with an identifiable employer'.[92] But that relationship is not standard: It is quite rare. Wherever it has existed, it has been mainly been *imposed* – by unions.

General and industrial unions in Europe began to organise day labourers and other precarious workers in the late 1800s – and won the standard employment relationship. In Africa it was won through struggles and strikes that started in the 1930s. Africa's unions have in the past defeated widespread casual wage labour, bridging divisions between permanent and casual workers and waged and non-waged sections of the working class.

4.3. THIRD CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGES ARE NEITHER NEW NOR IMPOSSIBLE

We need to recall that many of these victories were won in grim contexts. European workers' progress towards the standard employment relationship took place in the context of repression, mass unemployment and early capitalist globalisation. Africa's black and Asian workers made decisive progress from the 1930s in the face of authoritarian, racist and violent colonial regimes, forced labour and mass unemployment – with almost no donor funding.

This means that many of the challenges that labour faces today are not new. Many current problems, such as a divided working class, extensive precarious labour and the race to the bottom can be solved, since they have already been solved under worse conditions. Neo-liberalism is not alone to blame for this: Change depends on the balance of class power and how effectively the popular classes organise and fight.

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92   ILO (2015), p. 3. Some accounts also include a floor of basic conditions of protection, wages and hours, by law or collective agreement. See Gerhard Bosch, 2004, Towards a New Standard Employment Relationship in Western Europe, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 42 (4), pp. 618-619, and Marcel van der Linden, 2003, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations*, Aldershot UK: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 197-198.

4.4. FOURTH CONCLUSION: A REFORMED, IMAGINATIVE UNIONISM

The preceding conclusions lead straight to my next one: the necessity of revitalising the union movement as the central force for change in Africa today. This requires us to reflect on the current context and learn from the history of Africa's unions, which despite their weaknesses have weathered the storms of recent decades. If they can attract the growing masses of non-union workers and also find ways to draw in, or ally with, the masses of urban petty traders and self-employed, as well as the rural wage workers and peasantry, they will be able to increase their influence exponentially.

Larger changes are needed in the areas of tactics, strategy and politics, including:

DISTANCE FROM THE STATE: Political issues inevitably affect unions and workers. But aligning with political parties seeking state power divides, distracts and drains unions. Africa's unions have often been able to raise highly political issues and tear down the divisions between economic, social and political issues without such alignments. Both state corporatism and tripartism have damaged unions and created problems instead of solutions.

Past experience shows the need to end entanglements with the state and instead stress class politics and working-class autonomy. It is important to not have the popular classes get bogged down in multi-class nationalist and pro-democracy parties, subordinated to Marxist-Leninist vanguards or trapped by any type of corporatism. Revitalised unionism should be political and independent. It should build power from below, make demands and back them with struggle – without participating in the state. At an international level, this implies completely withdrawing from the tripartite ILO.

States are undemocratic, centralised organisations controlled by and for the ruling classes. It is important to fight for reforms: Parliamentary democracies are preferable to authoritarian regimes. But no parliamentary body is truly democratic. The notion that states can act as guardians of the popular classes or solve their problems must be definitively rejected. The record of Marxist-Leninist, nationalist and post-nationalist governments clearly show that such ideas are nonsense.

Popular classes must coordinate their struggles, engage in theory and ensure historical memory and continuity. Much of this can better be accomplished by mass organisations than by parties, whose track record of the last 150 years in Africa and elsewhere is appalling.

GLOBALISATION-FROM-BELOW: Africa's working class and peasantry have long been profoundly affected by developments beyond Africa. This is especially true in this neo-liberal capitalist era, with its race to the bottom and increasing inequality, poverty, austerity and precarious-ness. The nation-state has not been weakened by neo-liberalism but is one of its main creators and enablers. The IMF and World Bank, for example, are multilateral bodies comprised of states not MNCs: African ruling classes have embraced SAPs and neo-liberalism because they converge with their own class interests.

Unions need to stop narrowly focusing on the national sphere, which the ruling classes have long since abandoned. The ruling classes have powerful global alliances and structures for coordinating their states (such as the IMF and World Bank, and within Africa, the SADC, ECOWAS, the East African Community and the African Union) as well as their capitalists (such as MNCs).

At this crucial time, unions must also organise internationally, not just country by country. The working class needs to link up across its divisions and fight for common international labour standards, including equal union rights, a global minimum wage and decent conditions within each individual country. National protectionism is not a viable strategy. The framework of nation-states 'where the labour movement traditionally exerted influence' must be replaced with an approach based on 'global struggle, global organisation and global bargaining'.[93] Within countries, unions need to cover more of the working class and actively fight the oppression of workers and unions in other countries. For example, the existence of a massive low-wage, non-union Chinese industrial working class – created by a brutal dictatorship and funded by massive foreign direct investment (FDI) – undermines labour standards worldwide.[94]

A globalised labour movement is the answer to the globalisation of capital. Concrete steps towards internationalising labour include worker-to-worker contacts, exchanges and forums – across borders. In the 1990s, South African unions blockaded the border of Swaziland to support the struggle against the absolute monarchy, and in the 2000s unions campaigned against arms shipments to Zimbabwe.[95] Efforts to link the struggles of workers in Kenya's cut-flower industry to international campaigns[96] are part of a series of new initiatives that relate to global production chains.

INTERNATIONALISM, NON-RACIALISM AND FIGHTING SPECIFIC OPPRESSIONS: It remains important to fight divisions within each country. Capitalism, including its

93   Dan Gallin, 1996, The Challenge of Globalisation: Options for the Labour Movement, *Workers World News*, Cape Town, January/February, p. 4; also see Rob Lambert, 1997, The New Internationalism: A Response to Globalisation, *The Shop Steward*, COSATU, April-May and Kim Moody, 1997, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the Global Economy*, New York: Verso, chapter 12.

94   Rob Lambert and Edward Webster, 2016, The China Price: The All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the Repressed Question of International Labour Standards, *Globalizations*, 14 (2), pp. 1-14.

95   See Miles Larmer, 2008, The Zimbabwe Arms Shipment Campaign, *Review of African Political Economy*, 35 (3), pp. 486-493.

96   See Joyce Gema, 2012, *Wilting in Bloom: The Irony of Women Labour Rights in the Cut-flower Sector in Kenya,* Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission.

colonial variants, nationalist forms and today's neo-liberal incarnation, and states – regardless of their ideologies – actively promote division amongst the popular classes. African unions have some impressive achievements in forging unity across barriers: By organising along class lines, they can create a global, universal popular project and movement. This is more urgently needed than ever before in the face of the populist, postmodern and crude identity politics that are taking the space of left, progressive and universalist projects. Political parties foster communal and other divisions, including through their pursuit of votes.

Relentless attacks on class identity and solidarity divide and disorganise workers. Divisions in the popular classes along lines like ethnicity, nation, race and religion can be deadly, as shown by the party-instigated ethnic violence during and after Kenya's 2007 elections that claimed at least 2,000 lives, the wave of anti-immigrant riots in South Africa in 2008 that left 67 foreigners dead and the Jos religious riots in Nigeria in 2010 that led to 326 deaths.

But unity in struggle and sustained organisation win gains from below. Building class unity requires effective organising and solidarity, with specific working-class campaigns against class domination and the exploitation of women, as well as the oppression of nationalities and races, minorities, immigrants and others. This is concrete engagement in the *upward levelling* of the conditions of the masses – everywhere. The history of Africa's unions – in overcoming racial divisions, uniting workers, the unemployed and street traders through expansive general strikes, border blockades, and organising tenant unions and cross-border union operations like the East African Trade Union and general strikes across French West Africa – shows what can be achieved.

Building solidarity and internationalism also requires tackling prejudices, including national, racial and religious hatreds.

National protectionism is not a desirable strategy because it inflames these divisions. The solution is not for each national state to 'hamper the economic development of other nations by establishing special spheres of power and interest' with a vicious circle of trade wars and open warfare, but rather international solidarity from below,[97] global standards, global solidarity and struggle, and global changes won from below.

Nationalism must be viewed with scepticism: Even where it plays a relatively progressive role, as in the anti-colonial struggle, nationalism fosters illusions about the state, obscures class divisions by suggesting that the popular classes should ally with their 'own' ruling classes and imposes deep divisions on 'the separate parts of the great human family'.[98]

POPULAR CLASS ALLIANCES AND THE UNEMPLOYED MOVEMENTS: Lastly, building solidarity requires building unity beyond the unions along class lines throughout the popular classes. Workers are not the entire working class: In Africa as elsewhere, the working class is just one of the major popular classes.

It is important to form alliances between unions and other popular-class organisations and constituencies such as those of street traders and peasant farmers, as well as to find ways to overcome divisions between the employed and the jobless. One remarkable example was COSATU's now-defunct Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee, set up in 1986 with the aim of creating a National Union of Unemployed Workers to campaign for jobs and relief.[99] There is no reason why unions should not work with labour service organisations, although care must be taken to maintain union autonomy, and that of the popular classes generally. Independence is required to keep unions internally democratic.

UNION-BASED PRODUCTION, SERVICES AND MEDIA: An important element of a renewed, imaginative unionism is building a 'working class movement' that is larger than the unions and expanding union activities in pursuit of this goal. In a 1982 keynote address, FOSATU's Joe Foster argued that a 'working class movement' involves 'a range of institutions' linked to the working class to further its interests and provide a basis to engage a range of struggles and conquests. In addition to unions, he cited examples like co-operatives and newspapers.[100]

Africa's union history has a record of setting up co-operatives, services and alternative media. Unfortunately, such institutions have largely fallen away – but not because of a lack of resources. COSATU and its larger affiliates like the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) are major shareholders in private television and radio stations, including the largest open-access private network, eTV. NUM began to phase out its co-operatives in the late 1990s but set up a profit-seeking Mineworker's Investment Company that was valued at ZAR 10 billion (USD 706 million) in 2009.[101] These companies have been at the centre of recent corruption scandals in unions in Namibia and South Africa, and reinforce capitalism and exploitation through profit maximisation.

Union resources should be used instead to fund working-class and popular media, which could help construct counter-hegemony – a revolutionary counter-culture – and build counter-power. African states' social welfare programmes have failed abysmally, which means that unions could productively use their resources by establishing a

97 Rudolph Rocker, [1937] 1978, *Nationalism and Culture*, Minnesota MN: Michael E. Coughlin Publishers, p. 526.

98 Ibid., p. 213.

99 E.g., Comrades at Work, *COSATU News*, November 1986, p. 9.

100 Joe Foster, 1982, *Where Does FOSATU Stand?*, Federation of South African Trade Unions, Durban, FOSATU Occasional Publication No. 5.

101 National Union of Mineworkers, 8 December 2009, NUM congratulates Mineworkers Investment Company, COSATU, online at http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=2713 (accessed 15 Jun. 2017).

network of medical clinics in working-class districts and mutual-aid income schemes, for example. This would help them gain more support, delink from the state and drastically reduce corruption and at the same time provide real alternatives to expensive, profit-driven private healthcare that is beyond the reach of most of the working class and peasantry.

Union resources could also aid co-operatives – for political, not economic, reasons. Democratic worker-run co-operatives have to be shielded from markets to survive. Unions can provide this protection through guaranteed contracts that pay above-market rates. State sponsorship of co-operatives generally involves state control, and relying on ethical consumers to pay above-market prices presupposes the existence of elites with disposable income, which is precisely the inequality that needs to be abolished. This does not address the basic problem that the low incomes of most people lead them to punish workers' co-operatives and fellow workers by purchasing the cheapest items, which are often produced under horrific and repressive working conditions.

Such institutions cannot defeat the existing system: The core means of administration, coercion and production remain in the hands of small ruling classes, and union-backed co-operatives and services remain marginal. They cannot abolish poverty or create employment on any meaningful scale. But they can make real improvements in everyday lives and build momentum for class-based mobilisation. This requires abolishing union investment companies as part of reforming unions and redirecting their funds into worker- and union-based media, services and production.

Unions should also back alternative institutions to show that self-managed alternatives to capitalist and state media and state-run welfare schemes exist. Such institutions also serve to build up the power and influence of unions – and of the working class, poor and peasantry.

REFORMING UNIONS, AND RANK-AND-FILE MOVEMENTS: Renewing and reviving Africa's unions also requires them to carry out profound reforms. Even the worst union is better than no union because unions reflect the reality of class divisions. But centralised, corrupt and oligarchical, or narrow and sectional unions are weak.

Every effort must be made to make unions democratic, participatory and accountable, to prevent new hierarchies emerging and to challenge existing ones. The fragmentation of unions is another source of division and weakness in the workers' movement. Unions have been corroded over time, not least by states, and many struggle with issues of internal democracy and member participation. Unions are formally linked through various global union federations (GUFs) and regional bodies like the Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council (SATUCC), as well as through the ILO. However, these bodies are very distant from the ordinary worker.

Effective union reform cannot be left to union leaders who are insulated from the base, and obviously not to those who are corrupt or undemocratic. Entrenched leaderships, especially paid ones, pursue their own immediate interests, which are often at odds with those of the base.

Change must come from below and within the unions, not by splitting them or using splinter unions to isolate activists.

The essential forces for change are independent rank-and-file movements and initiatives that overlap, but are independent of formal union structures, and which span divisions within and between unions. Rather than taking the fight outside the union by forming new splinter bodies, these movements refuse to concede the existing unions to problematic leaders. They work for unity and reconciliation, reforming union structures and winning members and workers for combative programmes.

African history reveals many examples – notably in post-colonial Ghana, Zambia and Zimbabwe – where ordinary workers recaptured unions from officials and bureaucracies. While structures like GUFs and SATUCC are no substitute for more horizontal, bottom-up, worker-to-worker, shop-steward-to-shop-steward activities, they, too, should be reformed and democratised.

A reformed, fighting union is democratic, efficient and participatory – like the old FOSATU in South Africa which stressed internal education, built strong, accountable (and unpaid) shop-steward structures and paid no union figure, whether appointed or elected, more than the average worker's wage. Elected figures were easily recalled and all decisions were subject to discussion by assemblies that had full access to the financial records. At the same time, FOSATU safeguarded internal democracy by refusing to place the unions under the control of outside bodies like parties.

Although unions often tend towards oligarchy, this is not a natural law. Education, information and workers' control are the main counter-tendencies and correctives. Delinking unions from the state and abolishing union investment companies removes key external sources of corruption. Delinking from parties that aim at state power takes away a major force for factionalism and fragmentation in unions, improves conditions for greater cooperation and fosters unity.

TOMORROW IS BUILT TODAY: THE POLITICS OF PRE-FIGURATION. The present affects the future, and the way that movements are organised affects what they can achieve. If unions wish to create a society that is more egalitarian and democratic than what we have today, they must build genuinely egalitarian and democratic political cultures in unions and allied organisations of the popular classes.

Saying that unions should be independent of parties does not mean there should be no discussion of politics in unions – but that a range of views should be tolerated and critical thinking promoted in the place of demagogy, blind loyalty, manipulation and personality cults. Decisions should be taken after careful discussion, then reviewed regularly and changed democratically. If the aim is a different type of production – democratic, needs-based and useful – in place of the capitalist and state production systems, these means and ends should be applied in all union media, services and co-operatives.

4.5. FIFTH CONCLUSION: A PROFOUND REDISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH AND POWER

Economic and social reforms are still possible. I have argued that there is no likelihood of a KWS-type class compromise emerging in the context of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation, or more ISI. There is also very little likelihood that the ILO's Decent Work agenda will be fully implemented. The ruling classes have very little reason to make such reforms: They support the race to the bottom brought about by an increasingly integrated global economy and no longer fear the working class. The rise of MNCs reduces the possibility for class compromises at the national level, and slow, erratic growth reduces funding for pacts.

That said, it is also true that the global economy has grown considerably since the 'golden age'. In Africa, too, vast profits are being reaped, and production forces are booming. World productive capacity has increased astronomically over the last 40 years, albeit at a slower annual rate than during the good times, and the bakery is producing a bigger pie than ever before. At the same time, the working class is larger, more concentrated in workplaces, schools and cities and more connected than ever before. Unions continue to grow.

Despite the race to the bottom, there is real potential for winning substantial reforms – although there is no possibility of winning the whole Decent Work package, let alone reviving the KWS. Winning reforms requires massive pressure from below. Real gains can be made and defended if unions and popular class alliances are resurrected and confront capitalist globalisation through globalisation-from-below.

While the workers' struggle to get and keep bigger slices will be difficult, it can be successful if enough power is brought to bear.

Unions should always fight for more, with the long-term goal of dethroning the ruling classes and controlling the bakery in alliance with other popular movements. That means that struggles for bigger slices should be seen as stepping stones: The point is to build self-managed movements of the popular classes, systematically accumulating their capacity to take control so that the democratic organs of counter-power take power directly. The working class has the potential to run the bakery, as the history of Africa's unions and working classes clearly shows.

Unions exist precisely because the current system is an obstacle to genuine democracy and equality. Only profound social change driven from below will end this situation and with it, the fight for slices.

This is why it is so important to nurture ideas and 'utopian' thinking that show that what we take for granted in our daily lives need not be eternal. They liberate us to imagine and work towards more just and decent ways of arranging society and the economy.[102]

Projects based on using the state, including nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, have failed to emancipate the popular classes or transcend national borders. Therefore, future projects should aim at building a class-based movement of counter-power and counter-culture that can take control, replacing the current order with common ownership, popular self-management and bottom-up planning – along with egalitarian societies: a 'new human community' beyond the 'borders of the present states'.[103]

Only bottom-up, democratic mass movements that develop organs of counter-power prefiguring such an order have the potential to create it – both by steadily accumulating the organisational, ideological and technical resources needed to change society, and by building up counter-power and counter-hegemony outside and against the state to push for more than reforms. We must seriously engage with the view from below, with working-class intellectual and organisational traditions and the lessons from the past.

It is crucial for us to link immediate struggles and movement-building to a longer-term fight for the profound redistribution of power and wealth from the ruling classes to the popular classes. We must strive to profoundly change society and eliminate class.

102 Rick Turner, 1972, *The Eye of the Needle: An Essay on Participatory Democracy*, Johannesburg: SPRO-CAS (Special Programme for Christian Action in Society), pp. 3-8.
103 Rocker ([1937] 1978), p. 527.

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BEYOND DECENT WORK
Fighting for Unions and Equality in Africa

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Dynamic trade unions and bottom-up worker power are essential to Africa's rapidly growing working class. While the International Labour Organisation's Decent Work agenda has some positive elements that can be used, it is not a desirable or feasible project in the neo-liberal epoch. Its faith in state-based social protection and advocacy of tripartism assumes states can be guardians of the working class, the peasantry and the poor. But states are centralised bodies controlled by small ruling classes. State-run welfare systems, electoral politics and union engagement in corporatism damage working class movements. The Decent Work agenda's notion that today's capitalism can be systematically reformed to provide decent jobs, wages, adequate welfare and meaningful social dialogue ignores how neo-liberal capitalist globalisation has torn away the ground for sustained compromises.

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African labour should instead build bottom-up class-based counter-power and counter-hegemony, winning reforms from below within the current order, but aiming at a new system: common ownership, popular self-management and bottom-up planning. This requires direct action, autonomy from states – i. e., exiting electoral politics and tripartism – and alliances with peasants, the unemployed and the poor. This entails a prefigurative politics of debate, pluralism and critical thought, opposing divisions and oppression, and a democratic, internationalist practice.

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Concrete measures include unions taking up political and policy issues without being aligned to parties; building rank-and-file reform movements across unions; replacing union investment arms with union-backed healthcare, media and production; meeting the race-to-the-bottom with globalisation-from-below, including global standards and minimum wages; and learning from the history of Africa's unions, which is far richer and more radical than often acknowledged. Rooted in pre-colonial class struggles by commoners, serfs and slaves, it includes stunning victories over casual labour systems, state controls, and oppressive colonial and postcolonial regimes; workers' unity across deep divides; radical alternatives, and even workers' control of production.