

southern africa

PERSPECTIVES

In South Africa:

The Bloody Campaign Against Organized Labor

Anna Zieminski/Afrapix



Offices of the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union in Johannesburg after arson attack.

A year after African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela's release from prison, South Africa's Black trade unions, particularly the million-member Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), remain at the heart of the movement for political democracy and economic and social change. Union activists have been instrumental in revitalizing mass opposition to apartheid — launching ANC branches, organizing local consumer and utility boycotts, and leading strikes over wages, job security and workplace racism that cost the white-run economy over four million work days during 1990.

But labor's role in the struggle for political and economic democracy has increasingly made the unions the target of state-sponsored political violence. Black labor's resistance to oppression goes back to the 1920s, when the militant Industrial and Commercial Workers Union built a national membership of over 100,000. But it was not until 1981, after a wave of illegal strikes forced the apartheid regime to lift the ban on Black unions, that labor began to emerge as a major anti-apartheid force. With Mandela's African National Congress and other organizations still outlawed, Black workers increasingly saw their unions as a vehicle for their political aspirations.

The Africa Fund (associated with the American Committee on Africa)

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white president, F.W. de Klerk, the government's undeclared war on labor has escalated. Investigators into the January 14, 1991 firebombing of NUMSA's Johannesburg offices discovered, for example, that the arsonists had carefully removed and stacked the membership records from 400 factories in the center of the room before setting the offices alight.

De Klerk's Undeclared War

Labor leaders are frequent targets. On April 15, 1990, the head of COSATU's northern Natal region, Jeffrey Vilane, was shot twice by unidentified gunmen and his home burned to the ground. National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) President Beki Mkhize narrowly escaped two assassination attempts in January, 1991 when gunmen ambushed him near his home. Several weeks later the home of National Union of Mineworkers organizer Solly Rasmeni was damaged by a bomb—the second such attack in recent years.

In assessing the increase in political violence against unions and other anti-apartheid organizations during 1990, an emergency National Working Committee on Violence, made up of labor and democratic political organizations, said the campaign was "an act of organized counter-revolution...orchestrated by the state or forces within the state."

"It is no accident that the violence has escalated at a time when the ANC is involved in the process of negotiations and our activists are involved in building a mass legal ANC...The regime would prefer to negotiate with a relatively weak ANC. The violence can isolate us from our constituencies as well as weaken all democratic organizations allied to the ANC."

Apartheid Vigilantes

Key to this strategy has been the growing importance of Black "vigilante" forces loyal to a handful of conservative traditional chiefs, bantustan leaders and township councillors whose personal and political fortunes are tied to the old order. Mindful of the damage that pictures of white troops shooting Black demonstrators would do to its reformist image, the apartheid security forces have increasingly relied on its Black allies to intimidate the democratic movement.

The most powerful of these vigilante leaders is KwaZulu bantustan chief Buthelezi, whose bloody campaign against COSATU and the ANC has taken more than 5,000 lives since 1987. In 1990 alone Buthelezi received \$600 million in direct subsidies from the

AFL-CIO DENOUNCES VIOLENCE, SUPPORTS SANCTIONS

The AFL-CIO Executive Council, meeting in Bal Harbour Florida on February 21, 1991, reaffirmed its commitment to sanctions and denounced the violent attacks on South African trade unions. Excerpts appear below.

VIOLENCE

We condemn the massive violence inflicted on the democratic trade union movement, including COSATU and members of its affiliates, by vigilante forces and by those tied to the apartheid security forces.

SANCTIONS

We will continue to support comprehensive sanctions against South Africa until these democratic political conditions are met or until the South African trade union movement advises an alternative course of action.

de Klerk government. The regime also passed a special law in 1990 allowing Buthelezi's followers to carry "traditional" weapons that include machetes, clubs and spears.

Union Busting

In 1986 Buthelezi launched his own labor organization, UWUSA, as the labor arm of his tribal Inkatha party. In line with Inkatha's pro-business and anti-sanctions stance, UWUSA has never conducted a strike. Where UWUSA members spontaneously downed their tools, said founding Secretary General Simon Conco, UWUSA leaders intervened to end the stoppage.

In September 1990, 1500 Xhosa-speaking members of the National Union of Mineworkers were forced to flee a coal mine in Natal Province after Zulu-speaking miners—who were also members of the NUM—killed one worker and injured seven others in allegedly "ethnic" fighting. The violence followed a successful NUM organizing drive and strike that won all the workers a 31 percent wage hike.

Union investigators later discovered that mine management and local Inkatha officials had collaborated in a campaign to break the union along ethnic lines and incite violence between Zulu and Xhosa-speaking miners. Management refused to act on reports that Inkatha members had stockpiled weapons at the mine and permitted Inkatha to hold illegal rallies on company property.

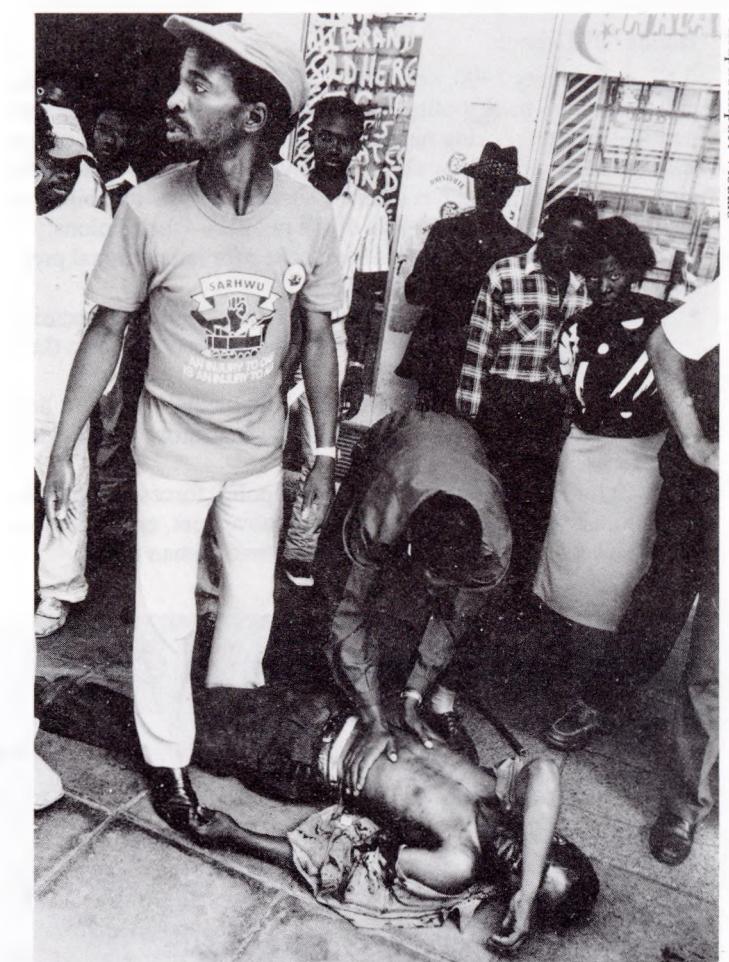
At a meeting called to defuse the conflict, the Inkatha representative produced a pistol and boasted that the union would be "annihilated" at the mine and in the rest of the region.

Workers Caught Up In Bloodshed

Over 1000 people in the townships around Johannesburg died in the fighting between Inkatha and ANC supporters that swept the townships around Johannesburg during the second half of 1990. Because much of the violence was centered around the vast, single-sex migrant workers hostels, the unions were particularly affected.

Over 60 NUMSA members were among several hundred people killed in Sebokeng township near Johannesburg last year by followers of Buthelezi's Zulu ethnic Inkatha organization. Twenty-three NUMSA members died on September 4 alone when their housing complex was attacked by over 100 heavily armed Inkatha members.

The de Klerk government and the Western press have dismissed these attacks as "Black on Black factionalism" or tribal conflict. But there is overwhelming evidence of official involvement with



South African Railways and Harbour Workers Union member lies injured after clash with scabs and police. Unions have been hit hard by escalating violence over the past year.

the vigilantes. During the September 4 attack on the Sebokeng migrant workers hostel, for example, witnesses charged that armed Inkatha members were transported to the site in police vehicles and that uniformed white officers provided covering fire during the attack.

Government Death Squads

Augmenting the uniformed security forces and vigilantes are covert assassination units. In 1990 a South African judicial inquiry confirmed the existence of official death squads, including the so-called "Civil Cooperation Bureau" (CCB), operated by the South African army and police. These secret security forces were responsible for the murder of David Webster and hundreds of other anti-apartheid activists during the 1980s, and the government announced they had been dismantled last year.

But on February 16, 1991, Beki Mlangeni, a human rights attorney who served on COSATU's violence monitoring group, was assassinated by a sophisticated bomb hidden in a set of earphones. Two weeks later the government admitted it was continuing to spend millions on the "demobilized" death squads. Meanwhile, the murder and abduction of prominent labor and anti-apartheid activists has continued.

In its statement on the killing COSATU charged that "only the CCB and other state death squads have the technical capacity and knowledge to execute such a murder...It is such developments that make the majority seriously doubt the honesty of F.W. de Klerk's government when they claim to be committed to a peaceful transformation to democracy in our country."

COSATU President Elijah Barayi (center, right) and General Secretary Jay Naidoo (far right) lead anti-government demonstration in October 1989. Labor's role in the struggle against apartheid has made them the target of government violence.

Targeted for Repression

Even after the unbanning of the ANC, explains National Union of Metalworkers in South Africa (NUMSA) Crisis Unit Coordinator Alf Woodington, "civic associations and the ANC are weaker... unions are the strongest democratic structures there. It's become absolutely vital for some people to disable the unions, so they can't support other structures."

Throughout the 1980s, labor leaders such as NUMSA head Moses Mayekiso were routinely targeted for detention and trial under apartheid security laws, and the federation was itself placed under harsh emergency restrictions. Other unionists, including Steel Engineering and Allied Workers Union shop steward Amos Boshomane and labor organizer and human rights researcher David Webster, were assassinated by death squads operated by the South African army and police.

Striking workers were particular targets. In July 1989, shop steward Clement Nene was shot and killed during a bitter strike at the Everite company in Durban. That same month, a NUMSA shop steward at the strike-bound U.S. Goodyear tire company, Joe Sapotela, narrowly escaped death when his house was fire bombed. His brother died in the attack.

Since the bombing of COSATU headquarters in Johannesburg in 1987, over 40 union offices across the country have been bombed, burned or burglarized. Only one of these crimes has ever been solved by the police, and many appear to have been the work of professional saboteurs.

Under the "reformist" administration of South Africa's newest

Hands Off Labor!

Since February 1990, South Africa's apartheid government has pursued a two-track policy in defense of white economic and political power: seeking negotiations with representatives of the Black majority while it weakens the movement through systematic violence. Key to the government's success will be its ability to paralyze the organized strength of the people — their unions.

South Africa's labor leaders have called for international pressure on the de Klerk government to:

- publicly and effectively dismantle the death squads, security police and military security units and dismiss or disperse their commanders and personnel,
- disarm and disband bantustan and municipal vigilante and police forces and prosecute known "warlords," right-wing terrorists and vigilante leaders,
- discipline the South African army and police forces to eliminate political bias against the democratic movement, end excessive violence and enforce respect for civil and human rights.

What You Can Do

- Have your union pass resolutions condemning apartheid's bloody campaign against the unions and supporting our brothers and sisters in the struggle for freedom.
- Keep up the pressure on apartheid through support for U.S. sanctions. Organize postcard campaigns in your local for continued sanctions. Meet with your Congressional representatives and push for maintenance of all current sanctions until Black South Africans have the right to vote.
- Ask your union paper to provide more coverage of the South African labor movement and U.S. labor solidarity.
- Support direct ties between U.S. and South African unions. Find out whether your union is paired with its South African counterpart. If it is, organize an educational or fundraising event. If it isn't, work to establish a union-to-union partnership.

For more information contact The Africa Fund Labor Desk, 198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038 (212) 962-1210.

Unpunished Crimes of Vandalism and Arson

The following are the recorded attacks on trade union offices since May 1987. This catalog of apparently unpunished crime over a three-year period does not include the numerous attacks on unionists and their homes.

- **May 1987:** East London offices of SA Railway and Harbour Workers Union (Sarhwu) burnt and vandalized; COSATU House bombed; Germiston office of Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) and Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Ccawusa) vandalized; Kroonstad offices of Sarhwu forced to close after being vandalized; Tudor Mansions in Johannesburg, housing several COSATU affiliates, firebombed and extensively damaged; Nelspruit offices of COSATU destroyed by fire.
- **July 1987:** Two whites reportedly break into Mawu's Krugersdorp offices, which are destroyed by fire.
- **August 1987:** Kimberley offices of National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) gutted by fire; bomb blast at Community House, which houses COSATU's Western Cape offices; fire at East London offices of SA Allied Workers Union.
- **September 1987:** NUM offices petrol-bombed.
- **December 1987:** Cape Town offices of Nactu burgled and vandalized.
- **April 1988:** Thwarted attempt to burn East London offices of Sarhwu.
- **July 1988:** Johannesburg offices of the Transport and General Workers Union destroyed by fire; Post and Telecommunications Workers Association (Potwa) offices broken into for the second time in a year.
- **September 1988:** Johannesburg offices of Ccawusa burgled; Johannesburg offices of National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union gutted by arsonists; offices housing COSATU and several affiliates in Durban petrol-bombed.
- **October 1988:** Fire breaks out at East London offices of Unemployed Workers Union.
- **November 1988:** East London offices of National Union of Foodworkers and COSATU damaged by fire.
- **January 1989:** East London offices of COSATU gutted by arsonists.
- **April 1989:** Tear gas canister thrown through window of National Union of Metalworkers' (Numsa) Benoni offices.
- **June 1989:** Windows of COSATU's Vereeniging offices smashed at night; glass doors of COSATU's Western Transvaal region broken.
- **July 1989:** Numsa's Ermelo offices destroyed by fire.
- **October 1989:** Nactu's Standerton offices broken into and vandalized.
- **March 1990:** Nactu's Stellenbosch office stoned.
- **May 1990:** Bomb damages Rustenburg offices of the Food and Allied Workers Union.
- **June 1990:** Bomb rocks Welkom offices of the NUM; COSATU offices in Belville petrol-bombed; bomb found at offices of NUM in Oberholzer.
- **July 1990:** Bomb defused outside NUM's Carletonville branch; NUM offices vandalized in Witbank and Rustenburg.
- **October 1990:** Numsa's Potgietersrus local broken into, tear-gassed, vandalized.
- **January 1991:** Nactu's Tembisa offices broken into, vandalized; Johannesburg local of Numsa gutted by fire.

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