

**CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CLASSROOM:  
Radical Social Thought and the Durban Moment**

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The Durban strikes and the subsequent emergence of the independent trade union movement coincided with perhaps the most fertile period of growth and development for radical South African social thought. In Durban itself, the Sartrean philosophy of Richard Turner directly influenced a generation of student activists to commit themselves to building trade unions – this was Turners’s explicit intention: it was he who proposed the formation of Wages and Economics Commissions at the white White English language universities which produced a generation of union intellectuals. In Britain, South African Marxist thinkers such as Harold Wolpe and Martin Legassick developed new understandings of apartheid in which class featured prominently. Their influence was far more indirect – Wolpe himself was more interested in influencing the SA Communist Party and the African National Congress than in encouraging the formation of trade unions. But research evidence shows that this work too had an important albeit indirect influence on intellectuals who became unionists. This paper will examine the influence of academic radicalism on the growth of the union movement. It will seek to examine its role in shaping union strategies and will try to suggest some implications for current South African dilemmas.