

“Building Tomorrow Today”: a re-examination of the character of the controversial “workerist” tendency associated with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) in South Africa, 1979 – 1985.

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This paper is concerned with unpacking the influential yet misunderstood "workerist" phenomenon that dominated the major independent (mostly black) trade unions born in the wake of the 1973 Durban strikes. Workerism is widely recognised as being concentrated in the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), and remains a source of much controversy in labour and left circles. This is due to the massive influence it commanded within the with black working class in its brief heyday, and the formidable challenge it presents to the legitimacy of nationalist movements and narratives attempting (then and now) to stake claims on the leadership of the liberation struggle. This controversy has yet to be resolved; both popular and scholarly attempts to theorise its politics are marked by demonstrable inconsistencies and inaccuracies that conceal more than they reveal. I argue that workerism was a distinctive, mass-based and coherent multiracial current in the black trade unions, spilling into the broader anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s and 1980s. It stressed class-struggle, non-racialism, anti-capitalism, worker self-activity and union democracy, and was fundamentally concerned with the national liberation of the oppressed black majority. However, it distanced itself from the established traditions of mainstream Marxism and Congress nationalism; fashioning a radical approach to national liberation that combined anti-capitalism with anti-nationalism. This debunks common portrayals of workerism, which regularly describe workerism in overly-racialised and caricatured terms that vastly dwarf its influence. I contend that this practice is partly rooted in nationalist and certain Marxist narratives, which present nationalism as the natural and inherent crucible of black liberation politics and ideology – and workerism, as an alternative project concerned with national liberation – therefore somehow alien to blacks. In addition, it is argued that a common failure to examine workerism in context has resulted in a literature that reduces workerism to a form of Marxism, and fails to recognise the influence of other currents, including significantly, anarchism, syndicalism and council communism, amongst others.