

## 10 YEARS OF THE SALB 1974-1984

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The origins of the SALB lie in the re-emergence of working class action and organisation in Durban in the early 1970's. On 30th May 1973, three months after the wave of spontaneous mass action by 100000 black workers, a group of sympathetic trade unionists, students and academics from the University of Natal (Durban), met in the James Bolton Hall in Durban to inaugurate the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE). Harriet Bolton, Secretary of the Garment, Textile and Furniture unions opened the meeting and explained how the project had come about. She said that workers lacked formal knowledge of trade unionism as they had neither the time nor the money to study. She said a school should be formed which would educate workers about their rights. Foszia Fisher, who was later to become the secretary of the IIE, then proposed:

- a) that a correspondence course be established to help workers understand the social and economic situations in which they operated.
- b) that a resource centre be established to provide the unions with background material and information.

It was from this second component of the IIE project that the idea of a journal on labour was to emerge. On 30th July 1973, the IIE sub-committee proposed that a newsletter be published "tentatively called Labour Bulletin - containing general information on trade unionism at home and abroad, book reviews, topical discussions and analyses of economic trends (like inflation)".\*

On 11th August a Working Committee was set up consisting of Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle, Foszia Fisher, Dave Hemson, Eddie Webster and Harriet

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\* Minutes of the IIE sub committee, 30th July, 1973. Private collection File B 1 p. 3.

## -10 Years-

Bolton, to run the day-to-day affairs of the IIE. It was this committee that was to undertake the initial planning of the Bulletin, appoint the first editor and solicit material for the first few editions. The SALB was, then, never conceived of as a mere academic exercise. It was directly linked to the emerging labour movement and was concerned both to record its struggles and serve its needs. From its inception it contained a tension; was it an instrument of the emerging unions or was its role that of independent critic? It was, of course, to develop a degree of independence over the years as it began to serve a wider constituency of persons concerned with understanding this movement. But it always retained those early links and continued to draw its material and audience from people sympathetic to that movement. It can be seen, in fact, as a mirror of 10 years of the workers movement in South Africa.

During these 10 years 78 editions of the SALB have been published. The content of these editions fall roughly into 5 phases - phases that mirror developments in the history of the emerging unions.

### Phase 1.....

During this phase, which covers the first five editions, the SALB had close links with the day-to-day activities of the new unions in Durban and attempted to reflect their activities in its pages. The driving force behind much of the material was the banned political science lecturer from the University of Natal, Richard Turner, whose particular brand of theory and practice was to influence and shape the SALB during this phase. Appropriately the first edition of the SALB, published in April 1974, was on the case for African trade unions. At this stage trade union recognition, which had been denied under the Industrial Conciliation Act, was the central issue for these new unions. The next four editions

published regular reports on the organising activities of the new unions and accounts of struggles for recognition. The SALB was seen during this phase, as an important outlet for the viewpoint of these unions. Vol. 1 no. 3 and Vol. 1 no. 5 were "banned" by the Publications Board. The reasons given were that the SALB was "promoting worker unrest" and opposition to the government's alternative to trade unions for black workers, the liaison committee system. It is perhaps an indication of the close links of the SALB with these new unions that after the first few editions, the editors were to debate whether some editions should not be introduced in Zulu.

Phase 2.....

Within the first six months of the SALB's existence an intense debate over the relationship between education and organisation was to emerge. In essence, the new unions were struggling to survive in a harsh political and economic climate and saw the IIE as a resource that needed to direct its energies more concretely to building shop-floor leadership. The IIE was eventually brought directly into the educational work of the unions. The SALB, however, was to experience a different history as it carved for itself a distinct niche almost exclusively among university academics linked through education and research to the emerging unions. This can be seen in the changing nature of the content of the SALB. Vol. 1 no. 6, published in late 1974, carried articles on the early history of the ICU and reflected the intellectual interests of the new school of radical South African historiography that emerged in the early 1970's. However throughout 1975 the SALB retained the close links that marked its origins. For example Vol.5 no. 2 was banned for carrying an article on the struggle for recognition at Leyland.

This phase ended rather abruptly in December 1975

when two of the editors were arrested under the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Acts. The state was in the coming year, to embark on a sustained offensive against the leadership of the new unions, which culminated in the banning of 26 unionists in November 1976. The SALB was to survive this period of repression by retreating into the university and becoming more of an academic journal.

Phase 3.....

This third phase could be categorised as one of retreat when the SALB established its independence from the IIE and became more firmly based in the universities. It was also a period of intellectual growth as labour became a focus of serious academic attention in the universities for the first time and the SALB widened its Editorial Board to include academics from Wits and UCT. Significantly these new editors brought into the SALB different perspectives and experiences making the Bulletin more of a national journal. During this period, from 1976 to 1979, the SALB pioneered the academic study of labour through editions on unemployment (Vol. 4 no. 4), the labour process (Vol. 4 no. 7) Industrial Health (Vol. 4 nos. 9 & 10) and International Labour (Vol.5 no 8). In 1978 the SALB brought out a book of 14 past articles on South African Labour History, as part of an attempt to meet this growing demand for material on labour. \*

Phase 4.....

A new phase in the history of the SALB was to begin in late 1979 when working class militancy re-emerged in the post-Wiehahn period. A new editor had been appointed in mid-1979, Merle Favis, and she grasped the opportunity of redefining the SALB as a journal that would, once again, record the day-to-day

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\* E. Webster (ed.), Essays in South African Labour History, (Raven Press 1978).

struggles of workers more closely. In September 1980 the SALB brought out an edition on the strikes at Ford (Vol. 6 No. 2 & 3) and in December 1980, the SALB began a strike series. The first edition (Vol. 6 no. 5) focused on the 1980 cotton workers' strike in Pinetown and the meat workers' strike in Cape Town. The second edition (Vol. 6 no. 6) focused on strikes in Putco, the media and Allied Publishing. The third edition focused exclusively on the Johannesburg Municipal Workers strike of 1980. (Vol. 6 no. 7).

The SALB's growing institutional autonomy led it, during this phase, to develop more clearly its role as an independent critic. This was most evident in the articles by Maree where he critically evaluated the organising activities of NAAWU in the Ford dispute (Vol. 6 no. 2/3) and SAAWU in East London (Vol. 7 no. 4/5). Both articles were to re-open the on-going debate on the relationship of the intellectual to the workers' movement. Above all this phase of the SALB was shaped by the shift in state strategy towards black workers and the intense debate around the workers' response to this. The SALB had given 50 typed pages of evidence to the Wiehahn Commission in January 1978 and had carried a detailed critique of the Commission's findings in April 1979 (Vol. 5 no. 2). In November 1979 we received a memorandum from the Western Province General Workers Union strongly critical of the decision of some groups, such as FOSATU, to register. After considerable debate we published the memo in Vol. 5 no. 4 (Nov. 1979). This was to trigger off an acrimonious debate inside the SALB. Two positions were reflected in the pages of the SALB; those who saw the decision to register as tactically wise (Fine, de Clerq and Innes in Vol.7 nos. 1 & 2) and those who saw it as surrendering to state control (Haysom and Hirsch, Nicol in Vol.7 no.39). This debate was to be a turning point in the SALB. Not only did the SALB provide the only written record of this important debate, but it was also to establish the SALB

as a genuinely independent forum for the emerging trade unions opening up a new phase in our history.

Phase 5.....

This new phase coincided with the Unity talks that began in August 1981 in Langa when increasingly support grew for a more united trade union movement. The wave of detentions of trade unionists in 1981, including our editor, Merle Favis, was to underline the need for unity within the labour movement. This commitment to a united movement enabled the SALB to play more effectively its central role of recording the struggles inside the movement and providing background information on issues of broad interest to the labour movement. This has taken a number of different forms:

- a) In late 1981 we began a Briefing section in the SALB that has proved highly successful. In these briefings we have tried to capture key issues in labour in summary form.
- b) At the beginning of 1982 we appointed a research officer, Jeremy Baskin, who, in the 15 months he was with us, transformed our coverage of contemporary labour by writing a number of in-depth articles. This side of the SALB's activities is now being expanded in an attempt to provide a more thorough monitoring of contemporary labour.
- c) We have been able to run more articles of practical value to the labour movement such as studies that look at maternity agreements in other countries or compare different health and safety agreements.
- d) In 1983 the offices of the SALB were moved under the direction of the new editor, Doug Hindson, to Johannesburg, separate from any trade union grouping, with regular funding and proper office equipment.

The SALB is now well placed to continue critically to reflect and serve the needs of the emerging trade

union movement. We feel we have fulfilled our intention, first stated 10 years ago, to help workers understand the social and economic situation in which they operate. We have not always done this in ways in which the trade unionists have agreed and certainly not in ways in which we foresaw when we gathered first to discuss the idea of a Bulletin on 30th May 1973. The role of the intellectual within the workers' movement is one of on-going debate.

A crucial question raised by this account of "10 years of the SALB" is the effect our increasingly institutional autonomy has had on our capacity to play a role within the worker's movement. Has the lack of direct union control made us too "academic" or has our independence from any specific union group, and the wider range of links that accompanied this, strengthened our capacity to play a supportive but critical role? We would welcome comments from readers on this question.

Our only regret, as we celebrate 10 years of the SALB, is that we do not have with us Richard Turner, who played a vital part in the foundation of the Bulletin. His untimely death by an assassin's bullet in the early morning of 8th January 1978, deprived us of a remarkable colleague. Our best tribute to Rick, and warning to the assassin, is that his ideas and commitment to a non-racial democratic workers' movement lives on in the pages of the SALB.

(Eddie Webster, Johannesburg, June 1984.)