

## **LOCATING MUNICIPAL WORKERS IN THE MOMENT OF 1973**

John Mowbray

The notion of a “Durban moment” is intended to reflect how the 1973 wave of strikes signaled a profound shift in ideas and consciousness in the locality of Durban. On the one hand there was the intellectual awakening linked to the names of Steve Biko and Rick Turner. On the other a wave of strikes that spread throughout the Greater Durban Area. This moment is seen as having reverberated across the country, ultimately leading to the Youth uprisings of 1976 and the spread of new ideas about rebuilding the union movement and new approaches to working class struggle. This paper is concerned with the question of how these events impacted on municipal workers and whether and how working class consciousness and action was shifted in this sector.

Municipal workers’ participation in the strike wave lasted from Monday 5<sup>th</sup> to Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> of February and marked “the most tense and dramatic period” in its course; what had been action in industrial areas moved to the CBD as well as directly affected white suburban areas. This was also the point at which the wave broke and turned into more sporadic but on-going strike activity which lasted into 1974 and beyond. The local and central government began to fear the possibility of a general strike. On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> a municipal workers’ march was broken up and 106 arrested, imprisoned overnight, and put through a summary Magistrates Court appearance on the following day. In the afternoon camouflage-clad riot police reinforcements were flown in from Pretoria.

This moment of municipal workers’ action was the first recorded strike by any municipal workers in Durban other than the 1917 white workers’ “soviet”. The paper will attempt to flesh out what exactly happened to trigger the municipal strike and will critically examine this moment in the context of previous attempts to organize African workers and of what we know of the history of the Durban Indian Municipal Employees Society (DIMES). It will examine the subsequent organization of municipal workers in Durban and the nature of ensuing divisions amongst African workers in terms of political or ideological consciousness during the 1980s. Divisions amongst the municipal workforce in Durban will also be examined in the context of how these meshed with skills and occupations. The paper will show how the more conservative DIMES experienced a considerable shift in its leadership and political outlook. How did this come about? What changed and what stayed the same? Finally, the paper will consider what themes and issues still require considerable research.