

Book Feature

Boekbeskouing

W.P. Visser, *Van MWU tot Solidariteit: Geskiedenis van die Mynwerkersunie 1902-2002*
Solidariteit, Centurion, 2008

xx + 384 pp

ISBN 978 0 620 421 42 3

An organisational and political history

Labour history, very much including the history of labour organisations, loomed large as a project amongst the revisionist historians of the 1970s and 1980s; they explored themes such as the interrelationship of class and politics in work which was highly politicised responding to the growing black labour resistance to the state. The study of white unionists and white labour, especially in the first militant quarter of the twentieth century, was a major part of this project. However, subjects that slid off the political screen were neglected. Nobody could deny the economic importance of the gold mining industry, but white gold miners? Once past the heroic – if at times misguided – phase of semi-insurrections leading up to the Rand Revolt of 1922, these overtly racist beneficiaries of the colour bar were best ignored, simply part of the problem. Thus we can feel very indebted to Wessel Visser for his painstaking attempt to fill this major gap. Without painting a more attractive picture of white gold miners than is justified, he has significantly added to South African labour history with this lengthy monograph, the first published book-length study of the Mine-Workers' Union (MWU). The organisation of the work into chronically logical chapters gives convincing shape to this study which covers several generations of economic history.

Visser returns in the earliest section of the book to the militant strike period which has been studied in depth by the Simons', Elaine Katz, Frederick Johnstone, Robert Davies, David Yudelman, Baruch Hirson, and most recently Jonathan Hyslop and especially Jeremy Krikler, but this is largely by way of an introduction to his subject. These struggles were wider in scope than the gold mines alone, although much has been written of contemporary mining conditions. The result is a familiar and relatively brief study of a phase which began when most white miners were migrants from Britain, mine-work was punctuated by very high accident rates and accompanied by truly horrific levels of death from silicosis and ended with the least skilled work going overwhelmingly to Afrikaners. Organised mine-workers did not keep unpublished records that survive from this period, so there has been no new source of historical information there.

It is really in the following phase where Visser strikes off on his own trail. Here we have a period when miners, poorly educated, still afflicted with mines-related disease and heavily oppressed by their working conditions which improved only very slowly, were misled one way and another by manipulative forces from above. To begin with, the union leadership was linked to the Labour Party and led by English speakers, including Charles Harris, notoriously murdered by a victimized worker in 1939. The failure of the Rand Revolt had not led to the disappearance of the important layer of white workers on the mine: the harsh racial order underground remained, but white numbers were fewer and their pay reduced. The government

gradually became closer to Anglo-American and its Corner House compères. As is well-known, a section of the Afrikaner nationalist movement, associated particularly with Albert Hertzog, tried to “win” over the miners from the blandishments of class consciousness to the cause of the nation in a heavily ideologically laden and well-supported drive that lasted many years and much exercised radical activists and scholars. In fact, despite the corrupt nature of the union and the sense of alienation from the Harris-Brodrick leadership felt by most white miners, a feeling of distance and mistrust vis-à-vis the Hertzogites remained and they never succeeded entirely. Afrikaner workers were always much less happy to trust the Afrikaner elite than was hoped or feared and they sensed that the National Party was never a worker’s party. For many years, moreover, the Smuts government was able to use wartime regulations to prevent any insurgent takeover of the union. Of course, it is also true that Charles Harris and other Labour-leaning MWU officials were every bit as committed to the colour bar as was Hertzog. Visser concurs with previous scholarship that the structural position of those mine-workers without clear skill qualifications was so weak that dependence on state patronage and the broader South African politics of race were absolutely critical to their maintaining their niche position.

The situation changed finally around the great electoral shift of 1948. Here for the first time, key mining constituencies voted Nationalist and at last the Englishman was ousted from union leadership. The dominant figure for many thereafter was Daan Ellis, a one-time schoolteacher who had been jailed for sexual offences for six months in Victoria West in 1931. Ellis was probably quite corrupt, loved the ladies, played the horses and in particular enjoyed his Scotch. However, he was also far from ineffective as a union leader, a good organiser and in his way a pragmatist. Thus right-wing Nationalists though both may have been, his originally good relationship with the prudish ideologue Hertzog deteriorated drastically. A third figure in this game was a Jewish émigré from Berlin named Jan (Hans?) Gleisner. Devoted to the workers’ cause, but fanatical in personality, it was Gleisner who had discovered that the old union leadership was not only in the pocket of Jan Smuts, but also in the pay of the Chamber of Mines, exposed the truth in print and as such was the man who finally engineered the fall of Harris’ successors. However, he also was scandalised by Ellis. With Gleisner’s aid, Hertzog and his supporters tried again and again to bring Ellis down through use of the courts, as well as the influence of the ruling party. However, to the top Nationalist Party leaders, Ellis, even if a bit of a scoundrel, was a valuable asset, whereas Hertzog, so out of line as to demand the nationalisation of the mines in 1948, was seen as a slightly fantastic character from another era. The results were an exhausting set of court cases, painstakingly captured by Visser; at the end of each, in very bald summary, the ball was tossed back at the union to solve its own problems.

The death of Ellis in 1963 opened up a new era at a time when the white gold miners, generally able to bask in the warmth of national political support for their increasingly acceptable economic position, were beginning to seem too costly to mines management. Two years later, an experiment at labour restructuring was conducted on numerous mines and the prize was dangled of a coherently structured and raised monthly pay packet for MWU members, but white miners came to fear that this might be a stage towards returning to the conditions that had led to the 1922 revolt. The resultant conflict was one of the first skirmishes in the struggles between “*verkramptes*” and “*verligtes*” in the National Party, taking advantage of the administrative weakness of the union.

After a series of conflicts including significant strikes, the dominant figure that emerged for the union was Arrie Paulus. Paulus became notorious as the epitome of white worker racist reaction to the emerging opposition of black South Africans to the *status quo*. Visser provides a different approach to his career. He sees Paulus as a reliable and determined negotiator and organiser who built up union power effectively and always stood at arm's length from the Broederbond and any other Afrikaner bourgeois organisation eager to capture the miners for their own purposes. Relations with corporate South Africa never became easy. It was Paulus' disciple and successor, Peet Ungerer, who told Visser in 2001 that "*die Kamer van Mynwese is die slimste, die rykste en die skelmste werkgewer in die wêreld. Daar is nie einde aan sy sonde nie*" (p 350). Such class-bound sentiments would certainly have echoed amongst black miners strangely enough. However, Paulus at first presided over many years of unprecedentedly favourable conditions. The mine-workers had the support of the National Party broadly on the one hand, while on the other, they profited from favourable economic conditions to achieve a level of prosperity undreamt of before the Second World War. In this period, as other writers such as Francis Wilson have indignantly written, they collectively earned two times as much money as the entire black workforce (which was literally nearly ten times as large), while their benefits reached decent levels.

From the middle 1970s, however, there was a growing parting of the ways between white workers and management as the pressures already manifest in the early 1960s deepened and were joined by growing problems in company control over black labour that forced management to think about new solutions. MWU members became mistrustful and hostile to the dominant forces in the National Party as the "*verkramptes*" began to lose out to the "*verligtes*". "... [D]ie verhouding tussen die NP en die MWU uitendelik nie net versuur nie, maar van die kant van die vakbond in bittere vyandskap laat oorgaan" (p 231). Equal defiance was hurled at those trade unions that began after the Wiehahn Commission issued the first parts of its report in 1979 to accept members who were not white; these were inevitably unions that organised more clearly definably skilled workers who could protect their wages through imposing barriers around skill rather than race, a key point long made by Eddie Webster in his studies of labour history.

This march to the right was led by Paulus until 1987 and thereafter by Ungerer. Visser recreates the political balance on the right at the time of the freeing of Nelson Mandela and into the transition era, a phase in which white intransigence was not matched by any structural unity or plan of action. However, an important initiative was the development of the MWU into a "super white union" aimed at the sustenance of white workers in heavy industry more generally, starting on the eve of Wiehahn and marked by membership growth. Here the MWU would gradually prove more plausible and more attractive than any potential rival as the political situation became starker.

Up until 1994, the main political idea was to hope that the HNP or KP might oust the NP amongst the white electorate, although the MWU never finally threw its weight entirely behind either party or, indeed, Eugene Terreblanche's Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging, which attracted many members. This strategy then became transparently a blind alley, particularly since the union was less eager to defy new legislation openly than might be expected. Instead, with the late 1990s, (Ungerer

retired in 1997), a quite new era dawned. Flip Buys, grandson of a 1922 militant, a Potchefstroom graduate in political science and communications and never remotely himself a miner, became Chief Secretary. Under new, university-educated leadership, MWU transmogrified into the non-partisan union federation Solidarity, began to attract white collar workers (20% of its membership today are women), was able to move beyond simply defending the race barrier (15% of its membership are not white), as it energetically tried to find legal ground on which to oppose affirmative action. It also could both ally with the National Union of Mine-Workers (NUM) over economic issues and create successful networks, media interventions and a wide range of new services that fitted the transformation of the middle and lower class layers of Afrikaners in the early twenty-first century. Today Solidarity revels in the same kind of corporate language that emanates from business college literature and courses on organisation more generally. Where to mention that Harris or Gleisner were Jews was once enough to damn them in true Nationalist eyes, the new leadership went to Israel to learn from Histadrut as best international trade union practice. Under Ellis and Paulus, strong figures, the union often seemed a very authoritarian structure governed by a power that could also seem brittle when crisis broke; organisational structure was the source of major battles that could have been settled in less heated ways. By contrast, Solidarity has adopted a far more democratic structure of administration. With a membership now well into six figures, Solidarity, argues Visser, is probably the most successful post-apartheid Afrikaner organisation so far constructed.

This study is a labour of love which really deserved a responsible and more attractive university press production. Its intensive use of public and union records over decades, supplemented with important interview material, makes it an important source for any interested scholars and its judgements are largely convincing. This ties into Visser's clarity of vision which creates a strong sense of movement over time; his capture of organisational issues seems unanswerable.

This is however an organisational and political history. There is a very different kind of study needed by social historians who capture memory and voice and articulate lived experience, rather than the flow of struggle and the structural constraints. In addition, there is not enough about work itself: one often feels the need to know far more what is going on in terms of technology and life at the mineshaft directly, and especially in the last chapters. It also seems strange, even if that is what the records reveal, that the great upheavals amongst black miners, in 1920, in 1946, again in the 1970s, and on to 1987, seem to have been happening on another planet. Paulus never seemed to grasp, for instance, that the changing attitudes of the mine management had little or nothing to do with the sway of "liberalism" or "communism" amongst them, but were a response to really dramatic challenges from black workforce that made holding the racial line in the old way impossible. And how does the mineshaft look today? Perhaps Visser's rather enthusiastic salute to present-day Solidarity might be tempered if the social dimension were as open as in the initial chapters.

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Unequaled in its measured use of union and archival sources

This book is a meticulously written account of the rise of the MWU in the turmoil of the Witwatersrand gold industry during the early twentieth century. It addresses the MWU struggle to protect the interests of white mine-workers (increasingly white Afrikaner workers) throughout the century. The book ends with a useful account of the transformation of the MWU into its current manifestation as the still Afrikaans-speaking, but now non-racial ethnic umbrella union, Solidarity.

One is struck at how racially encapsulated the history of the MWU was, despite constant efforts by elite Afrikaners like Albert Hertzog and Piet Meyer to focus it on Afrikaner ethnicity.¹ It started with English-speaking immigrants and came to include Afrikaans-speakers only as white miners became less skilled, but the struggle to capture the union for the Afrikaner movement was only resolved (if then) with the National Party electoral victory in 1948. Broederbond Daan Ellis, who was elected General Secretary in 1948, involved the union in Afrikaner cultural activities such as the opening of the Voortrekker Monument. It seems, however, that Ellis was also inclined to corruption and hence subject to self-righteous sneak attacks by Albert Hertzog, whose discontent with the Afrikaner Broederbond apparently came to a head when he was instructed by the Afrikaner secret society to lay off Ellis despite his record. It was only with the accession to power of Arrie Paulus in 1967 that struggles for Afrikaner support within the union stabilized with an inclination to support Hertzog's vehemently anti-English and anti-communist Herstigste point of view. Whatever the struggles around which Afrikaner political tendency the union was to follow (and for years Paulus played both sides against the middle), one thing remained adamant – commitment to the exclusive right of white workers to qualify for blasting certificates. In 1979, the union broke decisively with the National Party over the likelihood the “reformist” state might abrogate that right, as suggested by the Wiehahn Commission. In this regard, Paulus was quite willing to call his union out on strike against its own “Afrikaner” government. In the end, of course, National Party reforms and lay-offs on the gold mines made the MWU defence of white blasting certificates less and less sustainable. As a result, long before ANC accession to power, the union was trying to recreate itself under a racial umbrella, recruiting members from related industries. This prepared the way after 1997 with the appointment of the youthful Flip Buys as General Secretary, for the radical reformation of the MWU into Solidarity; a voluntary association open to Christian Afrikaans-speaking workers regardless of race, but strongly opposed to what it calls unfair affirmative action and deeply committed to the education and welfare of its members.² While the old MWU had been sharply hierarchical, Solidarity was organised horizontally into units that were expected to be self-sustaining.³ The appeal

1 I should add that such racial encapsulation was an aspect of South African organisational reality. The “official” history of the much shorter life of the black National Union of Mineworkers is equally encapsulated – V L Allen, *The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: Volume III, The Rise and Struggles of the National Union of Mineworkers, 1982-1994* (Moor Press, Keighly, 2003). While the MWU was radically committed to racial protection for white workers, the NUM was committed to African advancement in the same industry, yet the histories of each union are written with only passing mention of the other. Managements were obliged to negotiate an unsteady path between the two.

2 Buys' model was the Israeli Histadrut.

3 I am reminded of how Derek Keys described to me his reorganisation of Gencor in the middle 1980s.

was to Afrikaner solidarity of white-collar workers, protecting their skills from affirmative action, rather than the blue-collar solidarity of white workers along racial lines. One might then argue that Flip Buys has taken the union back from dogged defence of “the apartheid myth” to a spirited return to “the Afrikaner imaginary” (*die volkseie*),⁴ affirming Afrikaner skills against what is now perceived to be the “racism” of affirmative action.

As an “official” history, like Vic Allen’s recently published history of the much shorter life of the National Union of Mine-Workers, Visser’s book tends to focus on union head office goings-on, rather than providing an account of union organisation at the local level. Moreover, despite a graphic cover photograph of white workers underground,⁵ the book deals not at all with social relations underground at the point of production. In his introduction the author acknowledges these omissions,⁶ but this nonetheless remains, to my mind, the greatest shortcoming of the book. Even a brief account of the longstanding violence of underground labour control would have added an additionally poignant dimension to Visser’s account of unskilled white worker insecurities in the face of potential competition from black workers, political violence within the union and physical violence at meetings in so-called “mining constituencies”, and the vehemence of the MWU’s rejection of the Wiehahn Commission recommendations.⁷

That said, within the limitations of its intent (Visser explicitly asserts that he is writing a political history of the union), this book is unequalled in its measured use of union and archival sources. Also, I thought Visser’s “introductions” to each chapter, providing the socio-economic and political setting for more detailed events, were masterfully written. While, like Allen’s book, one finds oneself sometimes bogged down in detailed accounts of internal strife, this is an indispensable source for those seeking to understand the impact of South African transformations on one of the central organisations of the Afrikaner working class. As such it casts light not only on an important aspect of the racial South African past, but also points towards how some committed Afrikaners are framing a new and different ethnic future for a new, highly skilled Afrikaner working class.

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4 Here I am borrowing the language of Aletta Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (Verso, London, 1996), although, of course, the struggle to protect the privileges of white mine-workers against the rapacious capitalism of the Chamber of Mines long predated the apartheid regime – and indeed the Afrikaner movement itself

5 There is no acknowledgement of the sources for any photographs in this book

6 He asserts lack of sources and urges further research

7 For a provocative and stimulating account of white South African mine worker violence, see Keith Breckenridge, “The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the South African Goldmines, 1900-1950”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4, 1998, and my own more historical and structural development of the argument, in T D Moodie, “Maximum Average Violence: Underground Assaults on the South African Gold Mines, 1913-1965”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 3, 2005 Reference to the argument of these articles, based on archival sources as well as interviews, would have added an additional (if rather uncomfortable) dimension to Visser’s history

’n Stewige grondslag vir die bestudering van die transformasie van arbeidsbewegings

Met hierdie studie van die transformasie van die Mynwerkersunie van ’n blanke arbeidsorganisasie onder beheer van feitlik uitsluitlik immigrant Engelse mynwerkers tot ’n voertuig vir die beskerming van die belange van die verstedelike Afrikaner-mynwerkers tot uiteindelik die vakbond vir blanke arbeid oor die volle spektrum van die arbeidsveld in ’n andersoortige rasdiskriminerende omgewing van die een-en-twintigste eeu, het Wessel Visser stewige navorsing gelewer. Sistematiese omvattende navorsing in argiewe, biblioteke en persoonlike onderhoude het ’n gedetailleerde verhaal geskets van ’n honderd jaar van vakbondwese in die mynbedryf in Suid-Afrika. Visser neem die leser deur die fase van buitelandse oorheersing teen die agtergrond van sosialisties-kommunisties geïnspireerde vakbondaksies van die negentiende eeu, na die twintigste eeuse kostekonflik met mynkapitaal. Die verhaal van die ontwikkeling van die Suid-Afrikaanse goudmynbedryf en die afhanklikheid van relatief goedkoop beskikbare arbeid, word geskets teen die agtergrond van die verlies van politieke soewereiniteit deur Afrikaners in die Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek en die naasliggende Oranje Vrijstaat. Na Uniewording is blanke politieke mag verskans weens Britse imperiale belange en kon die politieke heersers in die Unie arbeid beskerm tot so ’n mate as wat hulle stempubliek vereis het. Die beskerming van blanke arbeid in die mynbedryf het ingepas by die politieke magsbalans totdat internasionale ekonomiese omstandighede na die Depressie van die 1930s en die afstanddoening van die goudstandaard toenemend kostedruk op die mynbedryf geplaas het. Daarna het die blanke arbeiders ontbeerlik geword, omdat goedkoper swart arbeid beskikbaar was. Die politieke sukses van die Nasionale Party en die Arbeiders Party in 1924 lui dan ’n periode in waarna georganiseerde blanke arbeid en sy politieke vennoot statutêre verskansing vir arbeid verleen het.

Die verhaal van die MWU vloei saam met hierdie politieke magspel solank as wat die Suid-Afrikaanse politieke bestel deur blankes oorheers is. Na 1994 het die toneel handomkeer verander en was blanke arbeid sonder enige politieke vennoot in die regering. Die geskiedenis van die MWU, soos Visser dit met Calvinistiese deeglikheid beskryf, is vir die periode tot voor die Pakt-regering, die verhaal van alle vakbonde: ’n konstante stryd tussen werkgewer en arbeid oor werksomstandighede, lone en bedingingsgeleenthede. Na 1924 word die invloed van blanke arbeid verskans deur die toegang tot die regerende party, verromantiseer onder die verheerliking van Afrikanernasionalisme en volkstrots. Die interne stryd tussen vakbondleiers, veral sedert die dertigerjare tot in die sestigerjare, vertoon die tipiese magstryd onder individue in ’n beskermdede omgewing: blanke beheer oor die MWU was nie in gedrang nie en politieke beheer ook nie. Persoonlike magsmisbruik het plaasgevind. Persoonlikhede het gebots en korrupsie is gepleeg. Die verhouding met die Nasionale Party-regering versuur dramaties wanneer ekonomiese druk die rasgesegregeerde politieke bewind dwing tot politieke kompromis. Visser beskryf met gedissiplineerde deeglikheid hoe die verandering in die beleid van die regerende party teen die sewentigerjare die beskerming van blanke arbeid ondermyn en dan tot konflik tussen die MWU en die owerheid aanleiding gegee het. Uiteindelik het die verwydering van alle beskerming vir blanke arbeid die MWU verplig om sy doelstellings fundamenteel te heroorweeg. In die laaste hoofstuk verduidelik Visser hoe leierskapstyle aanpas by die nuwe omgewing en gevolg gee aan nuwe insigte en bestaanstrategieë. Die rol van Ungerer in die MWU was dié van ’n verantwoordelike oorgangsfiguur: hy het

geleidelik die fokus op die werk- en bestaansbeveiliging van lede herstel. Uiteindelik was dit Buys wat die MWU na 'n ander vlak van optrede sou neem. Die MWU het 'n breë arbeidsorganisasie vir blankes geword, 'n organisasie wat na die totale werker omsien: as mens, as werker, as Afrikaner met 'n geskiedenis, 'n nasionalisme, 'n trots en menswaardigheid.

Die boek behandel die ontwikkeling van blanke arbeidsorganisasie in die mynbedryf vanaf die ontdekking van goud tot die resente reorganisasie van die vakbond tot 'n omvattende arbeidsorganisasie oorkoepelend oor bedryfssektore met die doel om volksgenote en eensgesindes in 'n nuwe sosio-politieke omgewing te beskerm. Die hoofstukke is chronologies georganiseer. Die eerste hanteer die periode tussen 1902 en 1929, synde die aanvanklike organisasie van blanke mynwerkers en die invloed van sosialistiese internasionale vakbondorganisasies. In Hoofstuk 2 word die periode tot 1948 behandel, waartydens die interne struweling tussen vakbondorganisasie, partypolitieke affiliasie en persoonlikhede baie interessante leesstof gee. Verwysings na misbruike van mag en posies herinner aan die hedendaagse politieke bestel. In Hoofstuk 3 is daar die nouer verweefdheid met die regerende Nasionale Party in die periode tot 1963. Hierdie hoofstuk skets die simbiotiese saambestaan tussen die MWU en die Nasionale Partyregering en berei die weg voor vir Hoofstuk 4 waarin die gemaklike saambestaan geleidelik aan politieke verandering onderwerp is. In die voorlaaste hoofstuk word die periode van 1977 tot 1987 behandel. Dit verteenwoordig die beëindiging van regeringsondersteuning en die begin van konfrontasie met die Nasionale Party. In hierdie periode word die grondslag gevorm vir die ontwikkeling van 'n breër organisasie van blanke arbeid buite om die voorheen eksklusiewe mynbedryf na die behartiging van die bestaansbeveiliging van alle blanke werkers. Die laaste hoofstuk verduidelik die transformasie van die MWU tot Solidariteit en die nuwe visie van die groter vakbondbeweging, met 'n nuwe klem op opleiding, voorbereiding en beskerming van blanke arbeid in 'n kompeterende, veelrassige omgewing.

Wessel Visser se werk verdien 'n kompliment. Dit is deeglike navorsing. Die boek is redelik goed geskryf: soms is die taalgebruik bietjie stram en formeel. Die woord “verreësing” val vreemd op my oor; “generasie” kan maklik “geslag” wees; die stramme glottale “poog” klink minder geforseer as “probeer” gebruik word, ensovoorts. Op 'n paar plekke word die historiese lyn versteur met 'n “insetsel van biografiese gegewens” wat goedskiks in 'n afsonderlike raam of voetnoot verstreë sou kon word. Die studie is inderdaad sterk polities georiënteer, soos in die voorwoord gewaarsku word. Daar is 'n ongemak met die hantering van ekonomiese vaktiaal: op bladsy 102 word na die goudstandaard as grondslag vir die land se monetêre sisteem verwys as “'n fiskale maatreeël” – dit is juis 'n kenmerk van monetêre beleid en het niks met owerheidsbesteding te doen nie. Op bladsy 177 word verwys na die Amerikaanse verandering in wisselkoersbeleid, waardeur die vaste wisselkoers van die dollar aan 'n vaste hoeveelheid fyn goud laat vaar is en 'n swewende wisselkoersstelsel ingelui is. Dit is nie die “goudprys wat ontkoppel” is nie, maar vaste wisselkoerse wat laat vaar is met die gevolg dat die goudprys ook deur markvraag vasgestel is. Kleinere soortgelyke terminologiese onsuiverhede kom voor.

Die studie is swaar belaaï met besonderhede. Dit sal die teks waarskynlik moeilik toeganklik vir die algemene leserspubliek maak. Die boek gaan egter nie gebuk aan een of ander ideologiese dienstigheid nie en dit laat die geleentheid vir die

leser om self tot gevolgtrekkings te kom. Die slotbeskouing is 'n goed gebalanseerde samevatting van die debat rondom verklarings vir blanke arbeidermilitansie. Dit dui op die verweefdheid van die verarming van Afrikaners en die lotgevalle van die mynwerkers. Visser wys daarop dat Afrikanermynwerkers nie eenvoudige pionne in die mobilisasiestrategie van die Afrikanerelite was nie, maar juis botsing meegebring het met nasionalistiesgesinde Afrikanerorganisasies wat die werkers vir ander oogmerke wou gebruik. Na die middel van die 1940s is groter politieke betrokkenheid bespeur. Solidariteit is egter die begin van 'n totaal vernude strategie om 'n omvattende bestaansbeveiliging aan alle lede te bied. Dit het dan ook gelei tot die diversifikasie van die werksaamhede van die eens nougesette vakbond na 'n totale sosiale opheffings- en sorgstrategie. Hierdie boek bied 'n stewige grondslag vir die bestudering van die transformasie van arbeidsbewegings in die groter globale konteks van die herlewing van liberale markeconomieë en groter mededinging.

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'n Betekenisvolle hydrae

“Arbeid” bied 'n belangrike sleutel tot enige poging om die moderne wêreld te begryp. Nie dat die pre-moderne wêreld nie iets soos arbeid geken het nie, maar anders as in die pre-moderne wêreld, is dit eers in die moderne wêreld dat arbeid bewustelik as 'n sleutel tot die geskiedenis ervaar is. Niemand het die moderne belangrikheid van arbeid dan ook so verwoord as John Locke, die groot liberale denker van die sewentiende eeu nie. Volgens Locke het die natuur ons van karige middele voorsien. Daarom, het hy gesê, is ons genoodsaak om deur middel van ons arbeid 'n wêreld vir onself te skep – en ons eie geskiedenis so te “maak”. “*Labour,*” het hy daarom ook geskryf, “*makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world.*” Die belangrikheid wat 'n latere moderne denker soos Marx aan arbeid as 'n vormende krag in die geskiedenis toegeken het, is 'n direkte gevolg van die wyse waarop Locke daarvoor nagedink het.

Die vraag is natuurlik wat hierdie enkele opmerkings hoegenaamd met die uitstekende werk van Wessel Visser oor die geskiedenis van die vakbond en arbeidersbeweging, MWU/Solidariteit, te doen het. Visser het immers in sy breedvoerige en gedetailleerde verhaal verkies om nie oor die idee-historiese agtergrond van die begrip “arbeid” te skryf of sy werk daarbinne te situeer nie. In 'n goed geskrewe werk wat meer as 400 bladsye beslaan, skryf Visser eerder op 'n nougesette wyse oor die verwikkelde politieke drama wat homself vanaf die militante aanvangsjare van die Mynwerkersunie tot en met sy omvorming tot die hedendaagse Solidariteit ontvou het. In hierdie geskiedenis word daar op 'n uiters sorgsame wyse met die magtige hoeveelheid detail van hierdie drama omgegaan. In die proses is daar kwalik ruimte om dit binne die groter idee-historiese konteks van die begrip “arbeid” te situeer en eersgenoemde van daaruit te begryp.

Dit mag so wees dat Visser nie die idee-historiese agtergrond rondom die begrip “arbeid” direk in sy werk betrek nie. Nogtans is dit een van die weliswaar versweë, maar tog sentrale vooronderstellings waarop sy werk rus. As ons die geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika en in die besonder van twintigste-eeue Afrikaners wil verstaan, is die fokus op arbeid 'n belangrike en selfs onontbeerlike invalshoek daarop.

Want, lui dié vooronderstelling, dit is in en deur die wyse waarop blanke- en in die besonder Afrikanerwerkers hulle arbeid tydens die twintigste eeu georganiseer het, wat hulle 'n beslissende rol in dié geskiedenis gespeel het. Hulle het hulle geskiedenis onder meer in en deur hulle arbeid "gemaak", om dit Lockiaans te formuleer. Met die deurlees van die werk word die leser dan ook met een oorweldigende feit gelaat: 'n mens kan eenvoudig nie die geskiedenis van die Afrikaners begryp sonder om ook hulle arbeidsgeskiedenis (die MWU se vroeë betrokkenheid by die goudmyne aan die Rand; die stakings tydens die 1910's en 1920's; die betrokkenheid van die MWU by die nasionale beweging onder Afrikaners en sy breuk met die NP tydens die latere jare van die 1970's, ensovoorts) in ag te neem nie. Arbeid is ook 'n sleutel tot die verstaan van die Afrikaner se geskiedenis. Soos dit 'n goeie akademikus betaam, is Visser deeglik van hierdie vooronderstelling bewus.

Visser skryf hierdie vooronderstelling uit deur onder meer te fokus op die verwarde politiek wat hom oor 'n tydperk van 'n eeu tussen die Afrikaanse, Engelse en swart arbeiders, vakbondeleiers en partypolitici uit byvoorbeeld die ou NP, die Arbeiders, die VP, die latere HNP en die KP voltrek het. In die proses fokus hy onder meer op miskien een van die boeiendste stukke geskiedenis uit die vorige eeu, naamlik die dramatiese wendinge wat op die gebied van arbeid deur die verslae van die destydse Wiehahn-kommissie oor werkreservering (die eerste verslag in 1979, die sesde in 1981) aangekondig is. "Dramaties", omdat hierdie reëling op die gebied van arbeid in die gewisse sin van die woord ook die einde van die Afrikaners se heerskappy oor die land aangekondig het. Daarmee onderstreep Visser dubbel en dwars dat arbeid en politiek mekaar wedersyds beïnvloed.

In hierdie verband het hierdie leser veral die voorlaaste hoofstuk, wat handel oor die rol van die MWU tydens die vuurwarm Afrikanerpolitiek van die 1970's en 1980's, as boeiend ervaar. Arbeid en politiek, vakbond en party was in dié jare in 'n besonder intense spanningsverhouding ingeskryf. Visser dui op 'n genuanseerde en objektiewe wyse aan hoe die MWU se historiese verbintenis met die Nasionale Party in dié tyd aan spanning onderwerp is en daar uiteindelik 'n volledige breuk tussen hulle ingetree het. Dit alles onder meer vanweë die dubbelsinnige wyse waarop die NP sy beleid van werkreservering hanteer het: enersyds het die party in antwoord op kritiek vanuit die regse wêreld voet by stuk gehou dat hy nie aan die grondslae van werkreservering torring nie; andersyds het hy juis ervaar hoe die ekonomiese, sosiale en politieke voorwaardes vir die handhawing daarvan ondermyn word. Hierdie dubbelsinnigheid hou inderdaad – en soos wat Visser tereg skryf – verband met die feit dat die nuwe elite wat die Afrikaners in dié tydperk gelei het, hulle vroeë idealisme afgeskud en hulleself toenemend op hulle materiële behoeftes toegespits het. Die NP was eenvoudig nie intellektueel in staat om hierdie spanning te bowe te kom nie. So het die gebeure in die arbeidswêreld 'n refleks geword van 'n diepliggende krisis in die simboliese orde van die destydse Afrikaners.

Locke en sy latere geesgenote het egter hulle punt oor die belangrikheid van arbeid as 'n vormende krag in die geskiedenis (en in hierdie geval die politieke gebeure in Suid-Afrika) oordryf. Anders as wat hulle gedink het, kan die ganse geskiedenis nie slegs as die resultaat van ons arbeid (ons tegniese ingrepe op en ons bewuste maak van die geskiedenis) beskou word nie. Visser maak hom egter nie aan hierdie teoretiese oordrywing skuldig nie. Buiten dat sy werk nie deur teoretiese pretensies gekenmerk word nie, staan dit met groot sorg en verantwoordelikheid by

die verwickelde detail van sy verhaal stil. Die indruk wat die geheel dan ook by 'n mens laat, is 'n besondere sin vir balans, ewewig en 'n gesonde neiging om nie sonder meer sy "objek" van studie aan 'n oordeel te onderwerp nie. In die proses bring hy ook nuwe perspektiewe en belangrike kwalifikasies ten opsigte van die bestaande geskiedskrywing ter sprake (soos sy kwalifisering van geskiedskrywers soos O'Meara en Moody, omdat hulle vanweë hulle onderskeie teoretiese raamwerke nie voldoende begrip vir die legitieme ervaring van bedreigtheid by Afrikanerwerkers in veral die eerste dekades van die twintigste eeu het nie).

Visser het sy werk bewus rondom die politieke kante ten grondslag van die MWU/Solidariteit geskryf. In die proses het hy dikwels (of deurgaans) die fokus laat val op die werksaamhede van die vakbondbestuur en in die besonder op die persone wat aan leiding daarvan gestaan het. Dit lei geen twyfel nie dat dit 'n geldige werkswyse is. In en deur sy fokus op kleurrike figure soos die vermoorde Charles Harris, Bertie Brodrick, Paul Visser, Daan Ellis, Albert Hertzog, Ras Beyers en Arrie Paulus, ontvou 'n boeiende verhaal oor die politieke geskiedenis van onder meer die Afrikaners. Visser skryf egter self dat die klem op die politieke kante van die vakbondgeskiedenis deur 'n fokus op dinge soos die ekonomiese en sosiale kante van die geskiedenis van MWU/Solidariteit aangevul behoort te word. 'n Aanvulling van die politieke geskiedenis met 'n uitgebreide analise van die sosiale en ekonomiese kragte ten grondslag daarvan kan daartoe bydra dat ons beeld op dié geskiedenis selfs nog sterker gefokus word. Mag dit inderdaad in die toekoms bewaarheid word.

Daarby, en dit is gewoon 'n persoonlike voorkeur, sal dit ook die leesproses aansienlik aanmoedig indien die skrywer in 'n toekomstige werk ook op 'n meer breedvoerige wyse aandag skenk aan 'n situering van 'n vakbond soos MWU/Solidariteit binne die internasionale vakbondwese. Waar kom die moderne vakbonde vandaan? Watter spanninge het die verhouding tussen vakbond en staat kenmerk? Wat was die aard van die akkoord wat uiteindelik tussen staat en vakbond bereik is? Wat het van dié akkoord geword? Hoe lyk die vakbonde vandag? En hoe pas 'n vakbond soos MWU/Solidariteit binne hierdie breër historiese beeld op die vakbondwese as sodanig?

Dit bring my by 'n laaste punt. Die uitgewersbedryf het die afgelope dekades enorm baie ontwikkel. Boeke word vandag op 'n keurige en professionele wyse uitgegee. Ongelukkig is die nie waar van die werk van Visser nie. Die uitgewer kon meer moeite gedoen het om die boek volgens die jongste style en kodes in die uitgewersbedryf uit te gee. Soos dit tans lyk, kom dit egter onprofessioneel voor. Daarmee word 'n onreg aan die boek, maar ook aan die skrywer gedoen. Visser se boek is van hoogstaande gehalte. Die formele sy van die boek (uitleg, lettertipe, versorging en ontwerp van voorblad, ensovoorts) behoort dit te reflekteer.

Visser het met sy werk 'n betekenisvolle bydrae tot die geskiedskrywing van die vakbondwese in Suid-Afrika gemaak. Hyself en sy opdraggewer, Solidariteit, verdien 'n enorme pluimpie in die hoed daarvoor.

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Historical sociology?

Van MWU to Solidariteit is presented as “the first comprehensive and in-depth research project about the history of the MWU in which thorough use was made of archival sources” (p viii; this and other translations by Louwrens Pretorius). The focal points are the seriously troubled dynamics in and around the union’s general secretariat and general council over the years 1902 to 2002. The exposition is shaped by a “political point of departure” and the claim is that the history of the MWU and its offspring “unfolded primarily around political issues” (p viii). It transpires that these political issues concern, for the most part, the rise and demise of organised Afrikaner nationalism. The drive by nationalist agents – organised and individual – to capture the MWU for Afrikaner nationalism is a central part of that history. This dimension of MWU history is well-known through many publications. The distinctive contribution made by Wessel Visser in this book is, it seems to me, the attention devoted to the internal dynamics of the MWU and its transformation into a substantially different organisation, Solidarity.

I read the book as a political sociologist with an interest in historical sociology, but with limited knowledge of trade union histories. My question is: what does the book bring to sociological comprehension of the rise and decline of Afrikaner nationalism and of the associated form of state?

Although the National Party (as party and as government), departments of state, ministers and members of legislatures, commissions of inquiry and courts figure in the history, the book does not say very much about the state. One can, of course, infer state dynamics from actions and reactions in and around the union, but even so this book does not add to what we know from other studies. Hence the part of my question that refers to the state is answered. What remains is to consider the book’s value for comprehending the rise and decline of Afrikaner nationalism.

While preparing for this review I came across commentary on a study of the British Transport and General Workers’ Union, in which it is claimed that:

Broadly speaking, there are three ways of writing trade union history. There is the straight biographical mode in which the life of an institution is presented in a clear chronological manner. This is not to be despised. It may be more demanding and more rewarding than some pseudo-sociological offering which prides itself upon being more analytic. Then there is the history which is organised, not around, the life story of one institution, but a cluster of occupations. ... Finally, trade union history may be written round a place.⁸

There are surely more ways to do it. Nevertheless, *Van MWU to Solidariteit* strikes me as fitting comfortably into the biographical mode. In fact, rather extensive parts of it read like occupational biographies of successive secretaries general. Biographies are increasingly important for sociological analysis. If one regards *organisation* as key to the comprehension of social formations, then organisational biographies should be doubly appreciated (irrespective of whether they have the appearance of sociological dissertations – pseudo- or otherwise).

8 R Harrison, “In Search of the Golden Rivet”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 16, 1992, pp 491

Visser stakes out a limited domain for his biography of the MWU; union management and its troubles (pp viii-ix). One explicit justification for the focus on “leading figures” is that “due to the historically bureaucratic nature of the MWU’s structures, the organisation’s activities and omissions revolved largely around the union management with the position of the general secretary as the core of managerial power” (p viii). I have no objection against the choice of focus, but the justification is flawed. Historians and others (should) choose their subjects for personal, ideological, theoretical, or practical reasons. The character of an organisation should not impose a perspective on scholarship. If it did, then histories of the Second World War death camps in Europe would be written only from the point of view of Himmler and the officials of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*.

Another justification – for “not researching ordinary members’ views of the union management” – refers to methodological and practical difficulties that would have been created by attempts to “interview ... a representative sample of ordinary members” (p ix). That is fair enough. However, the implication that a “representative sample” of interviewees (and, I would add, events and documents) may have been desirable to study “ordinary members’ views” is debatable. Such samples may well be what are *not* needed for the comprehension of social processes. As Stinchcombe puts it, contrary to received wisdom in hundreds of methods texts, “for most sociological purposes we do not care whether our sample of *units of observation*, such as persons or social groups, is representative, but rather whether we have a *good sample of differences among units of observation*”.⁹ Fantasia presents a similar argument: “The danger is that the search for a state of representativeness may overlook the most consequential cases, the principal players, the key institutions, and the rules, principles, and strategies that make them key”.¹⁰

The consequence of the decision to write a managerialist history,¹¹ is that the mine-workers cannot be heard, except remotely through descriptions of strikes, feuds between union leaders and aspirant leaders, commissions of inquiry, court cases, and the like. As the justifications for a managerialist approach indicate, Visser knows this. In fact, he has advocated the case for research on popular experiences.¹² Such decisions are also authors’ privileges. They may even make theoretical sense, but privilege and theory do not offer protection against criticism. This is so especially when authors transgress their self-selected boundaries. Visser does so. His story has (mostly arrogant and often venal) leaders and contenders for leadership as protagonists. However, in his concluding observations the narrative switches from the opinions and actions of leaders to assertions about the “mentality” of “white working class groups”, the “reaction of jobless Afrikaners”, “the conception held by many Afrikaners” (how many?) and “the motivations from mine-workers’ ranks” (pp 351-353). My difficulty with this is that I could not discern the point at which – and the

9 A L Stinchcombe, *The Logic of Social Research* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005), pp 11-12 Italics in the original

10 R Fantasia, “From Class Consciousness to Culture, Action, and Social Organization”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 21, 1995, pp 269-287 Quotation on p 274

11 On such histories see: B Freund, “Labour and Labour History in Africa: A Review of the Literature”, *African Studies Review*, 27, 2, June 1984, pp 1-58

12 W P Visser, Urbanization and Afrikaner Class Formation: The Mine Workers’ Union and the Search for a Cultural Identity Paper presented at the African Urban Spaces Conference, 28-30 March 2003, University of Texas at Austin, http://academic.sun.ac.za/history/downloads/visser/urbanization_afrikaner_class.pdf

justification in terms of which – the voices of “the elites” (Ellis, Hertzog, Gründling, Paulus, and so on) became the voices of “the workers”.¹³ The conclusions are, moreover, of limited empirical value because they are for the most part based on (two?) interviews with leaders and on secondary sources whose credibility Visser seems to accept at face value.

In short: if history for sociology must be social history, then the book might be judged to hold little value as historical sociology. History for sociology can, however, also be elite-centred; of which managerialist approaches are instances, and they focus on organisations. What, then, can *Van MWU to Solidariteit* do for historical sociology?

Its potential depends on the extent to which it can assist in filling out knowledge of the location of the *MWU-as-organisation* in the construction and destruction of Afrikaner nationalism (and perhaps of the place of Solidarity in the construction of post-apartheid society – or societies).

Have we not learnt as much as we can about such processes from, say, the works of Adam, Giliomee, Moodie, O’Meara, and others?¹⁴ I suppose that we already know a lot. We are familiar with the respective or comparative emphases on class and culture. We also know much about the role of Afrikaner nationalist organisations and their leaders in the construction and destruction of classes or ethnic groups – or, if you will, identities. Even so, it is in this regard that Visser’s book is of value, albeit indirectly. It contains a great deal of information that may be used to deepen descriptions of the relevant processes. Although Visser’s exposition is not exactly theoretically self-conscious (which may be an advantage over studies that are beholden to one grand theory or another), it does engage explicitly and implicitly with some orthodoxies in the field of work. Theoretical perspectives that focus on *organisations as actors* and on *organisation as process*¹⁵ do not seem to get much explicit support in South African political sociology. Threads of interactional analysis in which organisations are prominent actors are, nevertheless, common in studies of class, ethnic and other social processes. Hyslop, for example, points to O’Meara’s work as an exemplar of the idea that “Afrikaner nationalism” (I think it should have a capital N) was a *construction* of “social groups” and “movements”. That it is, but it is arguable that Trapido preceded O’Meara with a focus on social construction through organisation in 1963, and that Slabbert did so in 1974. Another full-length study that

13 Why are workers named *Afrikanermynwerkers* and *Afrikanerstaakbrekers* (pp 10, 18) – regardless of time, place and self-conceptions – when the heart of the story is claimed to be the struggle to get those *workers* to become *Afrikaners*?

14 H Adam and H Giliomee, *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1979); H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003); T D Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom. Power, Apartheid, and the Civil Religion* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975); D O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme. Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948* (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1983); D O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years*. (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1996).

15 See R Alford and R Friedland, *Powers of Theory* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985); R Fantasia, “From Class Consciousness to Culture, Action, and Social Organization”; A H Hawley, “The Logic of Macrosociology”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 1992, pp 1-14; G Sartori, “The Sociology of Parties A Critical Review”, Committee on Political Sociology of the International Sociological Association, *Party Systems, Party Organizations, and the Politics of the New Masses*, Institut für politische Wissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin, Berlin, 1968

fits into an organisational perspective, was published by Adam and Giliomee in 1979.¹⁶ There are others.¹⁷ It is apparent from much of what has been written (also by Visser) that, by the late 1930s, the nationalist political entrepreneurs knew what they wanted to create and what they were doing about it. However we still need to tease out the detail of “strategic encounters” between organisations and of “processes of ‘organisational mobilization (and demobilization)’”.¹⁸ This is what makes Visser’s book valuable: it is a source of information and – although they are not systematically presented – propositions about the MWU leadership’s encounters with the rise and demise of Afrikaner nationalism.

According to the extant histories of Afrikaner nationalism, organisations were *used* by political entrepreneurs to mobilise latent or weakly developed material and ideational divisions with a view to creating classes or ethnic formations. Such objectives were pursued less or more successfully, depending on the extent to which the organisational efforts were foiled or assisted by a variety of factors – including other organisations. In other words, nationalists used (or attempted to use) organisations – including the MWU – to achieve their mobilisation objectives. Scholars who are associated with broadly Marxist orientations, argue that Afrikaner nationalist activists exploited tensions within the MWU (and in other unions, and in the ranks of workers) to achieve nationalist aims. Scholars who are associated with broadly nationalist (read: cultural pluralist) orientations, argue that the activists mobilised primordial identities. These ostensibly divergent theses have at least one feature in common: they depict the MWU and mine-workers as the *objects* of nationalist manipulation.

Sociological propositions can be tested with reference to evidence. They – or better, the questions to which they respond – can also be tested by inverting them: did MWU leaders also (attempt to) exploit the nationalist assault (O’Meara) to advance their own agendas – whether organisational or personal? If state-centred analysts can propose that state bureaucrats can live off politics,¹⁹ then it can also be claimed that union and other organisational bureaucrats live similarly. If they do, how do they affect the construction and destruction of their organisations and of larger social formations? Visser claims that “Afrikaner mine-workers were not merely receptive pawns in the ethnic mobilisation strategies of the Afrikaner cultural elite”, but that they also pursued their own interests (p 353). If such formulations are taken as

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- 16 Adam & Giliomee, *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power*; J Hyslop, “Problems of Explanation in the Study of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Case Study of the West Rand”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 3, September 1996, pp 373-385; D O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*; *Forty Lost Years*; D O’Meara, *Thinking Theoretically? Afrikaner Nationalism And The Comparative Theory Of The Politics Of Identity: A Tribute To Harold Wolpe* Paper presented to the Inaugural Conference of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust The Political Economy of Social Change in South Africa University of the Western Cape, 1-2 April 1997; S Trapido, “Political Institutions and Afrikaner Social Structures in the Republic of South Africa”, *The American Political Science Review*, 57, 1, March 1963, pp 75-87; F van Zyl Slabbert, “Afrikaner Nationalism, White Politics, and Political Change in South Africa”, in L Thompson and J Butler (eds), *Change in Contemporary South Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975)
- 17 Examples are cited in: L Pretorius, *Relationships Between State and Society in South Africa* Inaugural Lecture, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 4 August 1994
- 18 Fantasia, “From Class Consciousness to Culture, Action, and Social Organization”, p 279
- 19 Amongst many: P B Evans, D Rueschemeyer and T Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985)

referring literally to mine-workers, then they transcend the limits of his empirical material. However, they do resonate with much of his description of the actions of MWU leadership contenders. I suspect that Visser's unwieldy expository style obscures an argument to the effect that *the MWU and the miners deserve to be looked upon as the authors of their own history and not only as the tools of others*. If this is the argument, then it is not precisely articulated, or I might have missed it. The *Slotbeskouing* (Conclusion), at least, points to such an argument.²⁰ Whether or not it is clearly stated, the argument deserves scholarly attention.

Van MWU to Solidariteit is a valuable source for historical (political) sociology because it focuses on the inner workings of an organisation that was central to vital social processes and because it suggests the need for dialectical thinking on the dynamics of a range of encounters in which the organisation engaged. Other books cited in this review ploughed the road towards understanding Afrikaner nationalism (and associated social forms) from organisation-centred perspectives, but more may be learnt if the MWU and its leaders are also viewed as principal units of action; rather than as mere objects of class and ethnic entrepreneurs. This is not to say that the book can stand on its own in such revisions. Apart from the neglect of the workers themselves, there is little in it that can pass as thorough exposition of encounters (or lack thereof?) between the MWU and other unions. Organised and unorganised black workers figure only in the background and as objects in disputes. I also closed the book with the thought that much, much more needed to be said about encounters between the MWU, state agencies and the Chamber of Mines. Organisations and their roles in society are, ultimately, only comprehensible, when they are systematically linked and compared to other organisations.

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20 It is also suggested in the conclusion of Visser, *Urbanization and Afrikaner Class Formation*, p 19