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Van Zyl-Hermann, Danelle. Privileged Precariat. White Workers and South Africa's Long Transition to Majority Rule. [The International African Library, Vol. 63.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2021. xvi, 338 pp. Ill. £125.00. (Paper: £29.99; E-book: $39.99.)

In recent decades, studies of workers' movements in South Africa have tended to fall into two categories. First, there are sociological analyses of contemporary unions, overwhelmingly focused on the left-wing Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) founded in 1985, and its splinters. Second, there are labour histories dealing with the modern and premodern periods, but only touching on the period beyond the 1950s: those looking at the subsequent period – including by this reviewer – concentrate on COSATU's immediate antecedents and biggest affiliates.

Danelle van Zyl-Hermann's rich, insightful monograph helps fill the gaps created by this situation, contributing to both contemporary and historical studies of labour. She traces the history and reinvention of an alternative, right-wing labour lineage rooted in the white working-class, one that remains a major player in South Africa today – a development that few labour scholars anticipated.

This lineage started with an immigrant-led white workers' union, the militant Transvaal Miners Association, founded in 1902. It became the South African Mine Workers Union (MWU) in 1913, and expanded into neighbouring countries. It was won over by Afrikaner nationalists by the early 1940s, in a bitter and sometimes violent battle, and co-founded the South African Confederation of Labour (SACOL/ SACLA) in 1957, the country's second biggest union federation. SACOL fell apart in the 1980s, and the MWU was in dire straits in the 1990s.

It was taken over by reformers, post-apartheid, and remade. It became a general union, moving decisively away from mining, and relaunched as Solidarity/*Solidariteit* in 2002. This was open to all, but predominantly white (and Afrikaner) in composition: far larger than the old MWU at its peak, it has 200,000 members today. Solidarity formed the Solidarity Movement/*Solidariteit Beweging* in 2010. A complex of civil society organizations and services, including charitable, cultural, educational, financial, legal, lobby, media, neighbourhood and youth structures, as well as Solidarity itself, the Movement massively expanded the union's imprint, and currently claims 500,000 members in 50 organizations.

The scholarly focus on COSATU is understandable. A non-racial but predominantly Coloured (in the southern African sense) and black African formation, COSATU grew explosively from 460,000 at its founding to a peak of 2.2 million members in 2012. It

was the largest independent union federation ever seen in South Africa, and the second largest ever in Africa after Nigeria.[1] Such was COSATU's dynamism in the struggle against apartheid – and in the early post-apartheid period – that the (now globalized) concept of "social movement unionism" was primarily devised to describe the federation. An outstanding example of how unions have been key actors in transitions to parliamentary democracy, COSATU won massive gains for workers – including legal rights – even before apartheid ended in 1994. These achievements took place at a time when many labour movements were in full-blown retreat globally. Its efforts to push towards a democratic socialism through worker-driven radical reforms, expanding workers' control of the economy and society, influencing the now-ruling African National Congress (ANC) and rebuilding the South African Communist Party (SACP), were remarkable – if doomed – efforts at left renewal.

But COSATU was never the whole labour movement, even amongst Coloured or black African workers. In 1993, it accounted for 45 per cent of total union membership: one of eight union federations, it housed just fifteen of 201 unions.[2] At its peak, it represented 67 per cent of union members,[3] before falling to 1.6 million members in 2018, taking it back to under 50 per cent.[4]

The long-standing tendency to conflate COSATU and organized labour, and the paucity of labour history dealing with the period from the latter 1950s, means that, amazingly, little is known about most of South Africa's current unions and union federations, or their history. Many of today's unions are rooted in pre-COSATU unions based among Coloured, Indian, and white workers. In 1972, for example, whites accounted for 70 per cent of union members countrywide, some in all-white bodies, such as the old SACOL and the MWU, and some in moderate multiracial unions and federations.[5] Several of these unions ended up in COSATU; many did not. Simplistic versions of South Africa's labour history that highlight left-wing unions, such as those linked to the ANC, elide the existence of powerful moderate (and right-wing) union traditions, not to mention the fact that most whites were working-class.

Recent work by Nicole Ulrich has unpacked the evolution of many of the moderate, multiracial, non-COSATU unions into the non-racial Federation of Unions of South

[1]The Nigeria Labour Congress, based in Africa's most populous country, was then (and remains) numerically larger, at over four million. However, it is weaker than COSATU, and proportionately smaller: Nigeria, with 230 million people, is over four times the size of South Africa.

[2]Ian Macun, "Growth, Structure and Power in the South African Union Movement", in Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster (eds), *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985–1997* (Basingstoke and New York, 2000), pp. 60 Table 3.1, 65 Table 3.3.

[3]Government records put union membership at 3,261,900 in 2013: Lucien van der Walt, "Rebuilding the Workers' Movement", *Amandla*, 63 (2019), pp. 24–25; also see *idem*, "Fragmented Labour Movement, Fragmented Labour Studies: New Directions for Research and Theory", in Malehoko Tshoaedi, Christine Bischoff, and Andries Bezuidenhout (eds), *Labour Disrupted: Reflections on the Future of Work in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 2023), pp. 23–25, 29.

[4]"Union membership increased from 3.5 million to over 4 million between 2013/14 and 2020/21, while the total number of registered unions increased from 203 to 220": "Minister Thulas Nxesi addresses SATUCC Worker Congress in Gauteng", 28 October 2022, press statement, Department of Labour, Republic of South Africa.

[5]M.A. Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions: History, Legislation, Policy* (Johannesburg, 1976), p. 72.

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Africa (FEDUSA) – today, second only to COSATU in size, at 650,000 members.[6] Wessel Visser's 2007 *Van MWU tot Solidariteit*[7] was a ground-breaking monograph on the very different tradition of the MWU and SACOL, and of its remaking as Solidarity. An official – but scholarly and critical – history, it traced the union from its origins in the Transvaal Miners Association to its centenary in 2002.

Van Zyl-Hermann's study covers much of the same ground as Visser but takes the story to 2020. She also places more emphasis on rhetoric, ideas, identities, and politics – including tensions around class, race, and nation – than Visser's more traditional labour history.

She starts by emphasizing the importance of being able to "step into the world of working-class whites that historians of late and post-apartheid South Africa seemed to believe did not exist" (p. 1). The white working-class, she argues, was never economically, ethnically, or politically homogenous (p. 64). Nor was it seamlessly unified with other whites, as "whiteness" theory and studies suggest, through a monolithic, invented, shallow racial identity reducible to claims of "privilege". Moreover, white workers in the old South Africa were not a labour aristocracy, but a fractured "privileged precariat", "dependent on state benevolence" (p. 37). Their "paper thin" protections and status, she argues, were steadily torn up by the white upper class from the 1970s.

Like Visser, Van Zyl-Hermann covers key phases in the union's history, starting with its early years as a union dominated by Australian and British immigrants that mixed anti-capitalism with demands for segregation and racially based job reservation. Labour-protectionist politics were not unique to white workers, but white workers certainly benefited most from the codification of job reservations in the aftermath of the 1922 Rand Revolt. This was a general strike-turned-armed rebellion: it was initiated by the MWU, placing it within the rarefied ranks of unions that engaged in violent insurrections. She looks at the MWU's subsequent takeover by Afrikaner nationalists, and its associated move to a populist anti-capitalism, honeymoon with the National Party government elected in 1948 on the apartheid platform, and its role in forming SACOL. Starting with 145,000 members, SACOL encompassed "some 200,000 white workers, or 31 per cent of the organised labour force" in the mid-1970s (pp. 63–64, 87 n. 63).

This was followed by the MWU's 1970s break with the apartheid government – which it now damned as betraying white workers to the *geldmag* ("money power" or big business) and liberalism – and its new role as an anti-establishment, white, hard-right movement, which linked up with other right-wing groups, including black Zulu nationalists. While SACOL fell apart (p. 149), the MWU survived, growing from 18,000 in 1979 to 44,000 in 1992 (pp. 113, 147, 182). This was followed by rapid decline: increasingly on the margins of the labour movement and the larger white population, its numbers fell to 33,000 (p. 244). This was part of a larger implosion of the white hard-right as apartheid ended. Afrikaner nationalism was now removed from the levers of

[6]Nicole Ulrich, "A History of FEDUSA", Research report for the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) (2022). Unpublished.

[7]Republished in English, and expanded, as Wessel Visser, *A History of the South African Mine Workers' Union, 1902–2014* (Lewiston, NY, 2016).

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state power, and the post-1948 Afrikanerization of state employment – the civil service, state-owned enterprises, and the armed forces – was rapidly undone by post-1994 Africanization under the ANC. The new government also mandated affirmative action in the private sector, including on the mines.

These developments, plus the neoliberal restructuring of state enterprises, gutted the old bastions of the white working class. The MWU was now a sinking ship battered by the sea changes in South Africa: the white working class was thrown aside by richer whites, who were sheltered from the political and economic changes by their education, money, and power (pp. 288–290).

At this point, according to Van Zyl-Hermann (and Visser), the MWU was taken over by dynamic, university-educated Afrikaner professionals like Flip Buys, who ousted the old blue-collar leadership, systematically expanded the union beyond the mines, and merged it with other unions – also, says Visser, coaxing 50,000 members away from FEDUSA. The union started to supplement industrial action and collective bargaining with heavy investments into its own research and strategic units and a high-powered legal department, a leadership school, and extensive services for members (and their families) (p. 234).

MWU was renamed Solidarity in 2002, at which point it was around 120,000-strong (pp. 158, 193). It included (says Visser) a significant (if small) Coloured (and black) membership, something once unimaginable. The renaming and expansion signalled the union's reframing both as a general union, and as a movement focused on minority races and cultures, faced with the post-apartheid predominance of English in public life and government, and the ANC's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) measures. It expanded its offerings to members and their families, including founding its own Christian, Afrikaans-medium technical college, Sol-Tech, in 2006. That same year, it established AfriForum, which described itself as a civil rights organization. AfriForum is well-known for extensive litigation and lobbying, especially on government language and education policies, and against BEE, including affirmative action.

At the core of this shift, argues Van Zyl-Hermann, was the development of a reimagined Afrikaner nationalism. This accepted that the white hard-right positions of the 1980s and early 1990s – notably, creating a breakaway Afrikaner *volkstaat*, a position embraced by the short-lived *Afrikaner Volksfront*, which the MWU had joined – were dead in the water. The union drew on threads in Afrikaner nationalism that viewed South Africa as a multiethnic country, but it grasped the realities that whites (including Afrikaners) would never again control the South African state, and that Afrikaners simply did not have the territorial concentration required for a secessionist movement. The union kept its distance from the new Afrikaner nationalist party, *Vryheidsfront Plus*. However, it shared with that party the view that the Afrikaners' future lay in finding their place in a shared South Africa, as a distinct African "community" with its own centuries-old culture, history, language, literature, and values.

Like FEDUSA, Solidarity shied away from party politics; unlike FEDUSA, it took a public position on many issues that went well beyond the workplace or economic policies. This was the background against which Solidarity (and AfriForum) increasingly used litigation – based on post-apartheid policies and legislation dealing with non-discrimination, multilingualism, and protection against hate speech – to tackle business and the state.

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The Solidarity Movement, the next step, claimed to have 320,000 members by 2016 (p. 223). This represented a substantial proportion of the total Afrikaner population, even of whites more generally. The Movement took over older organizations like the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK, Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organizations) and the Helpende Hand charity, added a Christian, Afrikaans-medium university (*Akademia*), an online school (*Wolkskool,* "cloud school"), expanded its other school student support services, developed financial and property development institutions, and built sophisticated publishing and mass media operations. Some Movement structures, in turn, established their own affiliates and projects. For example, AfriForum has a youth/student wing, and has founded scores of residents' groups, which then organize neighbourhood watch schemes and provide services – like road repairs and fire brigades – when the state fails. Feeding schemes, including in black and Coloured neighbourhoods, and for poor whites, are another major focus.

Providing charity as well as welfare benefits, financial counselling and health services, bursaries, free courses, school student centres and funding, its own higher education institutions, financial advice, a job placement company, urban services, cultural events, youth organizations, and a legal, political, public, and workplace voice, Solidarity has built a "cradle-to-the-grave" (p. 234) system that no COSATU or FEDUSA union (or the old MWU or SACOL) has ever come close to matching.

Thus, Van Zyl-Hermann argues, the MWU shifted, with its evolution into Solidarity and then into the Solidarity Movement, from a focus on blue-collar white workers to an emphasis on Afrikanerdom, rather than whites or (white) workers, more generally; class divisions among whites and populist anti-capitalism were replaced by an emphasis on ethno-national identity and language; the Movement has used the space opened by state failure and neoliberalism to build alternatives that – while sometimes market-based – are communitarian in orientation. Thus, it has increasingly blurred the lines between being a union for *white workers* and being a movement for *Afrikaners* in general, regardless of class; it has created a complicated and sometimes contradictory combination of class and nation.

The union's past, she argues, has been rewritten to align with its post-apartheid evolution. For example, the Rand Revolt was reinterpreted as an Afrikaner rebellion. The hard-right MWU leaders of the 1970s–1990s i.e. the men before Buys and co., were recast as hard-drinking, ill-educated, blue-collar reactionaries obsessed with class and race – too unsophisticated to lead Afrikaners in a changing South Africa. Van Zyl-Hermann argues that such narratives actually expose long-standing class divides and prejudices amongst Afrikaners (and whites generally), and indicate some of the tensions in Solidarity's project.

And so, the union has increasingly become the hub of a revitalized and rethought Afrikaner nationalism, centred neither on state power nor on a battle against capital, but rather on the slogan *#OnsSalSelf* ("we will do it ourselves"); yet it is willing to (cautiously) recruit other (non-Afrikaner) whites as well as Coloured (most of whom are also Afrikaans-speaking) and even black workers. It has also been keen on building links with more traditionalist black sectors, including the Matabele/Ndebele and Zulu royal houses, based on the notion of building direct relations between different "communities". This has included jointly commemorating past wars as well as past military (and other) cooperation between black and Afrikaner. This provides one of several

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means that the union grapples with South Africa's painful history – and challenges the ANC's patriotic history. It is difficult to imagine the old MWU acting or thinking in such ways.

Solidarity's story, as discussed by Van Zyl-Hermann, is not just an account of a union, but an important study of how nationalisms can revive and evolve, and an example of what they might (and can) do when locked out of state power. It bears comparison with labour movements like COSATU, but also with other more communitarian movements, both left wing and right wing.

Van Zyl-Hermann's study also points to the importance of locating COSATU within the context of the larger, fractured, heterogenous working-class movement in South Africa that dates to the 1880s. Her data indicates the problems inherent in labour scholarship's tendency to develop concepts and taxonomies to describe union types primarily with reference to COSATU. Solidarity is hardly an economistic union – as some studies have claimed – but is it social movement unionism, or something else, perhaps "social capital unionism", as Jantjie Xaba has suggested?[8] Challenges to long-standing categorizations of political and union types, and to commonplace characterizations of the fate of labour in the country, are implicit in the astonishing rise of Solidarity

'Meanwhile, the left-wing COSATU has become a traditional political union, battered by neoliberalism and state failure, campaigning for the ANC and SACP, and suffering the spillover of ANC factionalism and patronage politics. Its earlier alliances with church, community, and student/youth groups have withered; its alternative institutions, like union-based clinics, choirs, and workers' co-operatives, have faded; its socialist, workers' control project co-exists with large for-profit union investment companies, narrow collective bargaining, and lobbying the ANC. It is, ironically, Solidarity that now explicitly stresses *selfbestuur* ("self-management") and building counter-institutions. While COSATU's authority and presence in the larger society have declined, Solidarity has moved from the fringes to become a "booming voice", in the words of liberal Afrikaner journalist Max du Preez, a strident critic of the union. It is heard in South Africa and now – as recent controversies in the US show – internationally too.

The MWU/Solidarity story thus also reveals an imaginative, remarkable, unconventional, and unexpected story of union renewal.

It is right-wing Solidarity that has made large strides in an explicit project of building a popular "power bloc" (pp. 193, 229), not left-wing COSATU. Solidarity has certainly built its project on a sectional foundation that cannot win over most workers or most South Africans, but this does not negate its achievements. While unions in the COSATU lineage were formed, in part, as an alternative to unions like the older MWU, there is now surely something positive that they can learn from Solidarity's steady and systematic accumulation of power.

Like Jason Hickel's work on unions linked to Zulu nationalism – the National Sugar Refining and Allied Industries Union, and the United Workers Union of South Africa

[8]See Jantjie Xaba, "Social Capital Unionism and Empowerment: A Case of Solidarity Union at ArcelorMittal Vanderbijlpark", in Tshoaedi *et al.*, *Labour Disrupted*, pp. 205–228.

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(UWUSA)[9] – Van Zyl-Hermann's monograph makes it clear that right-wing labour movements complicate labour history, a field that has traditionally focused on more left-wing sectors. Right-wing labour needs to be examined seriously and soberly, rather than viewed as aberrant, transitory, or trivial in working-class history. The fact that Solidarity's success story barely registers in current discussions of union renewal is, largely because of analyses and outlooks that conflate the working-class with left-wing labour, and that assume a seamless, natural fit between labour and left projects more generally. But, as examples like Solidarity show, the working-class and the left can overlap, but have no automatic or essential connection.

In closing, there are some weaker elements in Van Zyl-Hermann's book. For example, while critical of "whiteness" theory and studies, and providing a large amount of material that rebuts their claims, she could have made a far bolder critique of their essentialist and crude edifice; indeed, their framework still echoes across the book through shaky concepts like "privilege" and "white talk". Her argument that Solidarity is a form of national populism is also not quite convincing. It is explicitly socially conservative, rooted in nationalism, and mixes class and ethno-national grievances, yet it is not organized around a party, a strongman, the capture of the state, or exclusivist claims on citizenship. It aims, fairly openly, at creating something akin to a state-within-a-state but without a territorial basis or state power (pp. 227, 232, 298).

That said, this book is a true classic, and one of the best recent works on labour. Highly recommended.

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[9]In Jason Hickel, *Democracy as Death: The Moral Order of Anti-Liberal Politics in South Africa* (Oakland, CA, 2015).