

Book Review

Raphael Botiveau (2018) *Organise or Die: Leadership of a Special Type in South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers.*

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In *Organise or Die*, Botiveau disentangles the DNA strands of South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The book is divided into two parts and gives what is arguably one of the clearest accounts of the union's history. Botiveau not only looks at processes and events, but at the very core of what constitutes the NUM. He looks at union strategy, the foundations of its administration, internal politics, including its strategic bureaucratisation by its leaders, the widening gap between leaders and members, the courting of leaders by management and union investments.

The first part unpacks and links the historical project of the founders of the NUM to the unions' current developments. It mainly deals with the top-down construction and functioning of this well-resourced, well-staffed and legal-oriented bureaucratic modern machine, the NUM. The analysis is grounded in experiences of ordinary members and moves to focus on the regional and national structures where power "over" members and resources resides. Botiveau demonstrates how the unions' development and how it groomed its leaders contributed directly to the distance from and contempt felt by workers towards their leaders and eventually to its demise.

Botiveau deconstructs and critiques what he calls the "SWOP hypothesis" that has been used to understand the NUM. The Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) is a research institute based at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. SWOP researchers have been at the forefront of labour and trade union studies in South Africa since the early 1970s. According to Botiveau, SWOP's hypothesis of the NUM has largely relied on what SWOP researchers have seen as a "transformation" of unions and the "paradox of victory" in post-apartheid South Africa (Buhlungu, 2010). The NUM image painted in the SWOP hypothesis, he argues, is that of a united, altruistic and democratic union, with a militant membership and responsive leadership during apartheid, and a distant and unresponsive leadership after the political transition to the post-apartheid period (pp. 13, 121). In other words, the union "transforms" to a bureaucratic structure far removed from its membership only after apartheid. The paradox of victory alluded to is in the considerable power the union has in national political structures, while some local branches are weak, crumbling and with a disgruntled membership.

Botiveau argues that the analysis of the NUM in SWOP research faithfully follows this apartheid and post-apartheid logic and periodisation of South African history. The emphasis on this binary has limitations and dangers related to the notion of "paradox", he argues – the paradox of victory over apartheid, and the paradox of post-apartheid unionism that has come to pervade our labour studies vocabulary. He thus critiques what he sees as an over-subscription to an artificial chronological binary between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. He argues that

this oversubscription enables “intellectual biases” and allows one to turn a blind eye to historical and organisational cultural continuities and processes of organisation building, while exaggerating discontinuities (p. 19).

The second part of the book looks at the type of leadership the NUM produces, what Botiveau calls “leadership of a special type”. He argues that the “labour aristocrats” who have been developed and educated by the union are effective organisers, campaigners who can manage “the organisation”. He notes two significant shifts in the organisation and its leadership of a special type. Initially the organisation was a bureaucratic one which acted as a shepherd over workers, maintaining some proximity while remaining strategically distant. In 1998, however, with Gwede Mantashe at the helm, there was a shift in the leadership and the union to embrace bureaucratic politics. While the leadership of a special type remained intact, conceptions of discipline were reconfigured and came to be understood and “abused” by key leaders to control the organisation.

Although this organisational development helped in running the NUM machine, it also alienated the union and its leadership from its core base. The distance between the organisation’s leadership and the members is not only social, Botiveau argues, but economic and also on a deeper emotional level as seen days and hours prior to the 2012 Marikana massacre. According to Botiveau, what also characterises the “leadership of a special type” is its use of communist ideology to stifle internal debate and opposition on one side, while it centralises “command” and power, stirring fear and imposing organisational discipline on the other side. He illustrates how worker control became rhetoric while power was centralised, and positions reserved for a select few “elites” – namely, the trade union executives, communist cadres and “legitimist elders” (pp. 214, 217, 232).

The author’s main argument is that the NUM is a product of specific historical, socio-political conditions, and as such cannot be abstracted from its origins if we are to fully appreciate its workings, development and the current juncture it inhabits. From its inception, the NUM was built from the top, modelled on hierarchical, good corporate governance principles (p. 211). Ideals, structures and power were centralised, participatory democracy or questioning members seen as ill-disciplined, and decision-making seized by those at the top. He argues that the organisation modernised and became highly bureaucratised, thereby necessitating a heavy investment on the production of leaders who could operate it, alas at the expense of workers (no strike fund!) and worker control and to the demise of local structures. This led to conceptual and experiential tensions among union leaders, between leaders and workers, between the organisational ethos and worker conceptions of a “good leader” and expectations of proximity and empathy from leaders. The tensions over the years have come to roost as the gaps between workers and leaders have widened and worker dissatisfaction has become more pronounced.

The conclusion Botiveau reaches is that the NUM’s current weaknesses were part of the very fabric of its conception. He tentatively demonstrates how Marikana, while not intended, was a “result of the maybe partly unintended consequence of a nonetheless conscious and deliberate process of organisation building and development” (p. 20). He argues that the decision of most mineworkers in 2012 to no longer support the NUM was due to the “type of organisation and leadership” the NUM symbolised. The striking platinum workers in 2012 were rejecting representational democracy and calling for participatory democracy, leadership accountability and union power that is grounded in the workers. “They rejected these very same attributes that are regarded internally as NUM trademarks and a source of pride for union cadres” (p. 349).

What one takes from the book is that there is a correlation between the NUM’s “leadership of a special type”, as mainly embodied by the second-generation leaders, the “communist

faction” and the organisational suicide witnessed on a grand scale since 2012. The book shows the immense power which resides in the NUM head office, a neglected yet powerful and relevant site if we are to understand the workings of the union, the broader workplace strikes and worker dissatisfaction. At the head office Botiveau focuses on leaders, specific individuals, and draws linkages between their subjective dispositions, union trajectory and the organisation they helped build.

Studies on the NUM hardly focus on the NUM as a finance giant, a financial empire, albeit one with starving members and well-paid leaders. There tends to be an emphasis on the union as representing or not representing workers, not necessarily as an organisation most concerned with amassing wealth.

The book answers questions about the Marikana massacre that current scholarship only hints at but hasn't unpacked. Important books currently circulating on Marikana have either looked at Marikana as an event which took place on 16 August 2012 with no significant links to the history of the union, or they look at Marikana as a culmination of what is wrong with South African unions in the post-apartheid era. Some have analysed Marikana by centring on a few individuals who played a pivotal role in formulating the demands. What Botiveau's book does, as a way of telling Marikana anew, or providing fresh clues to the 2012 strikes and massacre, is to take a step back and analyse from a different angle what has been happening within the NUM since its inception, especially after the 1987 strikes that led to massive retrenchments in gold mines; he brings his analysis to the present moment.

He is in debate with key labour figures in South Africa, and he convincingly problematises some of the key arguments, as noted above, that have come to be accepted as gospel in labour studies in South Africa – the SWOP hypothesis.

The book's contribution to scholarship, however, goes beyond the NUM. It makes an explicit and fresh link between the NUM's formation and its closely guarded and sustained relationship with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC). The account provided here, while centred on the functioning of the NUM, is equally about broader questions around (union and political party) leadership in the time of democracy, worker participation and agency. Because the NUM is so close to the ANC, his analysis also gives one clues about the kinds of organisations at the helm in South Africa.

REFERENCE

Buhlungu, S. (2010) *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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