

CAUGHT IN A STRANGLEHOLD BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND REFORM: THE MINE WORKERS' UNION AND RIGHTWING POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1979-1997

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Abstract

The National Party government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission of Enquiry in 1979, i.e., that job reservation be abolished and African trade unions be legalised, came as a huge shock for the South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU). The MWU responded by aligning itself with rightwing parties and organisations. When white resistance politics became more extreme in the 1990s, there were even attempts by the ultra-right Afrikaner Resistance Movement, albeit unsuccessful, to infiltrate and usurp the MWU executive. In an effort to try and thwart the momentum towards political democracy in 1994, the MWU joined other rightwing organisations in an all-encompassing resistance under the auspices of the Afrikaner People's Front (AVF) of Gen. Constand Viljoen. Although many white workers joined the MWU's ranks, rightwing unity was dealt a severe blow when a schism took place between the Viljoen faction in the AVF and the MWU over strategies to create an Afrikaner people's state. Between 1994 and 1997 the MWU stagnated and reached the crossroads. To avoid further stagnation and possible oblivion, Flip Buys, MWU general secretary since 1997, began a process of reinvention. This transformation was completed in 2002 when the MWU became Solidarity.

Keywords: Mine Workers' Union; Wiehahn Commission; Arrie Paulus; National Party; Peet Ungerer; Afrikaner Resistance Movement; people's state; Afrikaner People's Front.

Trefwoorde: Mynwerkersunie; Wiehahn-kommissie; Arrie Paulus; Nasionale Party; Peet Ungerer; Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging; volkstaat; Afrikaner Volksfront.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s, in the run-up to South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, several studies were published on the nature and scope of white rightwing organisations as a force of resistance and their mobilisation prospects during the elections and in the post-apartheid political dispensation. These studies concentrated on rightwing political parties and cultural groups, religious organisations and civil institutions, as well as paramilitary organisations.² However,

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2 See e.g. DJ van Vuuren *et al.* (eds), *South African election 1987. Context, process and prospect* (Pinetown: Owen Burgess Publishers, 1987); PL Berger and B Godsell (eds), *A future South Africa. Visions, strategies and realities* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau/Tafelberg, 1988);

considering the pivotal role played by white labour, particularly the Mine Workers' Union, in the rightwing's mobilisation and resistance efforts prior to the 1994 election, it is surprising that only three of these sources make scanty reference to the white miners' union almost perfunctorily.³ Even the chapter on the role of labour to democratise South Africa in the comprehensive post-1994 SADET project, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, except for one paragraph, completely ignored white rightwing labour as a potential disruptive force to this historical process.⁴

Founded in 1902 as the Transvaal Miners' Association (TMA), and renamed the South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU) in 1913, this organisation participated during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the turbulent age of industrial strife in South Africa. It soon gained a reputation as a militant union during the bloody mining strikes of 1907, 1913 and 1922.⁵ Besides duels with mining bosses over poor safety and health conditions on the mines, minimum wages, compensation for victims of silicosis, an eight-hour working day, overtime payment and miners' benefits, job reservation for whites, official recognition of trade unions and the insecurity of tenure⁶, white miners also found themselves in

J Grobbelaar *et al.*, *Vir volk en vaderland. A guide to the white right* (Durban: Indicator SA Issue Focus, August 1989); H Giliomee, "Afrikaner politics 1977-87: from Afrikaner Nationalist rule to central state hegemony", in JD Brewer (ed.), *Can South Africa survive? Five minutes to midnight* (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989), pp. 110-125; H Adam and K Moodley, *The negotiated revolution. Society and politics in post-apartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993); J van Rooyen, *Hard right. The new white power in South Africa* (London and New York: IB Tauris Publishers, 1994). See also, M Schönteich and H Boshoff, 'Volk', *faith and fatherland. The security threat posed by the white right* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies Monograph Series 81, 2003). The author is indebted to Prof. Pierre du Toit of the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University, and Prof Andries du Toit of the Department of Sociology at Pretoria University for their constructive suggestions in writing this article.

- 3 Grobbelaar *et al.*, pp. 16, 24; Van Rooyen, pp. 75, 91, 172-173; Schönteich and Boshoff, p. 87.
- 4 See D Hemson, M Legassick and N Ulrich, "White activists and the revival of the Workers' Movement", in SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2: 1970-1980 (Pretoria: South African Democracy Education Trust, 2006), pp. 243-314.
- 5 See e.g. E Katz, *A trade union aristocracy. A history of white workers in the Transvaal and the general strike of 1913* (Johannesburg: African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1976), pp. 54-114, 152-252, 381-429; RK Cope, *Comrade Bill. The life and times of WH Andrews, workers' leader* (Cape Town: Stewart Printing Co., 1943), pp. 89-142; E Gitsham and J Trembath, *A first account of labour organisation in South Africa* (Durban: EP & Commercial Printing Co., Ltd., 1926), pp. 28-38, 66; IL Walker and B Weinbren, *2000 casualties. A history of the trade unions and the labour movement in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg: SATUC, 1961), pp. 22-42; AG Oberholster, *Die mynwerkerstaking. Witwatersrand, 1922* (Pretoria: RGN, 1982), pp. 56-191; J Krikler, *The Rand Revolt. The 1922 insurrection and racial killings in South Africa* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), pp. 25-57, 113-178.
- 6 Cope, p. 89; Katz, p. 322; E Katz, *The white death. Silicosis on the Witwatersrand gold mines 1886-1910* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), pp. 66, 104; NE Wiehahn, "Industrial relations in South Africa – a changing scene", in DJ van Vuuren *et al.*, (eds), *Change*

a position of structural insecurity as a result of competition for labour with cheap unskilled black workers, as emphasized by Johnstone.⁷

Two factors had a profound impact on the MWU during its militant phase. After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, when many British-born miners went to war, there was an increasing Afrikanerization of the MWU.⁸ Secondly, the introduction of the 1926 Mines and Works Amendment Act (the so-called “Colour Bar” Act) in the aftermath of the 1922 strike, entrenched white job reservation on the mines.⁹ Therefore the post-1922 period saw the pacification, incorporation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of white trade unions within the state structures, thus disarming them as a potentially militant political threat. The increased role of the state brought a virtual end to militant white workers’ resistance and for the next five decades or so the MWU would become a collaborationist, docile and pro-government union.¹⁰

From 1948 to the late 1970s the pro-National Party executive of the MWU maintained a symbiotic and fairly harmonious relationship with the National Party (NP) government. However, by the 1970s the government was forced to take cognisance of changing economic conditions and would eventually be forced by circumstances to shift its economic policy, which would in future differ considerably from its white protectionist character of previous decades.¹¹ The NP’s initiatives towards labour reforms would eventually jolt the rightwing section of the white labour movement, of which the MWU formed a core component, into vehement reaction against such policies.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Du Toit and Kotzé, FW de Klerk postulated the outcome of negotiations to bring about a non-racial democratic order in South Africa to his own constituents as a positive result. However, such a subjective assessment of the

in South Africa (Durban: Butterworth, 1983); J Hyslop, *The notorious syndicalist. JT Bain: a Scottish rebel in colonial South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media Pty Ltd., 2004), p. 201.

7 FA Johnstone, *Class, race and gold. A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1976), pp. 25-82, 145-150.

8 ELP Stals (ed.), *Afrikaners in die Goudstad*, Deel I: 1886-1924 (Pretoria: HAUM Opvoedkundige Uitgevery, 1978), pp. 36-40, 86.

9 Johnstone, pp. 150-167.

10 RH Davies, *Capital, state and white labour in South Africa 1900-1960. A historical materialist analysis of class formation and class relations* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 179-198, 231; David Yudelman, *The emergence of modern South Africa. State, capital and the incorporation of organized labor on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), pp. 9, 114-115, 186, 208-233.

11 H Giliomee and H Adam, *Afrikanermag. Opkoms en toekoms* (Stellenbosch en Grahamstad: Universiteitsuitgewers en -Boekhandelaars, 1981), pp. 135-151, 202.

achievements can open the way for stressful encounters, especially when outside audiences or opponents appraise the peace agreement less favourably. This was the case with the white right between the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, social dislocation, as a component of existential insecurity, began to manifest among those white workers and other rightwingers who felt politically emasculated by the reform initiatives of the NP government.¹²

Yudelman concurs that once the symbiotic relationship between the state, mining capital and white labour was disturbed by the reform initiatives of the late 1970s, the state was confronted by an increasingly militant white labour force as was also the case in the 1910s and 1920s.¹³ He also argues that white mineworkers, represented by the MWU, were never remotely powerful enough to harness the South African state for their own ends. Consequently, they allied themselves to other rightwing groups because specific interest groups who pursue the same object can exercise disproportionate influence in closely fought elections.¹⁴

This article investigates the reasons why white rightwing labour detached itself from a long-standing symbiotic relationship with the state and capital, how rightwing labour utilised ethnic mobilisation as a form of labour struggle against labour and political reform in South Africa in the period 1979-1997, and why this strategy eventually failed.

3. POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE WIEHAHN COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE POSITION OF THE MWU

The Durban mass strikes of 1973 by African workers prepared the ground for the unprecedented growth of a new brand of black trade unionism in South Africa and ignited a profound consciousness of power among the African working masses. By the time of the Soweto uprising of 1976 it had become obvious that the apartheid government could not pacify black worker militancy. Therefore, it appointed a commission of enquiry into labour legislation, commonly known as the Wiehahn Commission. The commission's most outstanding recommendations, which the government accepted and implemented, included the registration of African trade unions and the abolition of statutory job reservation.¹⁵

12 P du Toit and H Kotzé, *Liberal democracy and peace in South Africa. The pursuit of freedom as dignity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 189, 196.

13 Yudelman, pp. 3, 7-8.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 254, 264.

15 S Bendix, *Industrial relations in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta & Co. Ltd, 1989), pp. 300-307; D MacShane *et al.*, *Power! Black workers, their unions and the struggle for freedom in South Africa* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1984), pp. 16-23, 55-56; D Ncube, *The influence of apartheid on the development of black trade unionism* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1985), pp. 114,

Having enjoyed state protection and white job reservation for such a long time the Wiehahn recommendations and its endorsement by the government came as a shock for the MWU. The union was totally unprepared for socio-economic reforms and black labour advancement, which its members regarded as a direct threat to their position. Suddenly white workers would no longer be able to rely on state protection of their jobs.¹⁶ Arrie Paulus, the adversarial general-secretary of the MWU, threatened that, if blacks were appointed over MWU members in the mining industry, South Africa “would know no industrial peace”.¹⁷ In March 1979, on the eve of the release of Part One of the Wiehahn recommendations, the MWU threw down the gauntlet and initiated a strike on an obscure copper mine in the semi-desert north-western region of South Africa. The strike soon escalated into a nationwide strike involving 9 000 white miners on 70 mines. However, it collapsed after a week when the Chamber of Mines threatened the strikers with the loss of all benefits. Although the MWU tried to demonstrate that the white miners were indispensable in the mining industry and that production would be seriously affected without them, the 1979 strike was a desperate, but futile attempt by white miners to thwart labour reform and to preserve a labour dispensation based on apartheid legislation.¹⁸

Seeing that the NP government could no longer be stopped from implementing the Wiehahn recommendations, the MWU changed tactics in its persistent opposition to the gradual abolition of job reservation and began to align itself more closely with rightwing political parties. The political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour reform was the loss of support from the MWU and the white workers. Thus, after the release of the Wiehahn recommendations, complete and irreversible estrangement set in between the MWU and the NP government. In by-elections in 1979 and the general election of 1981 the MWU gave moral and electoral support to the Herstigte Nasionale Party (Re-constituted National Party) or HNP. The HNP was positioned on the far-right spectrum of white politics.¹⁹

143; L Luckhardt and B Wall, *Organise or starve! The history of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), pp. 447-453; Wiehahn, pp. 186-189.

16 Van Rooyen, p. 31; Giliomee and Adam, p. 203; M Lipton, *Capitalism and apartheid. South Africa, 1910-1986* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), p. 322.

17 AHJ Barnard, *Die rol van die Mynwerkersunie in die Suid-Afrikaanse politiek, 1978-1982* (MA, Rand Afrikaans University, 1991), pp. 47, 79.

18 C Cooper, “The mineworkers’ strike”, *South African Labour Bulletin* 5, 1979, pp. 4-25; S Friedman, *Building tomorrow today. African workers in trade unions, 1970-1984* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), pp. 164-177; J Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg: men, mines, and the challenge of conflict* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1986), p. 469; Barnard, pp. 79-84, 114-117.

19 Barnard, pp. 35, 65-94, 114; Yudelman, p. 269; *Die Mynwerker*, 13 June 1979, pp. 1-2 (PJ Paulus: Rustenburgers, lees hier asb.); *Die Mynwerker*, 13 June 1979, p. 6 (PJ Paulus: Randfontein openbaar sterk protesstem teen die Wiehahn-verslag).

The union's attitude towards the NP chilled even further and turned hostile. The clearest indication of the MWU's anti-government political position was the moral support the union's leadership gave to the Conservative Party (CP), founded in 1982 in reaction to the NP's liberal reformist policies regarding the racial issue in South Africa.²⁰ Therefore it came as no surprise when Paulus was approached to contest the gold mining constituency of Carletonville for the CP in the general election of 1987. Paulus's official move to rightwing politics should be put into perspective. His image in miners' ranks as a steadfast and successful negotiator for white worker privileges took a blow after the failed miners' strike of 1979.²¹ Paulus's demanding and tiresome position as MWU general-secretary also began to take its toll. In 1984 he informed the MWU executive of his intention to retire the following year at the age of 55. He was persuaded to remain in his job, but in his personal capacity he became more interested in rightwing politics. He increasingly began to criticise the policies of the NP government in the columns of *The Mineworker*, the union's official mouthpiece, even though certain members accused him of breaching the MWU's policy of political neutrality.²² According to Graham Leach, Paulus declared that he had reached his goals in the MWU, namely better salaries, benefits and pensions for white miners. He became convinced that he could achieve even more for white workers in Parliament.²³

Although Paulus won by a narrow margin of only 89 votes, this victory constituted a huge swing towards the right in mining seats, as had also been the case in 1979 and 1981. Paulus succeeded in turning the NP's majority of 3 000 votes in the previous general election into a CP gain.²⁴

4. "A LAST WHITE TRADE UNION BASTION": EFFORTS TO CONSOLIDATE WHITE RIGHT LABOUR

With the end of job reservation a *fait accompli* the MWU, under Peet Ungerer, Paulus's successor as general-secretary, adapted its strategy again. Henceforth it would strive towards creating a "super white trade union" as it was called. It was

20 A Ries and E Domisse, *Broedertwis. Die verhaal van die 1982-skeuring in die Nasionale Party* (Cape Town: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Bpk., 1982), pp. 96, 108-187; Barnard, pp. 118-119; *Die Mynwerker*, 1 July 1981, p. 1 (Ons is reg vir praat sê Arrie Paulus aan dr Treurnicht); Mine Workers' Union Archives (MWU; Pretoria), Executive Committee Minutes, 24 January 1983, p. 2.

21 Barnard, pp. 79-88, 116.

22 See e.g. MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 31 October 1984, p. 12; MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 25 February 1986, p. 15; Barnard, p. 119; *The Star*, 22 April 1985, p. 9 (Honest Arrie leaves his pigs and carries on with the fight); *Die Mynwerker*, 19 February 1986, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Klap in gesig van blanke werkers); *Ibid.*, 25 March 1987, pp. 1-2 (PJ Paulus: Begrafnis van die groepsgebiedewet in sig).

23 G Leach, *The Afrikaners. Their last trek* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1989), p. 87.

24 MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 26 January 1987, p. 11; *Ibid.*, 26 June 1987, p.13.

the continuation of a tactic already initiated under the Paulus administration when it was decided to consolidate the ranks of conservative white labour, in order to resist the dismantling of job reservation. Such a “super union” would be able to bargain for white workers’ rights more effectively, as Paulus strove to create a “white force” or power base that could “fight” for the “survival” of the white worker. It would also serve as a strategy against the “threat” of “black advancement”. Thus a politically-conscious pressure group was to be created which could at a later stage be transformed into a (white) workers’ party.²⁵

In an effort to counter the influence of moderate white artisan unions in the mining industry and to lure away their members, the MWU began to expound the idea that, by opening their ranks to African workers, these unions had “betrayed” the white worker. Therefore the MWU proclaimed itself to be the only trade union that truly catered for the interests of the white worker. In the light of the Wiehahn recommendations that trade union registration should be liberalised, the MWU also attempted to extend its traditional scope beyond the mining industry. The union began to recruit steelworkers on Iscor (a state-sponsored steel foundry) plants and electricity workers at Escom (the national electricity utility) power stations and coal mines. In its recruitment propaganda the MWU was portrayed as “a sanctuary for white workers”. The scope of recruitment was eventually extended to include about two hundred job categories in mining and other industries in the greater Gauteng region.²⁶

Ungerer timeously interpreted the political implications for white labour when President FW de Klerk announced in Parliament in 1990 the unbanning of all anti-apartheid political organisations and exiles, and the liberation of all political prisoners. He argued that, in the absence of effective white political power under black majority rule after 1994, there should be at least one strong labour organisation to cater for the political, economic and cultural needs of the Afrikaner working class and to enhance their bargaining power.²⁷ The union continued its vigorous drive to extend its scope to include workers in the steel, chemical, distribution and other miscellaneous industries. The promotion of a super white union was met with great enthusiasm by white workers, especially in instances where their own unions became multi-racial. More organisers had to be

25 Barnard, pp. 45-66, 115; Friedman, p. 176; *Die Mynwerker*, 7 February 1979, p. 3 (Alle blanke werkers moet lid van een vakbond wees); *Ibid.*, 11 February 1981, p. 1 (PJ Paulus: ‘n Voorbeeld van agter die ystergordyn); *Ibid.*, 30 January 1979, pp. 10, 21.

26 Barnard, pp. 59-66; Friedman, p. 176; MWU, General Council Minutes, 30 January 1979, p. 4; *Ibid.*, 27 January 1981, pp. 12-13; *Ibid.*, 25 January 1983, p. 20; *Ibid.*, 30 January 1984, p. 22.

27 P Ungerer, MWU Memorandum, 2 July 2001; *Die Mynwerker*, January 1990, p. 3 (Beleid van getrouheid aan blanke werker); *Ibid.*, July 1990, pp. 1-3 (Een wit vakbond!); *Ibid.*, November/December, p. 1 (Volstoom na een wit vakbond).

appointed and new branch offices established. By 1992 the MWU's membership had increased to 44 000 to make it the largest white trade union in South Africa.²⁸

But the effort to consolidate rightwing labour towards the ideal of a super white union was no plain sailing either. Through the CP, which represented the white right's largest political grouping, the MWU strove to convince other white unions to amalgamate in a spirit of unity to become a powerful super white trade union. Although CP MPs agreed that the creation of such a union would serve the interests of the white worker, the party could not see its way open to support one specific white union only. According to Peet Ungerer, the CP was wary of the fact that an alignment with one specific union could sow discord among the ranks of the white labour movement and thus jeopardize potential white worker political support for the party.²⁹

One of the largest stumbling blocks in the way of realising a super white union was the intense rivalry between the MWU and the moderate Iron and Steel Workers' Union for new members in the early 1990s. This rivalry generated considerable mudslinging and innuendo between the two unions. Iron and Steel general-secretary, Nic Cilliers, was of the opinion that the MWU should rather relinquish its existence and be absorbed by the former which enjoyed a larger membership. Iron and Steel fought the MWU's super union idea tooth and nail. In turn, the MWU blamed Iron and Steel for being selfish and not serious about white worker solidarity. The fact that the MWU was apparently successful in coaxing away some of its officials, as well as a significant number of its members, caused widespread dismay in the ranks of Iron and Steel. Cilliers also suspected that the creation of a super union could politicise white trade unionism as the CP was conspicuously the only political party present at the steering meeting of the proposed new union. According to Cilliers, the idea of a super union was aimed at the downfall of the NP government; only without paying real attention to the needs of the white workers. On the other hand, Iron and Steel's moderate approach

28 See Ungerer, MWU Memorandum, 2 July 2001; MWU, General Council Minutes, 29 January 1991, pp. 1-2; *Ibid.*, 28 January 1992, pp. 2, 4-7; *Die Mynwerker*, February 1991, p. 3 (Verbind tot een groot blanke vakbond); *Ibid.*, April 1991, p. 1 (Aksiestaple vir super blanke vakbond); *Ibid.*, July 1991, p. 1 (Super unie vorder fluks – talle nuwe lede en maatskappye); *Ibid.*, September 1991, p. 1 (MWU se groei noodsaak uitbreiding); *Ibid.*, February 1992, p. 1 (MWU nou grootste); *Ibid.*, February 1992, pp. 8, 12 (Jaarverslag van die hoofsekretaris); *Finansies en Tegniek*, 7 June 1991, p. 44 (A Boyens: Super blanke vakbond mik na 200 000 lede); *The Star*, 4 July 1991, p. 2 (Rightwingers planning super-union).

29 Ungerer, MWU Memorandum, 2 July 2001; MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 24 April 1991, p. 3; *Die Mynwerker*, July 1990, p. 3 (MWU wil praat oor eenheid); *Ibid.*, August 1990, p. 1 (Blanke eenheid: stryd duur voort!); *Ibid.*, February 1991, p. 1 (Tyd ryp vir een vakbond).

towards the position of black workers was apparently also a thorn in the flesh for the MWU.³⁰

The climax of the unsavoury rivalry between the two unions for the favour of the white worker happened when Iron and Steel threatened the MWU with legal steps on the basis of false, unlawful or libellous reporting in the press regarding an alleged schism in the steelworkers union's ranks. However, the minutes of the MWU executive meetings do not show any signs of the intended litigation.³¹

5. RIGHTWING REACTION TO THE DISMANTLING OF LABOUR AND POLITICAL APARTHEID: THE MWU BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND REFORM

A contentious issue the MWU had to deal with was its relationship with the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement) or AWB of Eugène Terre'Blanche. The AWB was a militant, paramilitary and extra-parliamentary organisation on the extreme ultra-right spectrum of white opposition to change in South Africa. It believed in white racial superiority, was anti-Semitic and strove towards the creation of an independent, all-white Afrikaner or Boerevolkstaat (Boer nation state).³² The AWB targeted white blue collar workers for its support base. Initially, therefore, the organisation did exercise a great influence in the ranks of the MWU, but held no official membership branches in the union. A few officers of the AWB were recruited from the union, such as Dries Kriel, the MWU organiser in the coalmining town of Witbank. According to Kays Smit, a former general-secretary of the AWB, in the early 1990s the organisation could boast a membership of about 3 000 white miners from the vicinity of the Welkom goldmine in the Free State Province alone, although not all of them would necessarily have been MWU members too. AWB influence among and involvement with white workers were also stimulated by deteriorating safety conditions in mines and factories in the early 1990s, where some whites had been assaulted by African workers.³³

30 *Die Mynwerker*, November 1988, p. 5 (Wolhaarstories versus feite); *Ibid.*, April 1991, p. 3 (Ons voer wit werkers se wens uit); *MWU Nuus*, July 1992, p. 3 (Steelworkers' Union helps people 'of all races'); *Ibid.*, November 1992, p. 7 (Ope brief aan Nic Celliers, hoofsekretaris van die SA werker van Yster en Staal); *Ibid.*, November 1992, p. 8 (Yster en Staal in krisis); *Beeld*, 1 November 1991, p. 15 (G van der Westhuizen: Verwerp een vakbond vir wittes); Interview: C de Jager – W Visser, Pretoria, 22 January 2004.

31 See MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 27 November 1991, p. 12; *Ibid.*, 18 December 1991, p. 5; *MWU Nuus*, November 1992, p. 8 (Yster en Staal in krisis); *Die Patriot*, 29 November 1991, p. 2 (Skeuring in Yster en Staal onwaar, sê vakbond).

32 Van Rooyen, pp. 92-93; Schönsteich and Boshoff, pp. 18-19; A Kemp, *Victory or violence: the story of the AWB* (Pretoria: Pro Forma Publishers, 1990), pp. 18-21, 153-157.

33 K Smith, *Die wel en wee van die AWB* (Pretoria: Konfetti Bemaking, 1996), pp. 210, 234, 255, 283; *Die Mynwerker*, May 1990, p. 3 (Deurbraak vir veiligheid van blanke myners); *Ibid.*,

However, the relationship between the AWB and the MWU executive, who, according to Peet Ungerer, could never hit it off with Eugène Terre' Blanche, remained uneasy. For the sake of a united white right unity front, MWU representatives would share a platform with personalities of the HNP, the CP, the Afrikaner Volksfront (people's front) and the AWB on occasions where the AWB was the dominating presence. This was especially done to strengthen the rightwing's so-called "no" vote campaign in the 1992 referendum, when whites were to approve or reject the NP government's negotiation and reform process in order to bring about a non-racial democratic order in South Africa. In another instance, Krappies Cronjé, an MWU organiser, took in his private capacity part in the AWB's infamous protest invasion of the Conference for a Democratic South Africa talks at Kempton Park near Johannesburg in 1993. But, on the other hand, the union's executive decided to turn down a request from the AWB that Ungerer, in his capacity as MWU general-secretary, should address an AWB gathering.³⁴

Officially the MWU tried to remain aloof from the AWB. During his term as MWU general-secretary, even Arrie Paulus was requested to share a public platform with Eugène Terre' Blanche. Once again the MWU executive turned it down as Paulus was of the opinion that such a gesture would, in the eyes of the public, link the union to the AWB.³⁵ However, the MWU did pay its respects at an AWB wreath laying ceremony in 1991. Cor de Jager, in his capacity as union president, represented the MWU at the funeral for AWB members who had died in a violent battle with the police when the organisation tried to break up a political meeting of President FW de Klerk in the rural town of Ventersdorp, which was also the hometown of Terre' Blanche.³⁶

A factor which projected a very negative image of the MWU, even if it was beyond the control of the executive, was that certain white miners, who had access to dynamite, became involved in acts of sabotage and vigilantism against post-1990 political developments in South Africa, such as the unbanning of black freedom struggle leaders and the dismantling of various apartheid structures. Several incidents of dynamite-related sabotage began to appear all over the country. For instance, Hendrik Steyn, a white miner and AWB member, was initially arrested and charged with illegal possession of dynamite and for a dynamite explosion at the offices of the black National Union of Mineworkers in Welkom, but eventually the charges were dropped.³⁷ Dries Kriel, the MWU organiser at Witbank, was arrested

June 1990, p. 3 (Oorsake van konflik by myne uitgewys); Interview: P Ungerer – W Visser, Westonaria, 2 July 2001; Interview: F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001.

34 Smith, p. 340; MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 31 July 1991, pp. 8, 16-17; *Ibid.*, 25 September 1991, p. 11; Interview: P Ungerer – W Visser, Westonaria, 2 July 2001.

35 Interview: A Paulus – W Visser, Krugersdorp, 3 July 2001; Barnard, p. 118.

36 MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 28 August 1991, p. 5.

37 Kemp, pp. 176-180.

in 1992 for an alleged involvement with bomb explosions at the multi-racial Hillview School and COSATU House in Pretoria, as well as at post offices in Pretoria and Krugersdorp. But Kriel had a fall-out with the MWU as he apparently tried to win members back from the mining union to the Iron and Steel Workers' Union. It also seems that Kriel became bitter when he was not treated as a "struggle hero" by the rightwing after his alleged bomb attacks, as the African Nationalist Congress (ANC) did to its own struggle heroes.³⁸

Kriel's actions, while still being a MWU organiser, put the Ungerer administration in a huge predicament. Although he was in favour of group rights for whites and campaigned for white worker interests, Ungerer, for instance, did not oppose the existence of African unions. Nor did he join the CP as Paulus did. The MWU's constitution stipulated that the union was a-political. On the other hand, MWU members were free to join political parties in a private capacity. Many members, including the executive, were sympathetic towards rightwing causes. During the 1989 general election Ungerer even urged white workers to vote for (anti-NP) candidates who would restore white job security. However, Ungerer was correct to assume that the "unsympathetic" NP government would not be toppled by disgruntled voters, despite strong "white resistance" at the polls. Therefore, although the union supported rightwing causes, the MWU would not join any political party *per se* for the sake of restoring white job protection, because Ungerer was against official union involvement in party politics. He was convinced that party politics and trade unionism were irreconcilable.³⁹

Therefore Kriel's alignment with the AWB compelled Ungerer, in a barely concealed reference to the AWB, to "take a stand against a political movement" which put the interests of the MWU at risk. The MWU emphatically denounced violent acts of terror and would not take any responsibility for the deeds of each individual union member in this regard.⁴⁰ In an interview Ungerer, who later suspended Kriel's MWU membership, acknowledged that there were efforts by the AWB to infiltrate and usurp the powers of the MWU executive, but he was adamant that during his term as general-secretary such efforts had been thwarted and that any AWB influence was averted from the union. Interviews with other former MWU leaders and informed persons also confirmed that at no stage had there been any official AWB representation within or ties with the MWU executive.⁴¹

38 *MWU Nuus*, November 1992, p. 7 (Ope brief aan Nic Celliers, hoofredakteur van die *S.A. Werker van Yster en Staal*); *Ibid.*, November 1992, p. 9 (Vraagteken oor Kriel se motiewe); *Beeld*, 16 January 1992, p. 1 (G van der Westhuizen: Nóg vier regsgevang ná vlaag bomme).

39 Ungerer, MWU Memorandum, 2 July 2001; *Die Mynwerker*, September 1987, p. 1 (Peet Ungerer se boodskap); *Ibid.*, August 1989, p. 1 (Dag van beslissing vir blanke werker) and (Pasop vir stemsuiker).

40 *MWU Nuus*, May 1992, p. 1 (MWU nie polities).

41 Interview: P Ungerer – W Visser, Westonaria, 2 July 2001; Interview: A Paulus – W Visser, Krugersdorp, 3 July 2001; Interview: C de Jager – W Visser, Pretoria, 22 January 2004;

But the second leg of the MWU's two-pronged strategy, joining a white rightwing grouping to oppose the dismantling of labour and political apartheid, would inevitably bring the union closer to the fold of rightwing politics. In reaction to the defeat of the "no" vote campaign during the 1992 referendum, the MWU, in conjunction with other rightwing organisations, decided on an all-embracing strategy of passive resistance and obstruction to any reform initiatives by the NP government. This strategy entailed non-violent mass mobilisation, strikes and protests by white workers. Thus the focus shifted from efforts to halt reforms by bringing a rightwing government through electoral means to power towards exercising pressure on the NP and the ANC to recognise Afrikaner claims to political self-determination, and to pay attention to white workers' grievances and interests.

On 7 May 1993, the Afrikaner Volksfront (AVF) was founded under the leadership of the former Chief of the South African Defence Force (SADF), General Constand Viljoen. The AVF came about as a result of the violence and racial tension unleashed in South Africa after the assassination in April 1993 of Chris Hani, an ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) leader, and also in reaction to the leadership vacuum which arose in rightwing ranks after the death of Dr Andries Treurnicht, the CP leader. The AVF, of which the MWU was a founder member, was no political party but would strive to forge the whole spectrum of white right organisations into an effective alliance in order to further the ideal of an Afrikaner volkstaat. The MWU, strongly in favour of ethnic mobilisation and the volkstaat ideal, shared the AVF's opposition to an "ANC-SACP government". The union believed that white workers were being displaced by black workers in their own country through the abolishment of job reservation and that the NP government was delivering the "Boer people" to the "Communists". Therefore MWU president, Cor de Jager, made an urgent appeal to union members to join the AVF. Altogether 98 forms of resistance, referred to as the (Biblical) "Ten Plagues", were considered by the AVF. These included mass civil disobedience, deliberately engineered power failures, industrial sabotage, non-payment of taxes, a unilateral referendum among Afrikaners, forming an alternative government and, ultimately, securing an Afrikaner Boer nation-state through violent secession if non-violent means were futile.⁴²

For instance, in 1993 the AVF organised a mass meeting, attended by approximately 5 000 supporters at the government's headquarters at the Union Buildings in Pretoria to issue an ultimatum to the NP government for talks on Afrikaner self-determination within six months or to face armed rebellion.

Interview: F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001; Interview: F Botha – W Visser, Pretoria, 27 May 2002.

42 Van Rooyen, pp. 71-115, 154-193; Schönteich and Boshoff, pp. 22, 24; *MWU Nuus*, May 1993, pp. 1-2 (MWU steun Volksfront); *Ibid.*, August 1993, p. 1 (Sluit nou aan by die Volksfront!); *Ibid.*, March/April 1994, p. 9 (CP Beyers: Die blanke mynwerker se vryheidstrewa).

Members of the AVF engaged in acts of sabotage in various parts of South Africa to pressurise the country's constitutional negotiators toward complying with the right's demands for territorial autonomy. In addition, the MWU and the AVF launched joint protest marches to voice their discontent with unacceptably high crime levels in the Gauteng area and in the countryside, as well as the "selling out" of whites.⁴³

Another strategy to protect white workers from discrimination in the workplace was the launching of "Operation Self-defense" because, as the MWU saw it, their future depended on resistance to the "dangers" of an "ANC/SACP government".⁴⁴ With an ANC-elected government since 1994, and the non-realisation of the volkstaat ideal a *fait accompli*, the MWU would henceforth concentrate on its role as a forceful pressure group for white workers, whom they regarded as "the new disadvantaged minority in South Africa".⁴⁵ But the union's altered attitude in terms of its positioning in a post-1994 political dispensation did not deter the MWU from industrial action. It was the intention of the MWU executive to rekindle a "culture of protest" among its members, which had started dwindling in white labour ranks during the post-apartheid era. MWU mass action, protest marches and strikes were launched against parastatals in communications and electricity and in the steel and mining industries on issues such as the withdrawal of certain white workers' benefits as a result of affirmative action, wage demands, discrimination and violence against white workers, black advancement and the promotion of equal opportunities in the workplace.⁴⁶

In its ethnic mobilisation efforts the MWU also began to focus on rightwing Afrikaner cultural causes. The union regarded the post-1994 deracialisation of former white state schools as an "infiltration by cultural aliens" which would result in lower educational standards. Therefore, the establishment of private so-called Christelike Volkseie Onderwyskole (Christian people's own schools) by rightwingers was strongly endorsed, as such schools would teach values and

43 Van Rooyen, pp. 71-91, 112-114, 154-193; Schönteich and Boshoff, pp. 24-26; *MWU Nuus*, June 1993, p. 2 (Vanderbijlpark protest).

44 MWU, General Council Minutes, 26 January 1993, p. 4; *MWU Nuus*, March 1992, p. 2 (Operasie Selfverdediging eersdaags geloods); *Ibid.*, April 1993, pp. 1-2 (MWU identifiseer die drie gevare wat ons werkers bedreig); *Ibid.*, August 1993, p. 3 (S Maninger: 'n ANC-regering gelyk aan nasionale ramp).

45 MWU, General Council Minutes, 30 January 1995, pp. 1-2, 4-5.

46 See e.g. MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 28 April 1993, pp. 6, 22; *Ibid.*, 31 August 1994, pp. 7-8; *Ibid.*, 30 January 1995, pp. 4-5; *Ibid.*, 30 January 1996, pp. 5-6; MWU, General Council Minutes, 29 January 1997, pp. 33-34, 39-40; *MWU Nuus*, February 1995, p. 13 (Mynwerkersunie se Witskrif oor swart bemagtiging in 'n neutedop); *Ibid.*, June 1995, p. 5 (F Buys: 'Regstellende aksie' benadeel blankes).

honour commemorations that were important to the (Afrikaner) “Boer people”.⁴⁷ In furthering the white right’s ideal of ethnic separateness, the MWU supported an annual sports week, organised exclusively for white school sport, held in a rural area east of Pretoria.⁴⁸

In addition, the union launched a vigorous protest and resistance campaign against the abolishment of Afrikaans as official language in favour of English in petrochemical, electricity, communication and transport parastatals, as well as the civil service and industry in general. These were desperate measures to preserve and promote the language and culture of its members in the workplace and in the public domain.⁴⁹

However, a weakness of the late twentieth century white right was its inability to sustain a cohesive rightwing front and the propensity towards bickering, discord and strife over tactics and strategies on how to secure a separate future for conservative Afrikaners amidst rapidly changing circumstances. This weakness was its undoing in becoming a force majeure to successfully obstruct and resist the transformation of South Africa from apartheid to democracy.

In 1996 the MWU’s aspiration towards a rightwing unity front suffered an irreparable setback after a severe dispute with the AVF regarding the non-realisation of the visualised Afrikaner volkstaat. Within ten months since its founding the AVF tore apart and, since it had been a founder member of the movement, the MWU was extremely concerned that the white right, in the formation process of a rightwing unity front, never did proper introspection about the most appropriate strategy for bringing about an Afrikaner volkstaat. With only a few weeks to go before South Africa’s historical democratic general election of April 1994, Constand Viljoen and his supporters formed a new moderate rightwing party, the Freedom Front (FF). The FF took part in the April election hoping to achieve Afrikaner self-determination through a democratic process. Criticism within the ranks of the

47 Van Rooyen, p. 185; *MWU Nuus*, August 1993, p. 2 (Model C-skole val weg); *Ibid.*, February 1997, p. 2 (L Durand: Skoolintegrasie verslind ons weerlose kinders); *Ibid.*, March 1997, pp. 8-10 (Wat is volkseie onderwys vir jou kind?); *Ibid.*, May 1997, p. 16 (R Keulder: Volkseie skole: Ouers, oupas, oumas, almal moet saamwerk).

48 *MWU Nuus*, September 1997, p. 8 (Sport is weer lekker met AVS).

49 See, for example, MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 27 October 1993, p. 3; *Ibid.*, 30 January 1996, pp. 30-31; MWU, General Council Minutes, 30 January 1996, p. 75; *MWU Nuus*, June 1992, p. 2 (Weier Afrikaans. Dispuut teen Sasol verklaar); *Ibid.*, August 1994, p. 11 (Mynwerkers striem Eskom oor afskaf van Afrikaans); *Ibid.*, September 1994, p. 11 (Telkom hou werkers aan ‘n lyntjie...); *Ibid.*, May 1995, p. 16 (F Buys: Miskenning van Afrikaans: Maatskappye is ook skuldig); *Ibid.*, July/August 1995, p. 13 (Afrikaans sneuvel in Transnet); *Ibid.*, November/December 1995, p. 13 (KP Cronjé: Yskor misken Afrikaans); *Ibid.*, March 1996, p. 9 (Arbeidsverset kook teen miskenning van Afrikaans). *Ibid.*, August 1996, p. 2 (Flagrante diskriminasie: Staat gooi Afrikaanse tenders uit); *Ibid.*, December 1996, p. 5 (Peet Ungerer: Ek kry nie my taal nie; jy kry nie my geld nie!).

white right such as the MWU's towards Viljoen's volkstaat strategy was that his revised plan for an Afrikaner volkstaat, which would be based on a mere 14% of South Africa's surface, provided only for a restricted autonomy instead of complete Afrikaner independence. Ultimately, the FF could not even persuade the new ANC government to consent to the creation of an Afrikaner volkstaat in any form.⁵⁰

Peet Ungerer wrote a reproachful letter to Viljoen on behalf of the MWU, accusing the FF that its collaboration with the new government contributed to the dismantling of white-only Afrikaans state schools and the "steam-rolling" through parliament of a land reform act to the detriment of white farmers. Through affirmative action many white workers lost their jobs and the FF, which threw certain principles overboard, was a part of this "process of destruction". At the formation of the erstwhile AVF, the majority of rightwingers were of the opinion that the 1994 general election and subsequent Government of National Unity should be fought "by all possible means". However, now (1996), Ungerer argued, the ANC and SACP "led the FF by the nose with paltry talk".⁵¹

In his reaction to Ungerer's accusations Viljoen stated that in the 1994 general election the FF did receive a mandate from more than 600 000 voters to utilise the parliamentary process to negotiate self-determination for Afrikaners. The FF saw its parliamentary task as not merely trying to oppose government policy, but rather to offer long-term political alternatives. But this task was hampered by rightwing labour and political dissention. Neither could gather sufficient ground level support for self-determination through protest actions and strikes. Responding to criticism by obstinate rightwing elements that, despite his solemn resolve, he had failed to realise an Afrikaner volkstaat, Viljoen argued that just as the MWU had no alternative but to participate as a minority union in a labour dispensation designed by the ANC and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, so the FF was obliged to engage in a political dispensation with which it did not agree. As did the MWU, so the FF tried to utilise the system as much as possible to negotiate deals for their followers.⁵²

Despite Viljoen's explanation for the rationale of his political strategy, Ungerer's rebuttal was still uncompromising. In the light of the hostile political milieu of the time, as the white right perceived it to be, the MWU did not deem the FF parliamentary actions as proper opposition against the "ANC-SACP government". As an example, Ungerer referred to President Mandela's frequent deference to Viljoen, rather than any NP leader, as the man who steered the white right away from a bloody racial war and who thus contributed to a peaceful political

50 Van Rooyen, p. 115; Schönteich and Boshoff, p. 27; MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 29 May 1996, p. 40; Interview: C de Jager – W Visser, Pretoria, 22 January 2004.

51 MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 27 March 1996, pp. 27-29.

52 *Ibid.*, 29 May 1996, pp. 31-41.

settlement in South Africa. The FF was accused of preferring a good relationship with the “ANC-SACP government”, instead of countering the “onslaughts” on Afrikaner values, language and culture as its highest priority. What the new constitution regarded as ethnic rights were nothing but a “gimmick”, and this was clear proof that Viljoen’s approach was wrong. As Viljoen was not prepared to deviate from this political direction, Ungerer argued that reconciliation with the MWU was no longer feasible. Consequently, the MWU terminated its relationship with the FF.⁵³

6. REINVENTION OR DEATH: THE MWU’S RESOLVE TO REFORM

After the breakdown of the rightwing unity front in 1996 and the right’s failed tactics to thwart the dawning of a democratic, non-racial political dispensation in South Africa, the MWU felt somewhat deserted. Consequently, it became more reactionary and adopted a laager mentality. A good example of the MWU’s defiance towards the new political order was the symbolism encapsulated in the union’s emblem for the annual congress of the 1997 MWU general council. It was a white rhino with the motto: “Threatened but dangerous”. The congress slogan was equally pugnacious: “Vigorously, like a crazy, storming white rhino, we shall have to sweep aside all obstacles and onslaughts. Nothing may obstruct our interests and the interests of our descendants.”⁵⁴ By 1995 the union’s new mouthpiece, *MWU News*, already boasted that with a 53 000 membership, the MWU was the largest white trade union in South Africa. By comparison, by 1996 the numbers of its biggest contender among white workers, the Iron and Steel Workers’ Union, which was eventually renamed the South African Workers’ Union (SAWU), dwindled to a mere 23 000. *MWU News* ascribed this state of affairs to SAWU’s opening of its ranks to all races, which in turn caused a mass exodus of white workers to the MWU.⁵⁵

However, despite claims to being unstoppable and showing a phenomenal growth in membership, the strategy to project the MWU as a vigorous pressure group which acted exclusively and outspokenly for white workers’ interests, became increasingly problematic in post-apartheid South Africa. More and more employers started refusing to bargain with the union over labour matters because of its overt pro-white constitution.⁵⁶ From 1994 to 1997 the MWU began to stagnate. Its membership did not grow and it was unable to produce viable alternative strategies for the protection and advancement of exclusive white worker privileges.

53 *Ibid.*, 31 July 1996, p. 34.

54 *MWU Nuus*, February 1997, pp. 1-2 (Niks mag in die pad van ons nageslag staan nie); *Ibid.*, April 1997, p. 1 (Onstuitbaar).

55 *Ibid.*, March 1995, p. 1 (Report: MWU is the biggest and growing); *Ibid.*, March 1996, pp. 1-2 (Bont vakbonde se lede stroom uit).

56 MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 28 September 1994, p. 20.

By 1997 it had an extremely negative and stereotyped profile in labour circles associated with the ANC government. It was the image of a backward, racist and brutal organisation that was nothing but an odd anachronism from the old South Africa. Its rightwing image was politically incorrect and self-defeating and it was perceived to be only for blue-collar workers. The public viewed the MWU negatively and the union moved from being a national role-player to a marginalised shop-floor union. In addition, many of its members were retrenched or disaffected. It became clear that in the light of the radically altered political and economic realities of South Africa after 1994, the MWU had reached the crossroads. To avoid further stagnation as a labour union and to remain a significant player in the shrinking labour market of the post-apartheid economy, the union had to choose between a complete rethinking of its vision, strategies and structures – reinventing itself, as it were – or drifting into a cul-de-sac.⁵⁷

In July 1997, Flip Buys succeeded Peet Ungerer, becoming the first general-secretary in the history of the MWU who was not a miner. As an academically trained intellectual, Buys was characteristic of a new generation of white-collar trade union officials who had to function in a totally altered labour milieu. While studying at the University for Christian Higher Education at Potchefstroom, Buys was the chairperson of the local student CP branch. He also became involved with the CP's "no" vote campaign in the 1992 referendum. However, when Buys realised that Treurnicht and the CP, apart from campaigning against the referendum, had no concrete, realistic alternative strategy in place to counter the reform and negotiation policies of the NP, he became disillusioned with rightwing politics. Consequently, he began to think anew about the role and place of the right in a changed South Africa.⁵⁸

Buys also realised that the old practice, where blue-collar union leaders were forged by years of practical experience on the factory floor or in the mine stopes, could simply no longer meet the complex demands of modern trade union management. The radical changes which occurred in South African trade unionism towards the end of the twentieth century demanded new skills and strategic management.⁵⁹ He had a sober and realistic grasp of the realities of a post-apartheid South Africa, distinguished by new labour legislation in terms of which the union was in a crisis and required a drastic and profound change of policy. Internationally, as well as in South Africa, the economy was changing rapidly and irrevocably from an industrial to an information-driven economy. In addition, the number of

57 L Backer, "Revive and reinvent. MWU-Solidarity's plans for growth", *South African Labour Bulletin* 25, 2001, p. 68.

58 Interview: F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001.

59 MWU, Executive Committee Minutes, 28 May 1997, pp. 1-4; *MWU Nuus*, September 1997, p. 16 (Nuwe hoofsekretaris praat); *South African Labour Bulletin* 27, 2003, pp. 30-31 (What has happened to the white worker?); Interview: F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001.

white-collar workers began to surpass the number of white blue-collar workers and the labour scene was rapidly changing from one consisting of industrially-skilled workers to so-called knowledge workers. Of equal importance was the fact that the MWU would have to detach itself from a close alliance with rightwing politics. It would have to reposition itself again as a politically neutral labour organisation, representing white workers under the labour laws of post-apartheid South Africa.⁶⁰

By September 2002, the MWU was renamed Solidarity. The union had shaken off its reactionary rightwing image to assume a center-right position.⁶¹ Apart from Constand Viljoen's FF, the MWU was the only member of the former rightwing alliance still in existence by the 2000s. In fact, the MWU (Solidarity) became one of only a few Afrikaner institutions to have survived the era of apartheid.⁶²

7. CONCLUSION

By the late 1970s the socio-political environment was changing in South Africa. The NP government's reforms were increasingly incompatible with the party's traditional alliance of various classes. It was perceived as a threat to their interests and led to existential insecurity. The government's acceptance of the Wiehahn recommendations to abolish statutory job reservation, open apprenticeships to Africans, and registered black trade unions estranged white miners who struck to defend racial job reservation. White civil servants who also enjoyed white worker privileges were wary of reforms which threatened their functions or promotion prospects. In addition, the NP's agricultural policy was seen as favouring industry over farming, the big man over the little, and Cape and Natal exporters over the former Transvaal and Free State food producers. Poverty and unemployment were also beginning to surface among the white working class and the extent and quality of state support for poor whites declined. Consequently, they felt let down and betrayed by the ruling party elite. In turn, these developments provoked by-election swings to the far right of up to 40% in traditional NP working-class, farming and urban constituencies, particularly in the former Transvaal.⁶³

60 MWU, General Council Minutes, 27 January 1998, pp. 7, 18; Interview F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001.

61 MWU, Great Council Minutes, 27 February 2001, p. 5; *Ibid.*, 25 September 2002, p. 4; *Rapport*, 25 February 2001, p. 8 (ZB du Toit: Nuwe Solidariteit-vakbond vir minderhede); Interview F Buys – W Visser, Pretoria, 1 July 2001.

62 *Rapport*, 15 June 2003, p. 15 (Die groot uitskud van Afrikaner-organisasies).

63 C Charney, "Class conflict and the National Party split", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 10(2), April 1984, pp. 271-273, 277-279; J Hyslop, "The white poor at the end of apartheid: the challenge of the myth of Afrikaner community", *Itinerario* 27 (3-4), November 2003, pp. 229-231; D O'Meara, *Forty lost years. The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996), pp. 309-310, 312.

Collectively, the estrangement of these classes' traditional alliance led to social and political dislocation from the ruling NP. In the case of the MWU it caused a rupture in the long-standing symbiotic relationship between the state, mining capital and organised white labour. White mineworkers in the MWU, who after the failed strike of 1979 realised that they were not powerful enough to thwart the NP's labour reforms and the post-apartheid outcome of a politically negotiated settlement, responded in two ways. Firstly, the MWU tried to consolidate the ranks of conservative white labour by extending its scope beyond the mining industry. Secondly, it began to align itself more closely with rightwing political parties and organisations.

However, the relationship between the MWU and these groups remained fluid. It was unable to merge with the Iron and Steel Workers' Union in an amicable way to create a new, super strong white union. Old insoluble animosities and rivalries between the two unions stood in the way of the MWU's ambitions. Furthermore, although the MWU gave tacit support to the HNP and the CP, it never allied itself officially with any political party since 1979. The relationship between the MWU and the AWB also remained scratchy throughout. And the MWU's aspirations towards a rightwing unity front, in order to overturn the post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa, came to nothing when a dispute developed with the AVF over tactical approaches on the creation of an Afrikaner volkstaat.

The MWU's eventual rejection of resistance and option for reform was a key element for its survival as a predominant white labour organisation in post-apartheid South Africa.