South Africa’s trade union movement is one of the few global labour movements that are in ascendancy. Unlike many countries where the labour movement seems to have reached its zenith the movement here is still militant, it’s still growing and it’s still in alliance with the ruling party. Yet surprisingly there has been little serious in-depth analysis of it since Jeremy Baskin’s 1991 *Striking Back – a history of COSATU* (Ravan Press). So Sakhela Buhlungu’s book fills a welcome gap.

This book succeeds in being simultaneously an academic book (useful for teaching, writing, reflecting and referencing) and a political intervention in the debates of the day. This is a reflection of the author’s positionality with his history as a ‘participant and observer of the South African trade union movement’ (pvii), as well as, his current location as a professor of sociology.

While the book covers the period from the birth of the independent labour movement it’s no linear history of COSATU. Its primary concern is the current issues, or in Buhlungu’s words ‘dilemmas’, facing the labour movement in South Africa. Here (chapter 1 ‘Introduction: labour, liberation and development in Africa’) he identifies four dilemmas facing the labour movement: the issue of economic liberalisation and the accompanying pressures of casualisation and outsourcing; the unilateral adoption and implementation of macroeconomic policies; union-party relations; labour relations reform; and, the loss of union leadership either to government or business (pp5-16). In having to respond to these pressures, Buhlungu
suggests, COSATU is no different from other union movements in Southern Africa, the difference he notes lies in its successes as a labour movement and this success, he explains, is firmly rooted in its history of mobilisation. These dilemmas and their placement in the history of the labour movement structure the debates raised in this book.

The ‘paradox of victory’ referred to in the book’s title is that as the labour movement exerts its power and exercises its influence in the new democracy, so ‘the fruits of their victories continue to elude them as the processes of liberalisation that they champion almost always result in the organisational weakening of union structures’ (p17). Buhlungu locates his arguments in a discussion of COSATU and its immediate predecessor from the early 1970s onwards. The chapters cover the issues of union activism, organisational models and union mobilisation (chapters 2 and 3), the consequences of global economic integration and the author’s view that the unions were unprepared for the consequences (chapter 4), the changing face of the union movement by the late 1990s and the 2000s and the consequences for building organisation (chapter 5), issues of leadership in COSATU (chapter 6), the meaning of ‘race’ and ‘non-racialism’ in the union movement (chapter 7), and finally, in chapter 8, the ‘paradox of victory’.

I really enjoyed chapter 2 ‘Fighting for survival: union organisational models and strategies after 1973’. In writing about this period Buhlungu raises new issues and questions. Firstly, he brings the ‘lived experiences of black workers’ into the discussion of organisational history. Many of the accounts of the building of the independent trade union movement are inclined to treat the workers as having little agency in the formation or the form of the trade union movement. Much of the current writing (and often even the way it is taught in the lecture theatre, if I remember my undergraduate years) gives agency to only one set of actors – those whom Buhlungu calls ‘the professionally-trained intellectuals’. Implicit in this chapter is a challenge to the prevailing paradigm. Explicitly the challenge is empirical; through his presentation of a different story Buhlungu is calling into question previously hegemonic accounts of the building of the trade union movement. But the hidden challenges are both theoretical and methodological. Buhlungu points out that once workers’ lived experiences are integrated into the analysis it’s possible to understand the social processes of mobilisation in different ways. Linked to this theoretical point are the methodological questions: how do we, and how should we, research accounts of trade union organisational history? Secondly, by grounding his discussion of
organisation-building in the lived experiences of workers, Buhlungu is raising the links between organisation building, organisational form, culture and identity. This is an under-researched area and Buhlungu’s discussion shows the wide variety of lived-experiences that resulted in the democratic union tradition of today.

A second theme explored in this chapter is the role of intellectuals in the building of the labour movement. As Buhlungu argues many different types of intellectuals have been central to the building of the union movement. However, their role has also been contested with significant role-players being excised from the literature (and history). Buhlungu’s account doesn’t present an overarching narrative but instead indicates the complexity of the period and the diversity amongst the different groups of intellectuals who contributed to the building of the labour movement. As much as I liked this discussion, I had two critical points. Firstly, I felt what was missing from the discussion was the question of ‘power’. Where did power lie amongst these different groups or how did power shift between groups? Secondly, there is no recognition of the importance of location and locality. I suspect that recognition of differing regional dynamics would have added another dimension to this discussion. For example in the Durban/Pietermaritzburg area, the Urban Training Project and Industrial Aid Society were not prominent, while the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund played a greater role.

In chapter 4, ‘Union organising and global economic restructuring’, Buhlungu looks more closely at the theme of union organising and how it’s been impacted by global economic restructuring. He turns to the post-1994 period and asks the question ‘in what ways did global economic restructuring reshape the union organising landscape?’ (p79). In answering this he links the changes in the organisation of work at that time, namely worker participation and world-class manufacturing, to the issue of flexible production and flexible labour markets. He suggests that management were far ahead of the unions in their thinking about these issues and about the integration of the South African economy into the global economy. As such unions were not in a position to set the terrain for these initiatives but were always reactive. Ultimately what we are seeing here is the crisis of the organisational model of industrial unionism as developed in South Africa; labour has not yet been able to come up with a model that circumvents the flexibility in the labour market that has had such a destructive effect on both union membership and on job security in South Africa. In conclusion
Buhlungu suggests that the South African union experience of global economic restructuring raises three theoretical dilemmas. The first as mentioned above is the crisis of industrial unionism ‘where work restructuring has resulted in unprecedented job destruction and deindustrialisation’ (p96). The second is that trade unions have become isolated from other working class organisations and have retreated into the narrow coalition politics of the Tripartite Alliance. This is somewhat alien to COSATU’s history where it was a leading force in building broad coalitions. And, thirdly, there is a dilemma in the crisis of the paradigm of liberation and development. This paradigm is based on the idea that economic restructuring and redistribution in South Africa would be driven by a strong state. But the shift to GEAR saw the beginning of a ‘paradigm crises’ which, according to Buhlungu, the unions have not yet been able to successfully respond to. These three dilemmas, argues Buhlungu, highlight the difficult task that faces COSATU. The main obstacle facing the unions is that the alliance has made it difficult for union leadership (many who came into the movement in the late 1980s and therefore only know alliance politics and who have aspirations of upward mobility into government) to engage in a dispassionate debate about these dilemmas.

In my view what is most interesting about this discussion is the way in which the author embeds his arguments within the key issue of organising workers and union strategies, and the relationship thereof to changes in the global economy. I felt that he could have taken this discussion one step further and linked it to the more macro issue of class politics. But even though he doesn’t do this his framing of the problem provides a lot to think about. Implicit in his argument are his points that until the union movement is prepared to think more critically about the alliance they are not going to resolve the pressing problem of a declining membership; neither will they be able to successfully engage with workplace change on the factory floor. What I found stimulating about the discussion in this chapter is the way in which Buhlungu builds the links between what happens down there on the factory floor in one factory, and, changes and developments at the macro level.

Chapters 5 and 6 investigate the themes of the changing identity of the workforce and the consequent transformation of union leadership respectively. Drawing on the various longitudinal surveys that have been conducted, chapter 5 provides a picture of the changing age, generation, gender, occupation, length of membership, etc, of union membership. He
notes that there is paucity of research on the labour movement as subjects of change (p112). However, what this research does show is that unions have also been affected by the transition in fundamental ways and that ‘the changing social composition of COSATU’s membership .. [is] directly or indirectly, a function of this transition and does have several implications for the study of labour movements’ (p112).

Along with these changes in the membership have been changes in leadership (chapter 6). In the earlier period the unions were dominated by activist and altruistic leaders. But says Buhlungu this has changed ‘as much a result of broader contextual factors as ... of the internal processes of organisational change’ (p121). He identifies five transformations in union leadership over the last 20 years: the way union officials dress and project themselves in public; the emergence of increasing hierarchical relations amongst officials; professionalism; transformations in terms of gender and class with few women occupying leadership positions; and an increasingly upwardly mobile leadership. And yet he argues that despite these changes the result isn’t the entrenchment of leadership within the unions, rather high-profile leaders leave the union movement either for government or business where they are highly valued.

The penultimate chapter of the book ‘Many shades of black: intra-black relations in trade unions’ looks at ‘race’ and the labour movement. Here Buhlungu investigates the issue of non-racialism in the labour movement. As he says this is not an area that has been the subject of much research, he raises the issue in order to open it up as a new frontier for more in-depth research. He links this discussion to the creation of the organisational culture of the labour movement – and shows how race-thinking was key, but unacknowledged, in building the organisational culture. Buhlungu argues that the organisational culture was raced (as it was gendered I would argue) – but this was not conscious. By it not being conscious the union movement, despite its best intentions, reproduced the racial divisions of broader society. This discussion points to the importance of a broader debate on the meaning and consequences of non-racialism as an ideal in much oppositional politics.

I found this a very interesting chapter and I do think that Buhlungu makes some important and necessary points. It is an area that needs a lot more research. However, while Buhlungu does attempt to nuance the discussion (rather than generalising where often there are regional or organisational diversities) these attempts are often lost in the broad brushstrokes of his
discussion. More focused research on this issue would give us greater insight into these dynamics, as well as enable us to better understand the counter moments. For example he mentions that in the Western Cape the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) did not champion the COSATU policy of voting for the ANC in 1994 as they didn’t want to antagonise their ‘coloured’ National Party supporting members. Yet in KwaZulu-Natal SACTWU was one of the unions that sent the highest number of shop stewards into the countryside to campaign for the ANC in 1994 (personal interviews).

The last chapter (chapter 8) ‘Gaining influence and losing power: COSATU’s contested future’ tackles the paradox of the title head-on. The victory that Buhlungu is referring to is the phenomenal success in the organisation of black workers by COSATU (and its immediate predecessors in the 1970s). These unions managed to build permanent organisational structures and establish unions in sectors that hadn’t been previously organised, setting the scene for the phenomenal growth of membership. They also built alliances beyond the shop floor which enabled them to make political demands and become involved in the restructuring of the politics and economics of South Africa. However, and this is the paradox as seen by Buhlungu, as COSATU ‘achieved a historic victory and saw their influence expand to virtually all areas of policy formulation and implementation, their organisational power began to decline visibly’ (p160). Buhlungu details the reasons for this decline as being from the opening up of the South African economy to the global economy, to the overstretching of the Federation given the broad involvement of officials in wider national events. This discussion starkly lays out the dilemmas facing the union movement. It’s not an entirely pessimistic view; Buhlungu does acknowledge the achievements and the current strengths of the union movement in South Africa. Yet at the same time he says that as per the September Commission report there are strong elements of the ‘skorokoro scenario’ in the contemporary union movement (‘ … chaos and a deep social crisis would reign rendering South Africa a ‘skorokoro society’ with the federation itself ‘facing the danger of becoming a skorokoro union movement as well’ (p178)).

This view has not been well received by COSATU. They issued a press statement ‘distancing themselves from Buhlungu’s work and saying that academics should be careful when they put pen to paper and calling the claims made in the chapter “outrageous”’ (Books Live 2010a). According to the publishers, Zwelinzima Vavi (COSATU General Secretary) was invited to
debate these views as a member of a panel discussion held at the 2010 Cape Town Book Fair, but didn’t respond. However, at a later discussion of the book, the COSATU Western Cape Provincial Secretary, Tony Ehrenreich, agreed to act as a discussant. Here he said that ‘the book was an “incredible contribution” that showed an insider’s perspective into the organization’ (Books LIVE 2010b).

I would be inclined to agree with Tony Ehrenreich’s comments. In writing this book, Buhlungu has two definite advantages. Firstly there is his long association with the labour movement, first as an organiser in the 1980s and then as a writer with COSATU’s magazine The Shop Steward. Secondly, there is the vast amount of detailed research work, focusing on the changing nature of trade unionism in South Africa, which he has undertaken over the last 15-20 years. This work and experience combined has enabled him to write a very interesting and extremely useful book about COSATU. He brings together a great deal of fine detail in order to raise original arguments and crucial debates about the place of COSATU in 2011. This discussion is historically grounded and Buhlungu is careful to show how current issues are deeply and historically rooted in the development of the labour movement. Buhlungu might be critical of the labour movement, but it is a criticism raised with the passion of someone who cares deeply about its future. While the book is incredibly readable it does raise weighty issues that do need to be carefully debated. I found it rich, very insightful and thought provoking.

References