

The Role of Trade Unions during Apartheid.

Assessment Task

The social and political role of trade unions in the apartheid era (Individual activity) (LO1 AS4)

Read the extract below and answer the questions that follow. You need to do some research to answer all the questions.

A trade union movement is born

The basis of today's trade union movement was laid in 1973 when about 100 000 workers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal embarked on strike action to demand higher wages. Other workers joined in, engulfing Durban's entire industrial heartland in strike activity.

The strikes soon spread to other major centres in the country, prompting the formation of a number of industrially demarcated unions, starting in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Thus was born a national, albeit fragmented, trade union movement.

The unions challenge apartheid

The militancy shown by the trade union movement in support of union recognition and higher wages soon translated into political mobilisation against apartheid structures.

The apartheid era Industrial Conciliation Act, for example, recognised the right of white, Indian and coloured workers to belong to trade unions while denying black workers the same right. Consequently, trade unions argued that workers and their unions could not remain disengaged from community struggles to dismantle the apartheid system.

Unions soon began participating in community struggles against high rent, unrepresentative local councils and apartheid laws, leading in the 1980s to the establishment of community organisations, including youth, student and women's structures.

A co-operative relationship between unions and community organisations was established. The many stayaways in support of political demand in the 1980s were jointly organised by the unions and community organisations. The trade unions' valuable organisational and negotiating experience was shared with community activists, ensuring effective community mobilisation.

The unions also played an important political role when, in 1983, they joined up with anti-apartheid organisations to form the United Democratic Front, a broad-based movement that campaigned against the tri-cameral parliament catering for whites, Indians and coloureds to the exclusion of black people. Many trade union leaders became prominent members of the African National Congress (ANC) after the 1994 elections.

(Source: International Marketing Council of South Africa)

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| a) What caused the strike action in Durban in 1973? | [1 mark] |
| b) Why was the Industrial Conciliation Act discriminatory? | [1 mark] |
| c) Why did the trade unions become involved in the politics of the time? | [2 marks] |
| d) How did the trade unions become involved in the politics of the time? | [2 marks] |
| e) What is the difference between a strike and a stayaway? | [2 marks] |
| f) How did trade unions contribute to effective community mobilisation? | [2 marks] |
| g) Who was the United Democratic Front? | [2 marks] |
| h) What is the tri-cameral parliament? | [3 marks] |

