


ARTICLE

# “An Exercise in the Art of the Possible”: Waging a Battle Against Apartheid in the South African Workplace

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The Wiehahn Commission, a government body that proposed a multipronged 1979 South African labor reform, accelerated the corporate recognition of Black trade unions in apartheid era South Africa. Gradually implemented over the course of two years, the reforms complemented international workplace codes and the burgeoning reformist push for ethically sound business practices in the workplace. Although U.S. multinational firms in South Africa did not initially voice support for Black trade unions, in the aftermath of Soweto, many were faced with cascading internal and external pressures to negotiate with these emerging unions. By incorporating the Sullivan Principles, a U.S. code for ethical business conduct, into the broader scholarship on the South African trade union movement and the late apartheid era Wiehahn Commission reforms, this article examines how corporate reforms landed in South Africa, probing the business response to worker demands. South African workers were not merely passive recipients of workplace reform, but rather active participants, shaping the form and direction of U.S. and South African policy.

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**Keywords:** South Africa, labor relations, multinationals, race

## Introduction

Addressing the Federated Chamber of Industries Convention in Johannesburg, South Africa on September 25, 1979, the minister of manpower utilisation, S. P. “Fanie” Botha, announced a breakthrough change in South African labor law. Botha proclaimed that “all employed workers in the Republic [of South Africa] who are citizens of the Republic or who are citizens of an area which previously was a part of the Republic, will be declared employees.”<sup>1</sup> Stated differently, the 1979 announcement of some of the early findings of the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation, or Wiehahn Commission (the Commission), classified Black South African workers as employees for the first time, giving them access to the negotiation process and the right to be represented by Black trade unions. Although these changes

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1. Newsletter, Institute for Industrial Relations, “Industrial Relations on the Shop Floor,” October 1979, K364, AK6/3/1/1/5, box 34, Records of the Wiehahn Commission, National Archives of South Africa.

Published online July 25, 2023

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appeared monumental at the time, reform in a nation systematically ruled by apartheid was limited. Black workers recalled that they were repeatedly fired, and gaining Black trade union recognition was exceptionally difficult, despite the government's reforms.<sup>2</sup> As the story that unfolded in the late-1970s South African workplace shows, workers and unionists took advantage of and methodically leveraged reforms to pressure multinational companies with a presence in South Africa, generating international solidarity.

By 1979, the discriminatory South African government had turned toward reforming apartheid, hoping to create the illusion of inclusion.<sup>3</sup> The international community was increasingly attentive to South African matters as well. Western companies in particular relied on South Africa's inhumane apartheid laws, which collectively legalized state-sponsored segregation on the basis of race (1948–1994). As multinational companies saw it, they could maximize capitalist extraction by cheaply employing Black workers. However, things were changing by the late 1970s, especially after the violent police response to Black youth protest in the South African township of Soweto.<sup>4</sup> Following negative international headlines and increased shareholder pressure, it seemed that American corporations could no longer appear outwardly compliant with racist apartheid law. Interest in the adoption of corporate reform, including an embrace of the reformist ideas that had long circulated in both State Department orbits as well as within South Africa itself, was a real possibility.<sup>5</sup> Still, foreign companies preferred to avoid breaking ties with South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

The American presence in South Africa was extensive, and the ideas undergirding possible reform dated back to the pre-Soweto era.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the late 1970s, around 350 U.S. companies maintained direct operations in South Africa, where the thriving manufacturing sector was largely controlled by foreign interests, and growing exponentially.<sup>8</sup> American corporate giants, such as General Motors, IBM, and Mobil were among the many U.S. multinationals that faced shareholder pressure to reform their discriminatory business practices. Reverend Leon Sullivan, an African American civil rights leader and member of the General Motors Board of Directors, would use his platform to reform American business operations in apartheid South Africa while, simultaneously, the South African government sought to revise its industrial relations laws. Sullivan used his pedestal to boldly condemn GM's complicity with apartheid, calling on the company to withdraw from South Africa "until clear changes have been made in the practice and policies of that government as they pertain to the treatment of Blacks and other non-white residents."<sup>9</sup>

2. Gibbs, "Women, Labour, and Resistance," 319. Specifically, this references Gibbs's interview with Eugene Johnson.

3. Van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 118; Giliomee, *Last Afrikaner Leaders*, 141–142.

4. Gurney, "The 1970s," 480.

5. Levy, "Black Power in the Boardroom," 193; van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 119.

6. Levy, "Black Power in the Boardroom," 193.

7. Economic Security and Economic Development: Manpower and Employment. Black Caucus Recommendations, May 18, 1971, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, box 37, folder 2, Gerald Ford Presidential Library; "US Business in South Africa: Pressures from the Home Front," box 61, Leon Howard Sullivan Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University (hereafter cited as Sullivan Papers).

8. Hull, *American Enterprise in South Africa*; McHenry, *United States Firms in South Africa*; African National Congress Youth and Students Section, "Paper on Southern Africa," box 15, ANC-London, MCH02, University of the Western Cape Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives (hereafter cited as Mayibuye Archives).

9. Manuscript, Leon Sullivan, "Proposed Additional Chapters and Titles, Book: Climbing the Tallest Trees," box 73, folder 1, Sullivan Papers.

On March 1, 1977, six years after his appointment to the GM board, Sullivan launched a corporate code of conduct for U.S. companies operating in South Africa. Sullivan's six-point voluntary code of conduct encouraged U.S. business interests to promote human rights through equal employment practices on the part of their South African subsidiaries.<sup>10</sup> At first, twelve major American corporations with operations in South Africa signed the Sullivan Principles (the Principles). Privileging desegregation of the workplace and equal pay for equal work, the Principles were, at the time of Sullivan's proposal, too revolutionary in the eyes of the GM board and received condemnation from many executives.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the code was an integral part of the story of South African labor struggles and figured into South African trade union strategy.

This article examines how South African and U.S. labor and workplace reforms intersected during the late 1970s. It also explores the challenges U.S. corporations would begin to face after failing to gain support from a critical mass of American anti-apartheid activist groups, many of which critiqued Sullivan as a sellout to corporate interests. To understand Sullivan's impact, I foreground African workers and trade unionists, and thus highlight how they defiantly refused to accept reform at face value, all while leveraging the changing South African labor landscape. An array of actors—trade unionists, business people, and everyday workers—converged to pressure the private sector and the South African government to prioritize their respective interests.

Scholars have only recently started unpacking the broader significance of the Sullivan Principles. However, there has been ample work on a related topic, the 1979 Wiehahn Commission, an internal study and set of state-level recommendations advocating for a revision of existing South African labor policy. On July 8, 1977, just as American corporations were scrambling to address their shareholder dilemmas, the South African government appointed a multiracial commission to investigate the country's industrial relations system.<sup>12</sup> Like U.S. corporations, the South African government was hoping to stave off both internal and external pressures and combat the Black trade union movement.<sup>13</sup> Aware of the cascading protests from activists and the fragility of an economy highlighted by rising unemployment, the South African government grudgingly approved of an investigation into labor legislation

10. Stevens, "From the Viewpoint of a Southern Governor," 874. The Principles would boast, at most, 150 signatories. The original six Principles were as follows: (1) nonsegregation of the races in all eating, comfort, and work facilities; (2) equal and fair employment practices for all employees; (3) equal pay for all employees doing equal or comparable work for the same period of time; (4) initiation of and development of training programs that will prepare, in substantial numbers, Black and other non-whites for supervisory, administrative, clerical, and technical jobs; (5) increase in the number of Blacks and other non-whites in management and supervisory positions; and (6) improvement of the quality of employees' lives outside the work environment in such areas as housing, transportation, schooling, recreation, and health facilities.

11. Business people sent a series of letters to Sullivan, arguing that interfering in a country's sovereignty would invite "government-to-government confrontation." Mobil's president expressed this opinion in a letter to Sullivan: Bill Tavoulaareas to Leon Sullivan, February 18, 1977, box 54, folder 6, Sullivan Papers. Smaller companies also objected, thinking there was little they could do to change the South African landscape. See Malcolm A. Mynderse to Sullivan, April 14, 1975, box 54, folder 4, Sullivan Papers. Evidence submitted to the Wiehahn Commission showed that even non-Sullivan affiliates, such as Shell, generally rejected excessive outside interference. See Shell South Africa, "Submission to the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation," November 14, 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 35, National Archives of South Africa.

12. Van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 123. The Wiehahn Commission was the Republic's first multiracial commission.

13. Ulrich, "Only the Workers Can Free the Workers," 205.

and promptly appointed fourteen commissioners. The outline of the Wiehahn Commission would bring employers and registered unions together to submit written and oral evidence and essentially test the limits of reform.<sup>14</sup> This investigation would include 255 submissions and span the course of nearly two years, from August 1977 to the early months of 1979, culminating in recommendations for comprehensive reforms to South Africa's draconian labor laws. The South African government gradually applied these recommendations from 1979 to 1981.<sup>15</sup>

Some scholarship on the Wiehahn Commission draws from the published Commission report, but also from the collections housed at the National Archives of South Africa. The materials contained within the Wiehahn Commission records are rich, detailing the recommendations and concerns of employers, corporations, management, and the South African Department of Labour (now known as the Department of Employment and Labour) more broadly.<sup>16</sup> Beyond collecting evidence from this diverse array of actors, commissioners tasked with evaluating South African labor law also visited plants and observed labor practices, keeping detailed records.<sup>17</sup> Although a few scholars have made use of the Wiehahn archive, existing scholarship seldom connects the Wiehahn reforms to the Sullivan Principles.<sup>18</sup> Scholars such as Steven Friedman have evaluated the Wiehahn reforms with some caution, noting that the South African Commission's goal was to grant Africans unionization rights as a means to control them. Merle Lipton further probes this, arguing that businesses granted Black workers organization rights for selfish purposes, essentially reforming apartheid to increase their own productivity.<sup>19</sup> Alex Lichtenstein recognizes that such rights carved new space for Black workers to build unions, but that this apparent gain resulted in an abrupt bargaining shift to the corporatist, management-dominant Industrial Council, far from the shop floor.<sup>20</sup> Similar to Lichtenstein's work, this article centers Black worker responses, but it focuses on the multinational company and the workplace reforms unfolding simultaneously, including the proliferation of corporate codes of conduct such as the Sullivan Principles.<sup>21</sup>

With specific attention to U.S. multinationals in South Africa, existing studies of the Sullivan Principles highlight both the code's shortcomings and its successes. Although some anti-apartheid movement literature criticizes the code for stymying the anti-apartheid movement, recent work has complicated this narrative by reassessing its impact.<sup>22</sup> Although acknowledging the generally positive reception of the code in narratives of business ethics,

14. *Ibid.*, 205, 237.

15. Van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 124.

16. For a guide on how to access and use the archive, see van Zyl-Hermann, "White Workers."

17. For example, "Commission Visit to Industria House," 18 January 1978, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 35, National Archives of South Africa.

18. Rycroft and Jordaan, *Guide to South African Labour Law*; Bendix, *Industrial Relations*; Lichtenstein, "We Do Not Think"; Lichtenstein, "We Feel Our Strength"; van Zyl-Hermann, "White Workers."

19. Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*; Harries, "Capital, State and Labour."

20. S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 153; Lichtenstein, "We Feel Our Strength," 4, 17.

21. Other nonbinding corporate codes targeted toward business in South Africa included the Canadian Code, EEC Code, and the SACCOLA-Urban Foundation Code.

22. For a critique, see Schmidt, *Decoding Corporate Camouflage*; Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*. For recent work that has re-examined the impact of Sullivan and the code, see Levy, "Black Power in the Boardroom," 170–209; Larson, "Sullivan Principles," 479–503. Larson's work in particular considers how globalization and free market capitalism have shaped our analysis of the Principles. Webb, "People Before Profit," 64–87; Stewart, "Amandla! The Sullivan Principles." For a business angle, see Seidman, *Beyond the Boycott*; Sethi and

Zeb Larson ultimately highlights the various flaws etched into the code's language from the start, dooming it to failure.<sup>23</sup> Jessica Levy's work is focused less squarely on criticisms of the code, and instead positions Sullivan and his Principles as a key marker of the Black Power movement's place in the evolution of corporate social responsibility. Levy unpacks the intersecting pressures Sullivan keenly felt from both conservative business people hostile to change and workplace reform, and anti-apartheid activists who imagined a full break with apartheid South Africa via economic sanctions.<sup>24</sup>

This article enriches this discussion by placing in conversation two major and complementary reforms to the apartheid workplace in the late 1970s: the Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn Commission. The broader narrative cuts across both national and international policy, as well as business and labor histories. Thus, instead of examining Sullivan's work through a predominantly U.S. lens, I place the Sullivan Principles in the South African context, examining the code's impact on the ground and from the perspective of South African business people, unionists, and laborers. Although I do consult archival records, this article draws substantially on my recent interviews with a multiracial group of former workers and trade unionists. By connecting the international with the national and local, this article embeds the Sullivan Principles within the landscape of South African labor history more broadly, viewing workers and unionists as engaged internationalists. It unpacks the extent to which workers under apartheid repurposed corporate social responsibility initiatives and top-down labor reforms, highlighting the limitations *and* the possibilities built into workplace codes and labor reforms.<sup>25</sup>

Among the questions I pose are the following: In the roughly two-year period between the launch of the Sullivan Principles and the South African government's acceptance of the earliest Wiehahn Commission reforms, what did the Sullivan Principles accomplish, and how did race relations shape corporate policy in South Africa? How audible were worker voices in the evolving landscape of workplace reform, both in the United States and South Africa? My findings are that, although top-down workplace codes and labor reforms claimed to operate in the interests of Black South African workers, they only upheld this commitment when it became politically expedient. Ultimately, the initiatives taken in isolation did little to threaten the most entrenched and violent forms of apartheid.

Perhaps most importantly, this article does not take bureaucratic reforms and codes at face value but looks instead at the ways in which South African unionists and laborers leveraged what they had at their disposal to engender broader anti-apartheid reform, though still falling short of full liberation. Both the Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn reforms operated in the interests of business and management, and did not radically challenge nor drastically alter the apartheid system, even in the workplace. Despite the shortcomings of reform, Black workers and a multiracial cluster of trade unionists challenged the apartheid state by seizing upon Sullivan's goals for a postapartheid world, as well as upon the Wiehahn Commission's real, though limited, promises of Black unionization and worker rights. By examining and

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Williams, *Economic Imperatives*. Sethi and Williams offer a generally positive assessment of the Sullivan Principles and other international codes.

23. Larson, "Sullivan Principles," 180.

24. Levy, "Black Power in the Boardroom," 174.

25. Rycroft and Jordaan, *Guide to South African Labour Law*; Bendix, *Industrial Relations*; Lichtenstein, "We Do Not Think"; Lichtenstein, "We Feel Our Strength"; S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 153.

unpacking the parallel nature of these two reforms, I demonstrate how workers carved space in *both* the transnational anti-apartheid movement *and* the internal South African labor movement. Local needs were decidedly different from the goals external business reform imagined, and workers did not sit back and watch from the sidelines. The Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn Commission, although unable to end apartheid outright, did create space for some nominal reform. Workers gained little from workplace and labor reforms at their inception, but they acquired experience, skills, and political and social capital that served them well in later years, leveraging relatively weak reforms and setting the stage for more robust worker challenges to apartheid.

Thus, instead of solely critiquing the Commission and the code for their shortcomings, we can glean a more complete story of reforms in the late apartheid period by both taking the code seriously and giving voice to laborers and trade unionists. The story that follows weaves in the perspectives of South African workers and trade unionists, beginning with an outline of the Wiehahn Commission and then placing it in conversation with the parallel Sullivan Principles. Workers were quick to identify the weaknesses and gaps in both sets of capitalist reforms, and mounted their resistance through quotidian action. Case studies animating the ubiquitous ways workers leveraged reforms included worker and unionist activism at BorgWarner, Ford Motor Company, and Colgate-Palmolive. South African workers were thus able to effectively repurpose multiple, complimentary nationally and internationally inspired reforms to meet their local and shop-floor level needs and to influence international social movements.

### Wiehahn “Reforms” and Cautious Change

In the 1970s, South Africa’s formal industrial relations system was dualistic and divided on the basis of race: one system for whites, Coloureds, and Indians, and another system for Black African workers.<sup>26</sup> Fearing the collective power of organized Black labor, the South African government had long prevented the formalized unionization of Black workers.<sup>27</sup> However, the labor landscape of South Africa was rapidly changing, highlighted by a shift from agriculture to manufacturing as the dominant industry, which in turn warranted semiskilled and skilled labor. Further, economic pressures and broader unrest necessitated reform to racial discrimination at work.<sup>28</sup> To shore up a stable workforce and quell international pressure, the Wiehahn commissioners compromised. Following nearly eighteen months of arduous meetings and research, including the reception of testimony from 184 witnesses and written submissions from corporations, businesses, and trade unions, the Commission notably agreed to support an end to the exclusion of Black workers from South Africa’s industrial relations system.<sup>29</sup>

These defining changes to the South African Labour Relations Act were seismic, reversing the unequivocal exclusion of Black workers from formal unions and granting them the right to

26. Ulrich, “Only the Workers Can Free the Workers,” 88. The dual system was predicated on the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes Act) of 1953. Note that the racial category terms are notably contested and indeed imprecise. The so-called Coloured population included both multiracial and indigenous Khoisan people.

27. Maree, “Emergence, Struggles and Achievements,” 286. Black unions did exist, but they were not recognized by the state.

28. Van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 119.

29. Lichtenstein, “We Feel Our Strength,” 2; van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 124.

work in skilled positions. The combined context of a changing South African workplace, a growing Black population, and management's need for skilled Black workers forced the hand of commissioners and the South African government.<sup>30</sup> Management sought a mobile and competitive labor market, ideally with large numbers of Black workers employed in skilled and semiskilled jobs. As van Zyl Hermann shows, white elites were willing to sacrifice the interests of working-class whites to uphold their privileged position.<sup>31</sup>

Although South Africa's industry necessitated skilled labor, changes in the Black labor landscape were sluggish. White unions and federations, such as the South African Confederation of Labour (SACOL), feared the erosion of white worker privilege and the possibility that Black industrial citizenship would transmute into national political citizenship.<sup>32</sup> Black worker remuneration long remained a fraction of white worker pay, as evidenced in testimony submitted to the Wiehahn Commission.<sup>33</sup> African workers were unequivocally banned from joining registered trade unions, a measure codified through the 1953 Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act.<sup>34</sup> Although Black workers could technically form their own unions, they lacked the power to force employers into collective bargaining, and it remained illegal for them to strike. This transient relationship owed largely to the language of the Industrial Conciliation Act (No 28 of 1956), which the Institute for Industrial Relations claimed "excluded Blacks from the definition of employees, thereby excluding them from the negotiation process."<sup>35</sup> Despite these oppressive restrictions, South African-based companies were, throughout the late 1970s, beginning to evaluate their policies with an eye to reform. For example, Rexnord Corporation, a U.S. subsidiary consisting of Black majority employment, argued that it had placed its employment practices under "critical review." The group summarily introduced programs to target possible areas of workplace reform, such as "remuneration, training, industrial relations, productivity improvement, and conditions of employment."<sup>36</sup>

Multinational corporations became increasingly cognizant of the need for skilled Black labor, but also faced a dual pressure from shareholders who detested their very presence in South Africa.<sup>37</sup> In the aftermath of Soweto and under immense pressure from shareholders, U.S. multinationals sought ways to publicize their progress in influencing social change in South Africa. In response to these different forms of corporate demand, Leon Sullivan released his six-point voluntary code of conduct targeted at U.S. corporations based in South Africa,

30. FOSATU, "Statement on the Wiehahn Commission Report and Its Implications Issued by FOSATU after Its Central Committee Meeting on May 18–19, 1979," *South African Labour Bulletin (SALB)*, no. 6 (March 1980): 12–16; Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, 7; Thompson, *History of South Africa*, 221.

31. Van Zyl-Hermann, *Privileged Precariat*, 153.

32. *Ibid.*, 152–153.

33. Information Sheet, Institute for Industrial Relations, September–October 1978, no. 8, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa. Among unskilled Black and white workers, a survey of 50,000 employees confirmed that Black workers made 25 percent of their white counterparts' salaries.

34. Lichtenstein, "Measure of Democracy," 119.

35. Evidence Submitted by the Institute for Industrial Relations, 31 October 1977, K364, AK6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

36. Rexnord Manufacturing to Secretary, 27 October 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

37. Embassy Washington D.B. Sole to Pik Botha, "Church Campaign for Withdrawal of U.S. Investments from South Africa," Embassy of South Africa, August 4, 1977, 8/15/4, 34/5/33, 32a 3 (6), Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO).

pressuring them to publicly desegregate their workplaces and establish equal wage scales.<sup>38</sup> The inaugural March 1977 version of the Sullivan Principles, however, neglected to address Black worker unionization, due in part to opposition from business people.<sup>39</sup> However, by late 1977, a critical mass of employers (including multinational companies) expressed support for trade unions. In a 1977 October memorandum to the Wiehahn Commission, University of Natal academics concluded that “firms as a group were in favour of the provision of some machinery for worker representation.” Of those surveyed, only 17 out of 454 firms were adamantly opposed to both trade unions and works committees (alternatives to unions that gave workers the right to elect their own shop-floor representatives), while 181 were prepared to accept Black trade unions.<sup>40</sup>

Evidence submitted to the Wiehahn Commission indicates that more employers were in favor of works committees than of trade unions. Nevertheless, they saw the weaker committee system as possibly evolving into a trade union over time.<sup>41</sup> Works committees did give workers a lever for communication, but they were a diluted alternative to unions, the latter of which apportioned more tangible shop-floor power. Still, recent work by Alex Lichtenstein argues that workers took advantage of these committees, which exposed workers to negotiation tactics.<sup>42</sup>

The South African labor landscape would quickly evolve following the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission. Led by Professor Nic Wiehahn, a white man among a multiracial group of fourteen commissioners—eleven white, one Coloured, one Indian, and one African—the Commission released part 1 of the report on Labor Day 1979. Notably, part 1 of the Wiehahn Commission report recommended that the labor relations system register and recognize multiracial independent trade unions.<sup>43</sup> The release of the Commission’s findings did not equate to an expedient reformist embrace by the South African government. Commissions in general operated as fact-finding missions, outside of the scope of the executive, legislative, or judicial branches and offered recommendations for official policy. The government held the ultimate power to select which of the recommendations it hoped to adopt, and it would take two years for the Commission’s findings to be fully implemented.

In the case of the Wiehahn Commission in particular, the preliminary report notably adopted much of the same language as the Sullivan Principles, for example calling for an end to statutory segregation in work facilities by recommending an end to “Section 51 of the

38. Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, 448.

39. Sethi and Williams, *Economic Imperatives*, 69–70.

40. Jill Natrass, “Memorandum on Employers Attitudes to Black Worker Representation for Submission for the Consideration of the Members of the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation,” October 25, 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa. Lichtenstein demonstrates how business took up “works committees,” created through the 1953 legislation, to manifest a weaker alternative to genuine trade union recognition. See Lichtenstein, “Measure of Democracy,” 120–121.

41. IJ Hetherington (Group Chairman), Norton Company to Secretary, October 7, 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

42. Lichtenstein, “Measure of Democracy,” 122.

43. Prior to Wiehahn, these multiracial unions could not legally register and were not recognized on the shop floor. The Wiehahn Commission’s counterpart, the Riekert Commission, examined manpower and reported its findings in August of 1978. See van Zyl-Hermann, “White Workers,” 241; “Labor and South Africa,” *Economy Notes: Labor Research Association*, vol. 53, no. 7–8, ANC-London, MCH02, Mayibuye Archives, 6.



Factories, Machinery, and Building Works Act. Stated differently, there would be no more separate facilities based on race."<sup>44</sup> Both reforms, though advocating for desegregation at work, had severe limitations. For one, the South African government elected to negate implementing the more progressive of the Wiehahn reforms and sought to privilege urban Black workers while ignoring the rights of rural and migrant workers.<sup>45</sup> The Commission only hesitantly extended employee rights to migrant workers in 1981. Additionally, the Commission itself did not include the voices and perspectives of any representatives from the unregistered trade unions.<sup>46</sup> Together, the Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn reforms responded to prevailing workplace dilemmas like persistent segregation. Yet both sought to patiently target apartheid in a gradual way that did not agitate the South African government or push either South African or multinational corporations too far.

Although the Wiehahn Commission precluded dealing directly with Black unions, Sullivan's vision was also out of sync with the growing South African trade union movement and broader anti-apartheid activism more generally. It was also difficult for Sullivan to appeal to leaders of multinational corporations, many of whom rejected any interference by outside actors in internal South African matters. In courting multinationals to back the code, Sullivan received heaps of letters from concerned CEOs.<sup>47</sup> In one such letter, James Wilcock, CEO of Joy Manufacturing Company, noted that he refused to "follow the track of too many other Americans by always sticking my nose into the business of other countries."<sup>48</sup>

Owing to the Principles' detachment from the trade union movement, many anti-apartheid activists and labor activists were leery of the code. The code's absence of any language advocating for Black worker union representation was obvious.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, some evidence shows that internal calls for South African labor reform followed an initial impetus from the Principles.<sup>50</sup> Multinational companies were often more predisposed to supporting Black advancement, in comparison with South African-owned firms. A South African study that included interviews with 282 firms, including 74 multinationals, concluded that "foreign owned firms do show above average support for Trade Unions." The study further noted that

44. United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, Michael Shafer, "The Wiehahn Report and the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act: A New Attack on the Trade Union Movement in South Africa," 1979, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University, 8; "Let All Workers Decide on Integration," *Rand Daily Mail*, May 2, 1979.

45. United States Department of State, "Your Meeting with Professor Nic Wiehahn and Ambassador Donald B. Sole of South Africa (Noon, April 7, 1982)," 1982, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), <https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/your-meeting-with-professor-nic-wiehahn/docview/1679057516/se-2> (accessed July 12, 2023).

46. Lois Rappaport, "Confidential Internal Reports on South Africa," box 61, folder 4, Sullivan Papers.

47. This correspondence was with American executives. Many wholly owned subsidiaries had South African managers, but American executives often headed operation teams and overseas divisions.

48. James W. Wilcock to Sullivan, January 3, 1977, box 54, folder 6, Sullivan Papers.

49. Dorcas Good and Michael Williams, "South Africa: The Crisis in Britain and the Apartheid Economy," *Foreign Investment in South Africa: A Discussion Series*, 1976, box 72, ANC-London, MCH02, Mayibuye Archives, 9.

50. Jill Nattrass and IG Duncan, "A Study of Employers' Attitudes Towards African Worker Representation," 1975, Black/White Income Gap Project Interim Research Project No. 1, K364, AK 6/3/1/15, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

“foreign firms in general show themselves to be more progressive in their labour management policies than the South African firms.”<sup>51</sup> The U.S. firms, to some extent, were positioned to lead the way. In 1978, the Statement of Principles Industry Steering Committee, the Sullivan Principles’ evaluation committee, held a series of meetings in South Africa. Their report posited that many of the changes in the laws and customs of South Africa under consideration by the Wiehahn Commission first emerged with the Sullivan Principles.<sup>52</sup> Further, reports noted that the Wiehahn Commission was “catalyzed by the impetus from ‘The Sullivan Principles’”<sup>53</sup>

While the Principles did not *initially* outline support for multiracial trade union recognition and avoided any foray into labor relations, the code was not static. In fact, the code’s 1979 amplification changed its form and function.<sup>54</sup> Issued just four months after the Wiehahn reforms, the 1979 amplification of the Sullivan Principles called on firms to recognize and negotiate with registered trade unions that represented Black workers. Principle 2 included an addendum: “Support the elimination of discrimination against the rights of Blacks to form or belong to government registered unions, and acknowledge generally the right of Black workers to form their own union or be represented by trade unions where unions already exist.” Sullivan also added the following to principle 6: “Support changes in influx control laws to provide for the right of Black migrant workers to normal family life.”<sup>55</sup> Although Sullivan did not envision the code as a total solution, his team would remain malleable and responsive to changes in South African labor law and custom.<sup>56</sup>

Although short of a total solution, the Sullivan Principles, and in particular the 1979 amplification, did engender space for Black advancement. Pat Horn, a white union activist who led literacy programs for factory workers, many of whom were employed at multinational firms, recalled how it appeared that workers at American multinationals and Sullivan signatories generally fared better than those employed by South African-owned firms.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the Sullivan Principles generated an opening for unionists to pressure multinationals before the implementation of the Wiehahn Commission recommendations. Alec Erwin, a white general secretary of the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) and later the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), noted that during the pre-Wiehahn period, unregistered trade unions would often “target multinational-owned plants because we could then work with the unions in Europe or the U.S. or Scandinavia, where we could put pressure on the mother company to recognize.”<sup>58</sup> Horn confirmed a similar approach, noting that unionists adopted a strategy of “picking at

51. Ibid.

52. Report, Statement of Principles Industry Steering Committee, “Visit to the Republic of South Africa,” August 20–26, 1978, box 63, folder 6, Sullivan Papers, 3.

53. “Fact Sheet: The Sullivan Principles,” box 63, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

54. Farr, *Help or Hindrance?*

55. Arthur D. Little, Inc., “Third Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles,” October 15, 1979, (Cambridge: Arthur D. Little, 1978), African Studies Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collections (hereafter cited as UCT Special Collections), 3.

56. “Fact Sheet: The Sullivan Principles,” box 63, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

57. Pat Horn, interview by author, Zoom, February 19, 2021.

58. Alec Erwin, interview by author, Zoom, June 18, 2021.

the multinationals," with the expectation that collective bargaining would provide the necessary leverage for a more militant shop steward movement.<sup>59</sup> Thus the Sullivan Principles were a bargaining chip that allowed unionists to pressure multinationals before the mainstreaming of the Wiehahn Commission's reforms.

The Wiehahn Commission, whose findings were ultimately accepted by the South African apartheid regime, was cautiously moderate in its recommendations, advocating for change that was "evolutionary in nature."<sup>60</sup> The Commission recommended that all South African workers should be free to join any union of their choice, although it favored maintaining the existing ban on political activities by trade unions. Some of the other recommendations were on par with the Sullivan code. For instance, the Commission recommended that Black workers gain increased access to apprenticeship programs and the opportunity to learn fundamental workplace skills, a tenet of the Sullivan Principles. The manufacturing sector was long aware of a widening skills gap. As early as 1971, the Iron, Steel and Engineering and Metallurgical Council recognized the problem as a skilled labor shortage. It noted that "skilled artisans ... are in short supply," adding that industry was therefore left with "semi-literate, poorly educated labour."<sup>61</sup> Opening apprenticeship opportunities to Black workers was one step in addressing the skills gap, but many companies remained averse.

To manufacture necessary space for Black workers in certain positions, the Wiehahn Commission further recommended that the South African government abolish the brand of statutory job reservation institutionalized through the Industrial Conciliation Act. In line with Sullivan's call for an end to workplace discrimination, the Commission recommended that "separate facilities in the labour sphere should not be prescribed by law, but should be left to the employees and employers concerned."<sup>62</sup> This left the desegregation question up to the private sector, deferring to management and to the Sullivan Principles and other workplace codes of conduct. Finally, the Commission recommended the institution of an industrial court to organize and administer the collective of registered trade unions.

These recommendations did not arrive without conflict and hostility from U.S. companies operating in South Africa. In the evidence submitted to the Wiehahn Commission, there were repeated instances of corporate reticence toward the advancement of Black worker training, pay, and unionization. Even one of the industrial councils highlighted its rejection of increasing Black worker pay, specifically noting that small businesses could not afford to do so. Rejecting the present Industrial Conciliation Act, one company noted that "small businesses have a difficult enough task generating income and labour opportunities and are hard put to find capital to survive once the profits made have been creamed by taxation and with the obligatory payments now expected by the Councils, insurances and all the other non-profit-generating expenses we bear."<sup>63</sup> Smaller companies did not wish to pay their workers artisan

59. Horn, interview.

60. J. Piron and SM Swart, "Special Report: South African Labour Policy and Reality," Strategy Research, February 1983, box 67, folder 6, Sullivan Papers.

61. "Copy of Letter Sent 24 August 1971," K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

62. Piron and Swart, "Special Report," Sullivan Papers.

63. CH Hutchinson to Secretary of Labour, Enquiry into National Industrial Councils, October 5, 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

wages, which were notably higher than the wages they presently paid their unskilled workers.<sup>64</sup> In a letter to the Wiehahn Commission, representatives of a U.S. multinational company, Nordberg Manufacturing, noted that “job reservation has resulted in an artificial shortage of skilled labour in the engineering industry.”<sup>65</sup> The company explicitly rejected the Apprenticeship Act, noting it “does not meet the demands of an engineering business such as ours,” as they required “highly qualified technicians, which the Act does not provide.” In sum, the company instead recommended that upward mobility be premised solely on a “man’s ability and motivation.”<sup>66</sup>

Disagreements and quarreling abounded. The South African government, controlled by the National Party (NP) and its apartheid platform, agreed to some of the Wiehahn recommendations. However, the NP consistently demanded that the pace of workplace change proceed cautiously, so as to not alienate white conservatives within the divided party. By October of 1979, the South African government passed the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act, 1979 (Act 94 of 1979), which provided for the “establishment of a National Manpower Commission, the establishment of a new industrial court [and] the admission of Black workers to registered trade unions.”<sup>67</sup> The act also repealed the various protections that limited competition between racial groups.

The Wiehahn Commission, like the Sullivan Principles, fit the mold of South Africa’s general reformist attitude that characterized the late apartheid era. From a conservative view, the reforms were radical, even bordering on reckless. However, from the left’s perspective, they were nowhere near enough and made apartheid at work more tightly controlled. Commissioners were divided on just how far they wanted to take the reforms.<sup>68</sup> Although the Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn Commission both provided that companies recognize the rights of Black workers to join registered trade unions, they flatly excluded any pathway for representation of non-registered unions. During its visit to South Africa in August of 1978, the Sullivan team’s Industry Steering Committee met with Black labor union leaders, all of whom strongly detested the recommendation for multiracial unions. Although at this point the Wiehahn Commission was likely to recommend the recognition of multiracial unions, it was not clear that leaders of various existing Black unions would wish to fold into these multiracial unions. The “prevailing thought among blacks seems to be for black unions” the steering committee reported.<sup>69</sup> The apartheid workplace often promoted and worked more closely with Coloured and Indian workers, and the Black labor leaders were skeptical of unions that included a multiracial coalition.<sup>70</sup> Black workers had their own interests and believed that Coloured and Indian leadership could not advocate in earnest for Black worker needs.

64. Ibid.

65. Nordberg Manufacturing Company to the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation, K364, AK6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

66. Ibid.

67. Piron and Swart, “Special Report,” Sullivan Papers.

68. Giliomee, *Last Afrikaner Leaders*, 150–154.

69. Report, Statement of Principles Industry Steering Committee, “Visit to the Republic of South Africa,” August 20–26, 1978, box 63, folder 6, Sullivan Papers.

70. Mlungwana Mini, interview by author, KwaFord, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, November 16, 2021.

Multiracial unions were spaces where Black and white unionists could work together, but also represented a compromise that diluted the collective power of the Black African population and broke apart the Black unions. Upon the emergence of the multiracial trade union federation, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), the Black-led Motor Assembly and Component Workers' Union of South Africa's (MACWUSA) Executive Committee, led by Black Secretary General Dennis Neer, condemned the new federation.<sup>71</sup> The statement noted that "FOSATU is nothing but a government front organization," one that "failed dismally to solve the labour disputes at Leyland, Firestone, Ford, Sigma, and Dorby."<sup>72</sup> Black workers viewed any reform tied to the South African government with acute suspicion.

The Wiehahn Commission's connection to the South African government and the Sullivan Principles' distance from trade unions limited the scope and reach of both initiatives. In her critique of the Sullivan Principles, Elizabeth Schmidt, a U.S.-based anti-apartheid activist, scholar, and author of *Decoding Corporate Camouflage*, highlighted this glaring omission and its implications for the Black workforce. Schmidt based some of her critique on a close reading of the Arthur D. Little (ADL) reports, which gave signatory companies compliance scores based on corporate responses to questionnaires.<sup>73</sup> ADL Senior Vice President Reid Weedon worked with company representatives in South Africa, spearheading the corporate evaluations and promptly alerting Sullivan when a signatory company failed to live up to his performance standards.<sup>74</sup> The ADL firm itself was Boston based, and published reports twice a year. Referencing the sixth Arthur D. Little (ADL) report, Schmidt noted that Sullivan signatories "recognized three times as many government registered as opposed to unregistered unions."<sup>75</sup> Unregistered unions such as MACWUSA were much more political, more inclined to take a stand against issues transcending the workplace, and more apt to challenge apartheid inside as well as *outside* of the workplace, at least compared to registered unions. Additionally, they rejected white leadership within their ranks.

Schmidt further noted that the Sullivan Principles offered less than met the eye. True, corporations' support for the right of Black workers to join registered trade unions appeared progressive on paper, perhaps especially in the context of the late 1970s when there was no such precedent for Black worker unionization. However, corporations often limited their bargaining to unions deemed "multiracial" in structure, while rejecting unions that exclusively represented the Black workforce.<sup>76</sup> Thus the corporations undermined Black worker unionization rights by refusing to work with unregistered Black trade unions, violating the very principle of their "reforms." This dilemma became a case in which "nondiscrimination" failed to transfer neatly from the United States to the South African context. The Principles

71. "Statement: MACWUSA Executive Committee," n.d., AH1999, C6.10, Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter cited as HP).

72. *Ibid.*

73. Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, 447.

74. "Reid Weedon to Jim Rawlings," March 15, 1979, box 54, folder 12, Sullivan Papers.

75. Elizabeth Schmidt, "One Step in the Wrong Direction: An Analysis of the Sullivan Principles as a Strategy for Opposing Apartheid," March 1983, box 63, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

76. Shell South Africa, "Submission to the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation," November 14, 1977, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 35, National Archives of South Africa.

simply did not anticipate or understand the unique plight of Black African workers, and how their struggles differed from those of Coloured and Indian workers.<sup>77</sup>

The South African government followed the Wiehahn Commission with a white paper, through which it accepted the recommendations but added its “intention on not permitting employers to exceed the prudent rate of development” in reforming the workplace.<sup>78</sup> As expected, however, the South African government was bound to white conservative opinion. An analysis of the Commission and the white papers by J. Piron and S. M. Swart, two South African academics, warned that an overabundance of radical changes too soon could cost the Government political capital and lead to a possible conservative backlash.<sup>79</sup> Thus the South African government cautiously embraced the Wiehahn Commission’s recommendations, seeing them as no threat to the existing racial order, so long as they were interpreted very narrowly.

The white NP South African leadership responded similarly to the Sullivan Principles. Mining industry executive Dr. W. J. De Villiers warned Sullivan in 1978 that any outside interference could have a reverse effect on the South African people. Although De Villiers “indicated his support for the Statement of Principles,” he questioned the meddling of U.S. interests, proposing that Sullivan should instead focus his attention on assisting Black Americans in the United States.<sup>80</sup> A representative of the NP, he did not conceal the racism in his comments. As he saw it, segregation of facilities such as toilets operated as “a function of the different cultures.”<sup>81</sup> Although tolerated by the NP, the Sullivan Principles still targeted and challenged racist South African cultural norms. Doing something, such as dismantling segregation, was perhaps better than nothing at all.

### “Just Good Cosmetics for the Outside World”: Limits to Workplace Desegregation

In the context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, even members of the apartheid government’s ruling National Party agreed that “petty apartheid” was on its last legs, and that the Principles and Wiehahn recommendations merely targeted cosmetic forms of apartheid, such as workplace segregation. Professor Nic Wiehahn, the primary architect of the Commission’s report, supported the Sullivan Principles and urged robust application efforts by corporations, even if doing so meant breaking “the petty and outdated apartheid laws.”<sup>82</sup> South Africa’s minister of foreign affairs, Pik Botha, accepted the Sullivan Principles and in 1979 publicly campaigned for a seat in Parliament on the basis of abolishing petty apartheid, all the while upholding the continued effective imprisonment of the Black population via

77. Webb, “People Before Profit,” 66.

78. J. Piron and SM Swart, “Special Report: South African Labour Policy and Reality,” Strategy Research, February 1983, box 67, folder 6, Sullivan Papers, 6.

79. Piron and Swart, “Special Report,” Sullivan Papers.

80. Report, Statement of Principles Industry Steering Committee, “Visit to the Republic of South Africa,” August 20–26, 1978, box 63, folder 6, Sullivan Papers, 7.

81. *Ibid.*

82. Report, “Visit to the Republic of South Africa,” Sullivan Papers.

forced removals and the homelands system.<sup>83</sup> In a May 2, 1979, statement concerning the Wiehahn Report, the Republic's minister of labour, S. P. "Fanie" Botha, alluded to how the Wiehahn Commission's solution, "freedom of association," was necessary so as to not anger the international community.

Fanie Botha upheld that the Commission was unanimous in its opinion that the status quo could no longer be maintained, and the banning of Black unions would only result in more pressure from abroad.<sup>84</sup> Thus the international community and its general disdain toward apartheid created the crucial context for the Sullivan Principles and the Wiehahn Commission to receive a modicum of institutional support from the South African government. Stated differently, the South African government only came to its senses out of imminent economic and geopolitical desperation. Fanie Botha warned that "work would have to be found for millions of Blacks in order to stave off a revolutionary situation in South Africa," adding that job training would be an essential component of successful labor policy.<sup>85</sup> Botha was cognizant that South African labor reform would quell some of the potential Black unrest, and therefore stave off some modicum of international pressure.

Even during the August 20–26, 1978, Statement of Principles Industry Steering Committee's visit to South Africa, apartheid officials accepted the code. The country's new prime minister, P. W. Botha, agreed to its structure. The South African government's labor policy was inhumane, but overseas corporations and investors, in many instances, were discriminating against their Black employees on their own initiative, and not always because they were legally obligated to do so.<sup>86</sup> South African workers, however, were familiar with the NP's grip on South African society, and located blame beyond the confines of the corporation. Instead of placing culpability on companies like Ford Motor Company, Mpumelelo Cilibe, a Black Ford worker, also denounced the Afrikaner Broederbond, a secret club of Afrikaner men.<sup>87</sup>

Many Black Africans highlighted how the Wiehahn Commission did not address the most urgent needs of the Black community, and merely placated investors.<sup>88</sup> In a 1979 report commissioned by Leon Sullivan, Black workers listed the following as their top priorities: "family life, freedom of movement, be defined as a worker, freedom of association, be defined as a citizen, quality education both inside and outside the country, representation and due process, [and] share equitably in the control, direction, benefits, policies, and responsibilities which govern and profit from the Black community."<sup>89</sup> Nascent unionization and workplace rights would do little if those industrial freedoms did not extend beyond the workplace, something the Wiehahn Commission neglected to address. Unionists recounted that trade

83. Report, Harold R. Sims, "South Africa Report #2," July 1979, box 64, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

84. Press Statement, S.P. Botha, "Concerning the Wiehahn Report," May 2, 1979, box 63, ANC-London, MCH02, Mayibuye Archives.

85. Newsletter, Institute for Industrial Relations, "Industrial Relations on the Shop Floor," October 1979, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa.

86. Piron and Swart, "Special Report," Sullivan Papers.

87. Mpumelelo "Mpumi" Cilibe, interview by author, Bluewater Bay, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, November 17, 2021.

88. Sims, "South Africa Report #2," Sullivan Papers.

89. *Ibid.*

unions had to fill the obvious space left unaddressed by the reforms. As unionist Pat Horn recalled, “We then ratcheted on those reforms to create more reforms, because Wiehahn didn’t give us all the rights we wanted.”<sup>90</sup> When asked whether or not Wiehahn led to any change, one worker at a multinational company noted: “Yes, in a sense, but very, very little. Previously, they never talked about unions. But now we, the workers, have approached them and said that we want the union.”<sup>91</sup>

Black workers were skeptical of the code, seeing workplace reforms as failing to account for major structural discrepancies in the ways of life of the Black population that filtered into the workplace, such as health benefits and influx control. Nelson Mthombeni, the president of the South African National Union of Textile Workers, viewed the Sullivan Principles as “retarding our progress because some U.S. companies use them to block unionism in the factories. They tell their workers: ‘We follow the code. Our canteens are integrated. There is no discrimination.’” In line with Mthombeni, Emma Mashinini, the secretary of the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa, referred to the Sullivan Principles as “just good cosmetics for the outside world.” Mashinini opined that there was little difference in the conduct of American and South African companies.<sup>92</sup> Thus the specter of company progress in implementing the code only served as a union-busting measure that largely obfuscated the role of advocates for broader structural change and the uprooting of the apartheid edifice.

However, the code still engendered a modicum of progress. A 1980 census report revealed that Black and Coloured workers far exceeded white workers in such trades as bricklaying and construction carpentry. In motorcycle mechanics, Black workers outnumbered white workers by about 8,000. However, when considering administrative and managerial jobs, Black workers made few inroads. Although white workers dominated professional and technical fields, there were more than 172,000 Black workers in these jobs, more than half of them women.<sup>93</sup>

Since the implementation of the Sullivan Principles at Ford Motor Company, Black workers agreed that, in comparison to white workers, advancement proceeded indolently. Even in cases in which a Black worker possessed equivalent skills and work ethic, management rarely promoted them at a comparable rate to white workers.<sup>94</sup> According to an outside evaluation of Ford, the company’s “hiring and induction facilities are the same. No training periods for the new recruitments. There is no promotion within the company.”<sup>95</sup> In his memoir, Ford worker Mpumi Cilibe noted that “there were still no blacks in management

90. Pat Horn, interview by author, Zoom, March 2, 2021.

91. “Hoechst Worker Interview,” box 129, folder 1, South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) Papers, MCH261, Mayibuye Archives.

92. Gail Hovey, “South Africa: Questions and Answers on Divestment,” *Southern Africa Perspectives*, no. 4-81, box 67, no. 3, Sullivan Papers.

93. “South Africa Namibia Update,” African Policy Information Center of the African-American Institute, February 1983, vol 7, no. 2, box 67, folder 6, Sullivan Papers.

94. Nordberg Manufacturing Company to the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa. For Ford examples specifically, see Whisson, Roux, and Manona, *Sullivan Principles at Ford*, 48.

95. FOSATU Eastern Province Region, “Preliminary Code of Conduct Report,” n.d., AH1999, C2.3.2., HP.



positions. Some black graduates had made appearances as management trainees, but never actually made it into management at Ford."<sup>96</sup> Tyrone Afrikaner, a Coloured worker, confirmed a similar pattern from his experience at GM: "Whites had all the privileges in the company at that time. They had all the senior positions in the company."<sup>97</sup>

GM tried to promote its Black workers to higher grade positions but ultimately progress was an illusion. White workers, who made up the majority of supervisory positions, saw their power and privileged position fading away with the dual induction of the Wiehahn Commission and the Sullivan Principles.<sup>98</sup> Corporations approached the Wiehahn reforms conservatively, hoping to allay the concerns of white workers. For example, GM upgraded white hourly workers in response to Black promotions, effectively maintaining the status quo despite the presence of reforms. GM employees confirmed these sentiments. Tyrone Afrikaner's recollection, indeed the notion that he struggled to imagine any Black workers in management positions, demonstrates that GM was not proactive at worker promotion, a guideline of the Sullivan Principles. Another Black GM worker, Mlungwana Mini, noted the roadblocks he faced in being promoted to a patent-maker, a higher paid position:

If you are an apprentice, then there's an apprentice board that approves you to be there. When I had gone for the interview, they told me no, no, no, no, no. There's no black patent-maker. Patent-makers are for the English.<sup>99</sup>

When Mini finally won promotion in 1985, a strike, unrelated to his promotion, ultimately curtailed his advancement. Mini's experience illustrates the barriers many Black workers faced in getting promoted, even with the creation of apprenticeships.

Some workers had a more positive experience. Black workers buttressed Sullivan with personal, handwritten letters. In a 1983 letter, S.J. Ragoo noted that "we Blacks look at [the Sullivan Principles] as a ray of sunshine."<sup>100</sup> A group of employees from White Hall Products wrote Sullivan on April 4, 1986, stating their appreciation for the code. The collective of South African workers noted, "We hope that through the Sullivan Principles our children may one day be of benefit to our community."<sup>101</sup> The Sullivan Principles created a space that heralded the "community as stakeholder," wherein the corporation was increasingly responsive to the demands, interests, and livelihoods of the larger area in which it operated.<sup>102</sup> This experiment was novel at the time. Sundra Naidoo, an Indian worker employed by the subsidiary South African Cyanamid, reflected upon the Sullivan Principles as "an exercise in the art of the possible."<sup>103</sup> Although these attitudes highlighted some degree of appreciation for corporate activism, they also revealed that South African workers at U.S. subsidiaries were

96. Cilibe, "On the Shop-Floor," 47.

97. Tyrone Afrikaner, interview by author, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, October 7, 2021.

98. Van Zyl-Hermann, "White Workers," 241.

99. Mlungwana Mini, interview by author, KwaFord, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, November 16, 2021.

100. S.J. Ragoo to Sullivan, June 15, 1983, box 56, folder 9, Sullivan Papers.

101. Letter to Sullivan from White Hall Products Employees, April 4, 1986, box 58, folder 3, Sullivan Papers.

102. Sundra Naidoo, interview by author, Zoom, October 1, 2021.

103. *Ibid.*

indeed aware of the Sullivan Principles. The code was filtering down and making a degree of impact, albeit often with some noted skepticism from South African workers and unionists. Fred Sauls, a Coloured Port Elizabeth trade unionist with the National Union for Motor and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA), summed up the disconnect between the code's aspirations and the actual unfolding on the ground: "I think for me; it was some of the codes were drafted by people with good intentions. But it's the context in which it must be implemented. Can it be implemented?"<sup>104</sup>

### "We Do Not Believe Unions to Be Necessary or Desirable": Sullivan and Wiehahn in Practice

The actual rollout of reforms targeting the apartheid labor system would prove messy, as evidenced by worker testimony and a series of corporate case studies. In 1979, Kellogg became the first U.S. company in South Africa to sign a recognition agreement with one of the new, independent unions.<sup>105</sup> BorgWarner followed Kellogg in 1980 and agreed to plant-level negotiations. Since agreeing to negotiations, the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) at BorgWarner expediently negotiated wage increases that more than doubled workers' monthly minimum wage.<sup>106</sup> This apparent progress, however, should be met with skepticism. Although Sullivan administered signatory company evaluations through the ADL auditing agency, they were nonmandatory. Nonetheless, both Kellogg and BorgWarner completed them, with BorgWarner submitting its first evaluation in time for the October 1980 report. Although Kellogg scored a passing, "Category I" score for the Sullivan evaluation, BorgWarner received a failing "Category III" score, meaning it "needed to become more active" and "did not meet basic requirements."<sup>107</sup> BorgWarner, although signing onto the Principles and promising to increase wages, fully desegregate the workplace, and train and promote Black workers, failed to do so. The company's performance was largely inadequate.

The evaluation was worrying simply because it contradicted the "progressive" image BorgWarner appeared to garner by granting unionization rights to non-white workers. Certainly, it shows that the ADL self-evaluations, though by no means objective, can tell us something. The discrepancy between Kellogg and BorgWarner's ADL scores shows that unionization rights were just one piece of the puzzle, and in no way signaled that either company was making uniform progress in both implementing and evaluating the Sullivan Principles. Although corporations could state that they respected Black unionization rights and upheld freedom of association, in practice many signatories indicated their hostility

104. Fred Sauls, interview by author, Zoom, July 15, 2021.

105. Newsletter, Institute for Industrial Relations, "Industrial Relations on the Shop Floor," October 1979, K364, AK 6/3/1/1/5, box 34, National Archives of South Africa; "Labor and South Africa," *Economy Notes: Labor Research Association, Inc.*, vol. 53, no. 7–8, ANC-London, MCH02, Mayibuye Archives, 6.

106. *Ibid.*

107. Arthur D. Little, Inc., "Fourth Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles," October 8, 1980, (Cambridge: Arthur D. Little, 1980), African Studies Collection, UCT Special Collections.

toward unionization, which was reflected openly in the ADL reports and independent company audits.

Ford Motor Company, long considered one of the better, more progressive companies for Black workers, also proved a testing ground for the Wiehahn Commission and Sullivan Principles. First, in early November 1979, more than a thousand Black workers refused to buy food at the company's engine and Cortina plants until certain white employees withdrew claims that Black workers abused integrated facilities.<sup>108</sup> David "Skula" Gola, a worker spokesperson, told the *Evening Post*, a Port Elizabeth newspaper, that Black workers' main complaints were that white worker attitudes were worsening. Black workers were rightfully "insulted by white workers calling them unclean, manner-less."<sup>109</sup>

Further exacerbating tensions, in November of 1979, Ford fired more than 700 Black South African workers after they mobilized a wildcat strike at the Struandale Assembly plant in Port Elizabeth. This action coalesced to form the fourth walkout at the plant in three weeks. Worker activism quickly reverberated. Another 1,400 Black workers at two other Port Elizabeth plants staged a boycott of canteen facilities, in sympathy with the fired employees.<sup>110</sup> The strikers cited that they were unhappy with the way Ford approached their grievances, and for refusing to meet with them. Several workers also noted "racist statements" made by white Ford factory workers.<sup>111</sup>

Fred Ferreira, Ford's Industrial Relations Director, took matters into his own hands and launched an investigation on the basis of worker claims. He further committed to holding meetings to address worker grievances—with both the Black workers' United Automobile and Allied Workers' Union and the white workers' South Africa Iron, Steel and Allied Industries Union. The negotiations were closely observed by industrial relations experts, in no small part because many of the issues raised involved the basic principles of the industrial relations initiative in South Africa heralded by the Wiehahn Commission.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the attention negotiations spurred, the American Consul in Johannesburg claimed that the Ford dispute was outwardly met with "a deafening silence by the Rev. Sullivan and his associates."<sup>113</sup> Privately, however, Sullivan was in agreement with the workers. On January 4, 1980, he penned a letter to Henry Ford II, highlighting his abiding support for the striking Ford workers. Sullivan also feared that the labor disputes at Ford's Struandale Assembly plant could endanger the Sullivan Principles. He deduced that the rights of Black workers "must be fully protected in this situation," and that they must have the "fullest assurance possible of the Ford Company's interest in their welfare."<sup>114</sup> There was no indication Sullivan took further public action, but he remained involved behind the scenes.

Following negotiations with two Black unions, Ford's Director of Public Affairs, Dunbar Bucknall, said the company's employment moratorium at the Struandale plant was extended

108. Brian Pottinger, "Ford Boycott," *Evening Post*, November 14, 1979, box 65, folder 1, Sullivan Papers.

109. *Ibid.*

110. Memo, "Ford," November 21, 1979, box 65, folder 1, Sullivan Papers.

111. *Ibid.*

112. Pottinger, "Ford Boycott," Sullivan Papers.

113. American Consul Johannesburg to Department of State Washington, DC, "Ford Dispute Status Report," December 1979, box 64, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

114. Sullivan to Henry Ford II, January 4, 1980, box 55, folder 5, Sullivan Papers.

until the festive season's shutdown, which would end on January 7. As a result of brisk negotiation, the employment offices opened for rehiring from January 2 to January 4. The managing director of General Tire, R.G. Nicholson, confirmed that about five hundred workers were dismissed, but most returned to work during the rehire period. The head of security police in Port Elizabeth, Colonel Gerritt Erasmus, alleged that about twenty men were still being held for questioning under Section 22 of the General Law Amendment Act.<sup>115</sup> The eventual rehiring of fired workers proved to be a win for Black unions, and perhaps the Wiehahn Commission, at a U.S. subsidiary and Sullivan signatory that wielded seismic influence in South Africa.

Upon closer inspection, however, corporations overlooked the role and influence of Black community organizations, such as the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO). Even the September 1980 issue of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, which was devoted entirely to the strikes at Ford, included two articles that denounced the shop-floor engagement of PEBCO and the Ford Workers' Committee.<sup>116</sup> Several workers later recalled both the Sullivan Principles and the union efforts as key factors in negotiation. Xolile Mini, a Black worker previously employed by both Ford and GM, remembered meeting Sullivan personally, and explaining to him how the trade union had forced the company to apply the Principles, and thus deserved more credit.<sup>117</sup> Very few gave any tribute to the Wiehahn Commission or to reforms stemming from the South African government. Referencing Wiehahn, Mlungwana Mini, Xolile's brother, stated that "you can't fight when you're within the government. You will have to do what the government tells you to do."<sup>118</sup>

Although Sullivan was aware of worker grievances and the ways in which the code, in practice, did not hold up his most ambitious standards, he was never eager to become overly involved with the politics of Black union recognition. In late 1980, Sullivan would be tested again, this time by the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) and its ongoing demands for negotiation with Colgate-Palmolive. Like Ford, Colgate operated a South African manufacturing plant and had long profited off of Black labor.<sup>119</sup> In 1978, the U.S. subsidiary justified its controversial presence in South Africa by declaring a "sincere and ongoing commitment to the elimination of racial discrimination."<sup>120</sup> An original Sullivan Principle signatory, Colgate self-reported progress in affirmative action hiring programs. The company received the highest possible rating from the ADL reports for its efforts to desegregate operations and promote Black workers in its South African plants. Nonetheless, Colgate struggled to reform the workplace. The CWIU cited assiduous worker discord and discriminatory practices at Colgate, despite corporate claims that its policies and attitudes were in total compliance with the Sullivan Principles.<sup>121</sup>

115. American Consul Johannesburg to Department of State Washington, DC, "Ford Dispute Status Report," December 1979, box 64, folder 7, Sullivan Papers.

116. Merle Favis, "The Ford Workers' Committee: A Shop Flawed Victory?" and Michael Evans, "PEBCO: The Emergence and Decline of a Community Organisation," in "Working for Ford?" *SALB* 6, no. 2-3 (1980).

117. Xolile Mini, interview by author, Makhanda, Eastern Cape, November 11, 2021.

118. Mlungwana Mini, interview by author, KwaFord, Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, November 16, 2021.

119. Hull, *American Enterprise in South Africa*, 138-140.

120. Colgate-Palmolive, "Press Statement, June 20, 1978, New York," *SALB* 6, no. 8 (1981).

121. Colgate to CWIU, June 30, 1980, from "Documents: Workers' Struggle at Colgate Chemical Workers Industrial Union," *SALB* 6, no. 8 (July 8, 1981): 28.

Tensions were reaching a boiling point, and throughout 1980 and 1981 a bitter sixteen-month saga broke out between the union and Colgate.<sup>122</sup> Refusing to even meet with union representatives, the company insisted that its workers were paid well and did not need the union's assistance. The CWIU, with the leadership of formidable white female organizer Christine "Chris" Bonner, decided to leverage the Sullivan Principles to pressure Colgate.

After a series of requests for negotiation with Colgate, Bonner reached out to Sullivan, attaching a copy of her recent communication with Colgate.<sup>123</sup> The CWIU hoped that Sullivan would pressure Colgate management into negotiating with the union in good faith. In an interview, Bonner recounted ongoing worker discord directed at Colgate management, even after the company had implemented the code:

Workers approached us complaining basically about Colgate, the discrimination that went on there. That stage they had separate toilets, separate canteens and all this stuff was still at Colgate even at that point. But I think they were kind of in the process of change, and it could have been because of [the] Sullivan Principles. But the workers were complaining. So we decided to go in and really try and organize them.<sup>124</sup>

Bonner was correct—Colgate workers protested continued segregation within the company, despite the company's endorsement of the Sullivan Principles.

In crafting her letter to Sullivan, Bonner noted that, although Sullivan made an effort to position the Principles as favorable to union recognition, Colgate management was "still refusing to meet" and continued to "place obstacles in the way of genuine trade union recognition."<sup>125</sup> Colgate responded, citing that it paid its workers the highest possible wages in the industry, well above the minimum household subsistence level.<sup>126</sup> Management further claimed that they were "enlightened employers" and did more for their workers than any trade union could.<sup>127</sup>

Still, Bonner persisted in using a capacious understanding of the Sullivan Principles to put pressure on Colgate. Bonner recollected that Sullivan had amplified his code: "I think Sullivan added to his principles, he did change his principles, because I remember using that. But Sullivan says you can recognize an unregistered union. I can't remember but I think he added a principle ... I do remember specifically using that as a tool."<sup>128</sup> Bonner was correct, for by 1979 the Sullivan Principles officially encouraged companies to recognize and negotiate with Black trade unions. Around the same time, the South African government finally recognized Black workers as employees and reluctantly agreed to legalize unions representing Black workers.

122. Elizabeth Schmidt, "One Step in the Wrong Direction: An Analysis of the Sullivan Principles as a Strategy for Opposing Apartheid," March 1983, box 63, folder 7, Sullivan Papers, 7.

123. In this letter, Christine, who goes by Chris, signed off as "JC Bonner."

124. Christine "Chris" Bonner, interview by author, Zoom, August 12, 2021.

125. Gale L. Moore to Sullivan, December 29, 1980, box 55, folder 9, Sullivan Papers; JC Bonner to Sullivan, December 18, 1980, box 55, folder 9, Sullivan Papers.

126. "Union Puts the Squeeze," *Sunday Tribune*, May 31, 1981, FOSATU Archives AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP.

127. Letter to CWIU, May 12, 1980, from "Colgate to CWIU, June 30, 1980, from "Documents: Workers' Struggle at Colgate Chemical Workers Industrial Union," SALB 6, no. 8 (July 8, 1981): 23.; CWIU to FOSATU Affiliates, March 21, 1981, FOSATU Archives AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP.

128. Bonner, interview.

Through the trade union, Bonner resourcefully leveraged the Sullivan Principles and the union's connection with a Sullivan signatory to lobby for further organizational inroads.<sup>129</sup>

The CWIU's obstacles included Colgate's narrow interpretation of the Wiehahn Commission, namely the Commission's requirement that all negotiations refer to the Industrial Council. The CWIU reproachfully defined the Industrial Council as "an institution originally set up to serve the interests of workers other than African workers, and which at the moment could not possibly negotiate in any meaningful way for Colgate workers." Bonner highlighted the limits of Industrial Council negotiations in her November 10 letter to Colgate-Palmolive management. She did not receive a reply until a month later. Following a contemptuous reply, Colgate-Palmolive blamed the CWIU for not registering with the domineering Industrial Council. In her appeal to Sullivan, Bonner foregrounded the ways in which the code neglected to mention Black trade unions, stating that "our interpretation of your statements while in South Africa led us to believe that signatory companies should recognize any Union, registered or unregistered."<sup>130</sup> Bonner and the CWIU were simply unaware of extra conditions such as those outlined by Colgate, and argued that the use of a registration application was in contravention to the Principles.

Decades later, Bonner recounted this communication with Sullivan, noting that the Chemical Union was predisposed to targeting multinational companies. Bonner reflected that the Sullivan Principles "really fitted into the strategy of focusing on them [multinationals] and using whatever we could in terms of international contacts."<sup>131</sup> The dispute at Colgate in particular figured prominently in Bonner's memory of the Sullivan Principles:

Here's somebody [Leon Sullivan] in the anti-apartheid movement coming up with some clear guidelines, demands for multinationals. In that sense we thought it was really useful because it was quite concrete. And so it was another tool that one could use. Clear tools like that were not really readily available. There was an anti-apartheid movement, but this was very directed. It fit into the chemical's focus on say, let's target the multinational companies. I think from that perspective, I'm surmising a bit here, because I just remember that we used the Sullivan Principles. And I'm not sure if we used it in other companies, we probably did. But specifically we used it in Colgate.<sup>132</sup>

Bonner's experience and memory of the Colgate saga to some extent highlight the leverage the union had in dealing with multinational companies. At least for the chemical union, the Sullivan Principles showed some initial promise.

By 1981, the South African government had fully implemented all parts of the Wiehahn recommendations, and for the first time in the history of South Africa, all Black workers gained the right to join trade unions. Nonetheless, Colgate's workers were not blind to the ways in which the corporation hid behind "progressive" reforms like the Sullivan code and Wiehahn Commission, both of which projected the illusion of progress. Recognizing an opportunity,

129. The same strategy Pat Horn highlighted in her interview with the author, February 19, 2021.

130. Gale L. Moore to Sullivan, December 29, 1980, box 55, folder 9, Sullivan Papers; JC Bonner to Sullivan, December 18, 1980, box 55, folder 9, Sullivan Papers.

131. Bonner, interview.

132. *Ibid.*

workers pressed further. Colgate's union shop stewards took matters into their own hands, organizing meetings in the nearby townships and union offices, writing to Sullivan, and spearheading meetings with a representative of the U.S. Subcommittee on Southern Africa.<sup>133</sup> At the plant level, workers risked their jobs through quotidian resistance. Many interfered with factory equipment, closing some production departments. Workers received firm condemnation from Colgate management.<sup>134</sup>

At a meeting on April 24, 1981, the CWIU protested that Colgate deployed a variety of union-busting tactics, including worker intimidation and the luring of workers away from the union by offering benefits as a form of bribery.<sup>135</sup> For example, management introduced a free burial scheme, to which workers responded by saying, "We want what we're asking for now, not when we're dead" and summarily refused Colgate's offer.<sup>136</sup>

By late May 1981, the CWIU boldly called for a nationwide boycott of all Colgate products, such as soaps, detergents, and toothpastes. Colgate workers launched a vast campaign, distributing over fifteen thousand posters and stickers to convince workers and the surrounding community to boycott Colgate until the company granted full union recognition and the right to negotiate wages and working conditions.<sup>137</sup> Colgate management responded by distributing pamphlets to the workforce, delivering free product samples to the Black townships, and augmenting the false narrative that the dispute and ensuing boycott were the work of outsiders with no connection to the union.<sup>138</sup> Refusing to be intimidated, the union voted in favor of a strike by a two-thirds majority.<sup>139</sup> The boycott and threatened strike were so besieging and successful that management conceded. On August 21, 1981, Colgate and the CWIU signed a formal recognition agreement. This victory for the union owed in part to the persistent activism at the local level.<sup>140</sup>

The deep irony was that the Sullivan Principles evaluation team rated Colgate-Palmolive as one of the most progressive multinational firms. If the subsidiary could so blatantly resist the implementation of principle 3, thereby neglecting to provide unionization rights to its non-white workers in its ongoing dispute with the CWIU, then Colgate-Palmolive was not deserving of exemplary ADL ratings. Some unions thus left a damning critique of the code itself, stating that "the code is clearly useless to African workers."<sup>141</sup> A branch secretary for the CWIU noted that Colgate-Palmolive's managers "fight every issue tooth and nail. Their

133. "Documents: Workers' Struggle at Colgate Chemical Workers Industrial Union", *SALB* 6, no. 8 (July 8, 1981): 27.

134. *SALB* 6, no. 8 (July 8, 1981): 33; L. Coetzer, "Documents: Workers' Struggle at Colgate Chemical Workers Industrial Union," Second source: "Notice to all Employees. Interference with Equipment," *SALB* 6, no. 8 (July 8, 1981): 32.

135. CWIU, "Resolution on Colgate," AH1999, C1.13.1.13, HP.

136. "Management 'Squeezed' at Colgate," *FOSATU Worker News*, October 1980.

137. FOSATU Archives AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP.

138. "Union Puts the Squeeze," *Sunday Tribune*, May 31, 1981, FOSATU Archives AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP; *The Star*, June 8, 1981, FOSATU Archives AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP; "Colgate 'Intimidation' Slammed," *The Sowetan*, June 8, 1981.

139. Schmidt, "One Step in the Wrong Direction," Sullivan Papers, 7; "Global Newswatch," *Multinational Monitor*, July 1981, 2, no 7, <https://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1981/07/southafrica.html>.

140. "Dispute Ends as Colgate Accedes to Union Demands," June 23, 1981, AH1999, C1.13.1.13.7, HP.

141. African Policy Information Center of the African-American Institute, *South Africa Namibia Update*, 5, no. 8 (1981), box 66, no. 2, Sullivan Papers. From *Sowetan*, May 15, 1981.

attitude is still very anti-union.”<sup>142</sup> Similarly, white workers on the shop floor neglected to follow the Sullivan Principles. Black shop steward Dusty Ngwane encouraged Colgate’s Black workers to challenge white resistance to workplace desegregation by leveraging the Sullivan Principles:

So we started using the white change house. The foreman went for him and told him, “you can’t wash here,” the workers then called to come and see what was happening. When I got there I told them that in terms of the Sullivan Principles, the people have a right to wash here, but of course we had to vacate.<sup>143</sup>

The saga at Colgate was one of the earliest examples of South African workers’ struggles drawing in the near-daily resistance of a community of Black workers *outside* of the factory.<sup>144</sup> In the face of obstinate corporate hostility toward the emerging trade union movement, workers successfully leveraged the Sullivan Principles both to challenge management to recognize the emerging Black trade union and to rally workers and the surrounding community to support a boycott of Colgate products.

This episode illustrates that signing the Sullivan Principles was merely a symbolic first step. Sullivan signatories and non-signatories alike fired workers for engaging in strike actions in the years following the Wiehahn Commission and complementary Sullivan Principles, revealing the impotence of the voluntary ADL evaluations.<sup>145</sup> For example, Fluor Corporation, which built South Africa’s coal-to-oil conversion plant (SASOL), failed to uphold the Sullivan Principles when it fired nearly 6,500 striking African workers from their SASOL jobs. The workers were then forcibly expelled to the homelands following the two-day strike.<sup>146</sup> Worse still, some companies would not even adhere to the desegregation of the workplace, highlighting yet another shortcoming of the code and the stringent limits to reforms that merely placated capitalists. At an August 1980 International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference Committee meeting, Ray Denison of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions’ (ICFTU) African Regional Organization noted that it was all too easy for companies to desegregate the workplace in the most literal sense of the term, all the while upholding *de facto* segregation. For example, management could change a sign that said Whites Only to read Senior Staff Only in order to make it appear that they had eliminated racial discrimination. If the company provided no operative structure for Black workers to advance to seniority, the

142. Schmidt, “One Step in the Wrong Direction,” Sullivan Papers, 7.

143. Interview with Dusty Ngwane, Labour Struggles Project, Interviews, A3402, HP.

144. M. Friedman, *The Future is in the Hands of the Workers*, 84.

145. The companies included: Chrysler (non-signatory), Coca-Cola, Columbus-McKinnon (non-signatory), Firestone (category II), Standard Oil of Ohio (non-signatory), and City Investing (non-signatory). See “Labor and South Africa,” *Economy Notes: Labor Research Association, Inc.*, vol. 53, no. 7–8, ANC-London, MCH02, Mayibuye Archives, 6.

146. Schmidt, “One Step in the Wrong Direction,” Sullivan Papers, 8. The Native Land Act (1913) initiated the reserve homelands system, and on October 26, 1976, the South African government codified homeland independence through the Bantu Self-Government Act. The Afrikaner government’s grand apartheid policy consisted of grouping the Black African population into their own “nations,” with the aim that they would achieve independence. See Thompson, *History of South Africa*, 191–195.



change was merely "cosmetic."<sup>147</sup> Of course, not all companies signed the code, and even signatories could opt out of questionnaires and self-audits. Task group leaders accused many companies of "using the Sullivan Principles."<sup>148</sup>

The pace of change was also lethargic. In the three years following the issuing of the Wiehahn Commission report, only nine U.S. companies had signed formal recognition agreements with unions representing Black workers, yet thirty-one companies ranked in the highest scoring category of the 1982 ADL questionnaire.<sup>149</sup> In other words, the companies that refused to recognize Black unions received no tangible punishment from the Sullivan evaluation team.<sup>150</sup> Signatories also did not hide their clear hostility toward the liberalization of Black organizing rights, echoing conservative management voices from the Wiehahn reports. In the sixth ADL report, one signatory highlighted that "we do not believe unions to be necessary or desirable."<sup>151</sup> In the seventh ADL report, a Sullivan endorser claimed that its employees rejected unions because "the company was looking after them and ... they did not require a union."<sup>152</sup> Thus, the Sullivan Principles presented corporations with the façade of worker progressivism and conveniently masked their resistance to advocating for Black worker unionization rights.

### Conclusion: Beyond Desegregation?

Oddly enough, U.S. multinational companies could achieve passing Sullivan scores without fully advancing the code's demands or fully adhering to the Wiehahn Commission recommendations, such as union recognition and negotiation. The Sullivan clause calling for the "rights of blacks to form or belong to government registered or unregistered unions" lacked an enforcement mechanism. There was no mention of any obligation to bargain in good faith, or to acknowledge trade union rights in a way that fully and unequivocally welcomed Black unions, regardless of their affiliation with the Industrial Council. However, the Wiehahn Commission reforms, though intended to blunt the momentum of worker and youth uprisings throughout the 1970s, ultimately provided a modicum of space for worker militancy. Such militancy, in the form of work stoppages, strikes, and quotidian resistance, undercut the Sullivan Principles from within. Although both reforms abolished some of the racial characteristics of trade union legislation, such unraveling of petty apartheid operated in the interests of business and foreign investment, and less so in the interests of workers.

147. "South Africa: ILO Conference Committee on Apartheid Draws Up Action Programme," *African Labour News*, August 1980, box 65, folder 6, Sullivan Papers.

148. Draft Report, Investor Responsibility Research Center, "The Corporate Response," 1983, box 68, folder 1, Sullivan Papers.

149. Arthur D. Little, Inc., "Sixth Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles," October 25, 1982, (Cambridge: Arthur D. Little, 1982), African Studies Collection, UCT Special Collections.

150. See Sheehan, *Church Investors Concerned About U.S. Investment in South Africa*.

151. Arthur D. Little, Inc., "Sixth Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles," UCT Special Collections.

152. Arthur D. Little, Inc., "Seventh Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles," October 25, 1983, (Cambridge: Arthur D. Little, 1983), African Studies Collection, UCT Special Collections; Schmidt, "One Step in the Wrong Direction," Sullivan Papers.

The Sullivan Principles were appealing to the South African government and American capitalists. Likewise, the South African government gave its stamp of approval to the Wiehahn reforms and tolerated the Sullivan Principles. However, due in part to the already established Black labor activism, the Wiehahn reforms and Sullivan Principles served to accelerate the pace of workplace reform. Both Wiehahn and the Principles were relatively safe and politically acceptable, complementary in abetting shifts in the structure of labor and the South African workplace.

The internal pressure engendered greater external pressure. The Sullivan Principles were partially effective in that they did complement the internal dynamic. Short of economic sanctions, investment in Black skills, education, and pay brought some pressure on the internal situation, enabling the Wiehahn reforms. Most companies expressed at least some openness to reform. The parallel movement for Black unionization rights, in turn, assigned more pressure on the Sullivan Principles' advocates and also transcended the narrow scope and influence of American companies. However significant the changes to the workplace appeared, the companies that signed onto the code were still beholden to the desires of the South African government, and were thus responsive to its demands.

In a March 11, 1983, letter to Sullivan, the executive director of the International Council for Equality of Opportunity Principles (ICEOP), Timothy Smith, expressed concern that corporations were being forced into situations they morally detested. Smith noted that Standard Oil of California alerted the ICEOP of an aggressive letter from the South African government. In this letter, the South African government served an order requiring Standard Oil to sell to the South African police and military.<sup>153</sup> Standard Oil was not alone, as the apartheid government coerced many multinational corporations to lend material support to South Africa's military arsenal. This bond between multinational corporations and the South African Defense Force (SADF) would only lend credence to the anti-apartheid movement's broad opposition to the Sullivan Principles, and the continued multinational presence in South Africa.

In his 1985 testimony to the United States Senate, Sullivan defended the Sullivan Principles as parallel to the anti-apartheid movement, a "lever" to engender more robust anti-apartheid reforms.<sup>154</sup> However, owing to the sluggish pace of reform, the general consensus among Black workers on the ground remained critical. Black management held a forum conference on June 21, 1985, in Johannesburg, South Africa. As expected, Black and white workers harbored different views. Black workers insisted that U.S. companies were "not seriously confronting the system of apartheid and little had been done in most areas."<sup>155</sup>

However, Black workers were not complacent recipients. Rather, as case studies like the Colgate saga show, they leveraged reforms to further pressure the South African government and the multinational corporation. Moving beyond desegregation, and thus toward a full

153. Timothy H. Smith to Leon Sullivan, March 11, 1983, box 56, folder 8, Sullivan Papers.

154. Transcript, U.S. Senate, "Hearing on S.635 and Other Legislation Regarding Apartheid and South Africa," June 13, 1985, box 69, folder 5, Sullivan Papers.

155. Dan Purnell to Representatives of Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles, June 26, 1985, box 62, folder 3, Sullivan Papers.

dismantling of the apartheid structure, would prove an elusive goal in the context of the late apartheid era. Nonetheless, workers took advantage of openings in the apartheid state to advance both industrial, personal, and political needs.

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**Cite this article:** Webb, Mattie C. "'An Exercise in the Art of the Possible': Waging a Battle Against Apartheid in the South African Workplace." *Enterprise & Society* 25, no. 2 (2024): 329–357.