This review argues that despite the many positive changes taking place, industrial relations in South Africa are faced by a range of severe problems, perhaps even of crisis. These problems set real limitations on what will be achievable in the process of restructuring industrial life that is needed in order to meet local and international economic challenges. In briefly looking at the reform agenda for industrial relations in the 1990s, the author offers a few broad comments about the consequences of the past decade for future developments.

It would be a relatively easy task to devote a review of the 'Wiehahn decade' to the remarkable achievements made by both management and labour in the 1980s. Thirteen years have passed since the publication of the Wiehahn Commission's report on labour legislation in 1979. The culture of negotiation that emerged from the battles over union recognition of the early 1980s has altered industrial relations in quite fundamental ways as well as exerted a positive impact on the broader South African society.

It would also be appropriate to focus a review on the way in which achievements in industrial relations have been arrived at despite the repressive conditions prevailing in all areas of South African life. According to a recent report, South Africa remains the most unsafe place to carry out trade union activity. One indicator of this is the murder of no less than 47 trade unionists in this country between March 1991 and March 1992 (ICFTU, 1992).

In the context of the broader processes of political and social change in South Africa since February 1990 it would seem more appropriate, however, to reflect on the Wiehahn decade with a view to the present and future. It is no longer adequate to praise past and present achievements without, to some extent, measuring these against their potential contribution to the restructuring of social and economic life in South Africa.

To adopt such an approach would require a far more critical evaluation of the recent history of industrial relations and a greater degree of clarity regarding present conditions than is generally available in much of the literature.

The Wiehahn Decade

In many ways the changes that occurred in industrial relations during the Wiehahn decade have been momentous:
- a union movement representative of black workers has established itself in greater depth than at any other moment in South Africa's labour history;
- collective bargaining has become an accepted and widespread form of conducting industrial relations in key sectors of the economy;
- notions of fairness have become accepted in employment practices and the basic rights of many workers have improved;
- new institutions, such as the Industrial Court and the National Manpower Commission (NMC) have been established; and
- existing institutions, for instance, some
industrial councils have in some cases changed their character in important ways.

To reach such a stage has clearly required change in power relations between state, capital and organised labour, change in attitudes and changed behaviour on the part of the many interest groups directly enmeshed in the social relations of industry.

What has been the end result of this turbulent decade of change in industrial relations? Broadly speaking, it is possible to view the changes as primarily resulting in the establishment of a regulatory framework for the governance of industrial relations. What has been set in place is a framework which is primarily legal or statutory in character, but which also contains important extra-statutory elements (such as the recognition agreement). The current framework embodies a great deal more formal rationality than was present in any earlier historical period and has introduced some sense of normative order into industrial relations. Thus, employers are obliged to bargain with representative unions, workers can no longer be dismissed or retrenched without some degree of procedural fairness and conditions of employment cannot be changed unilaterally.

The process through which this regulatory framework has evolved has been important. The Wiehahn reforms, while far-reaching in their ramifications, were nevertheless reforms imposed by the state and aimed at establishing formal control and order in the industrial relations arena. Throughout the 1980s, the state continually attempted to curb the power of the growing trade union movement through legislative intervention and through more directly repressive means. But, increasingly, it was through union-led struggles that the regulatory framework, both statutory and extra-statutory, came to reflect a more even-handed framework for the conduct of industrial relations and collective bargaining.

In evolving in this way, the regulatory framework has increasingly come to reflect, implicitly, the increased power of the union movement vis-à-vis employers and the state. The high point in this process was undoubtedly the accord between the SA Employers Consultative Committee on Labour Affairs (Saccola), the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) which led to the promulgation of the revised Labour Relations Act (LRA) in early 1991. The decision to amend legislation to reflect an agreement negotiated between employer and employee representatives effectively reversed the government’s attempt to roll back previous union gains by amending the LRA in 1988.

The present position is that the regulatory framework embodied in the Labour Relations Act has been substantially shaped through pressure exerted from below by the union movement. The important role of the union movement in the process of reform has strengthened the framework in that it has ensured greater legitimacy for the rules and procedures established.

**Industrial Conflict**

The establishment of a regulatory framework is, however, in important respects a limited achievement. Most importantly, a regulatory framework, irrespective of the process through which it is established, is unlikely to ensure a stable industrial relations environment, or a stable normative system. The framework established in South Africa is essentially concerned with a network of institutions, rules, procedures and practices which govern the interaction of capital and labour in the workplace. It does not, however, regulate the production and distribution of wealth in society and therefore does not affect the underlying inequalities which tend, constantly, to be a source of conflict and instability.

Nor does regulation of industrial relations necessarily affect the nature of the relationship between capital and labour. It allows for unions to exercise greater power in relation to management which have, in most cases, been forced to come to terms with unions as bargaining partners. South African industrial relations in the early 1990s can still be characterised as being highly adversarial in nature; i.e., a style of bargaining and management-labour interaction based on a deep conflict of interest on most issues. Adversarial industrial relations and collective bargaining can also be characterised by a short-term, low-trust perspective in which each side’s strategies and tactics depend primarily on a changing balance of power.

There is a growing body of literature internationally and locally that suggests that there is a positive relationship between economic performance and non-adversarial industrial relations systems. The catchword is co-operation or a co-operative style of
bargaining. What this term usually refers to (or implies) is the existence of common interests between management and labour which outweigh particular conflicts and which entails a long-term, high-trust perspective in which neither side seeks to take advantage of short-term shifts in the balance of power. Internationally, it has been suggested that economies characterised by such co-operative management-labour relations adapt more easily to market and technological changes and are generally better able to deal with questions of change in economic and industrial relations.

Despite the reform in South African industrial relations during the last decade, there is little evidence to suggest that the relationship between management and labour has evolved to a point which would allow for the qualitative restructuring of management-labour interaction and perhaps, therefore, their ability to deal effectively with restructuring of industry.

Such evidence as is available would, in fact, suggest the opposite, namely the deterioration of the ability of management and labour to resolve differences and disputes via collective bargaining. There has been a significant increase in the number of recorded strikes in the period 1980 to 1990 (200 strikes in 1980 compared to 948 in 1990), with an average of 863 strikes per year for the period 1985-1990 (NMC, 1991).

Furthermore, the growth in the duration of strikes and the diversification in the reasons for strikes (other than wages), could suggest increased difficulty in resolving disputes across a broader range of contested issues. In other words, rather than becoming better at limiting the potential causes of conflict and ensuring quick resolution of conflict, the parties would appear to have become less able to do so.

The spectacular growth in mediation (see Table 1) and arbitration no doubt also reflects an increased inability of the parties to bargain in good faith and reach appropriate compromises, without having to rely on third party intervention.

Figures for mediations shown in Table 1 show a 40-fold increase. The number of arbitrations has also risen dramatically, from 5 in 1984 to 212 in 1989. In 1990 there were 344 and in 1991, 430 arbitrations were conducted by the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa (IMSSA) (IMSSA Review No12, 1992).

**Strategic Weakness**

The steady growth in industrial conflict over the past decade could be seen as an indicator of an apparent inability of management and organised workers to change their relationships in the workplace. Evidence regarding the quality of industrial relations is very hard to come by and also suffers from possible problems of validity, but the perceptions of certain key actors cannot easily be discounted. According to a senior National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa) official, South African management is still authoritarian, wedded to old-fashioned notions of tight, hierarchical forms of control over labour and unsophisticated in their economic policies. Very significantly, management is also said to be primarily orientated to short-term, profit-centred goals with little conception of long-term objectives and strategic investment (Bird, 1991).
These generalisations have been supported by a growing number of studies of key plants and industries which confirm in each case an inability by management to move beyond viewing labour as an adversary in relational terms and as a simple cost factor in economic and production terms (see, *inter alia*, Bethlehem, 1991; Nattrass, 1991).

While it is customary to speak of the union movement primarily in terms of its strengths, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid the signs of strategic weakness emerging with respect to the major unions. These are primarily organisational problems relating to the increased centralisation of functions within unions and their federations. In the words of one national organiser: "... the "local" has become a function of the national, the passive recipients of national directives" (Marie, 1992). In addition, the ongoing difficulties faced by many unions in overcoming the constraints of scarce resources and limited skills have given rise to serious leadership problems and severe pressure on the shop-steward leadership.

Finally, while the growth of black trade unions during the past decade has been very rapid, this should be seen in the context of the low level of unionisation from which it started. Presently, there is a relatively high level of union density in the manufacturing, mining, wholesale and retail and transport sectors, but not in agriculture, construction, financial or public sectors. Furthermore, the severe economic problems confronting the manufacturing and mining sectors may well lead to a decline in the growth rate of unions in the future.

Rapid union growth has also generated its own set of demands for resources and skills which many unions have been unable to fill. In short, union growth in certain areas of the South African economy could be viewed as a contributing factor to the organisational problems faced by the union movement. Organisational and resource constraints and their associated problems have been evident particularly from the time of Cosatu’s formation in 1986. They are also likely to be a continued factor facing unions attempting to expand their membership in unorganised sectors, while attempting to maintain and consolidate present membership levels in the highly organised sectors of the economy.

At the end of the Wiehahn decade, industrial relations in South Africa could thus be characterised by crucial areas of weakness with regard to both management and organised labour. These are areas of weakness which may contribute significantly to the difficulty of establishing a stable and relatively peaceful industrial relations environment in the future.

**Social Change**

If this assessment of present trends appears very negative and, in certain respects it obviously is, then it clearly needs to be balanced by a brief review of the more positive developments that have been taking place within the political arena over the past two years.

The period of change usually identified with President FW de Klerk’s speech to Parliament in February 1990, unleashed processes that hold out the potential for a more serious attack on social inequality in South Africa. Indeed, it could be argued that a key factor forcing the state to shift into a reformist mode was precisely the economic weakness and financial crisis that prevailed through much of the 1980s (see Hirsch, 1989). Recognition by all the major political players of the need to address economic problems clearly does not lead automatically to a lessening of social inequality. It is the simultaneous democratisation of the political process which suggests that economic policies orientated to improved social welfare and a more equitable redistribution of resources will become central to the political process in the future.

Within this context, it becomes possible to think of movement towards a relatively stable normative order in industrial relations. In other words, as the political process starts to reflect the concerns of the broader population, including the members of trade unions, it will develop a greater moral justification and thus enable the attainment of greater consensus in all areas of society, including the economic sphere.

In the words of the British sociologist, John Goldthorpe (1974:231): "... The advancement of social justice has to be seen not as some lofty and rather impractical ideal, the further pursuit of which must wait upon the attainment of such basic objectives as "getting the economy right", but rather as an important precondition of mitigating current economic difficulties."

It should perhaps be added that the current process of change in South Africa is
unlikely to lead to a situation, even in the long term, in which there will be complete consensus and therefore complete stability. The potential for conflict will remain so long as there are social factors generating this potential, for instance, hierarchical organisation in the workplace. But it does seem possible to envisage the existing patterns of inequality in South Africa becoming less arbitrary, less unjust and therefore more likely to receive some degree of acceptance from a wider section of the population.

Clearly this is not intended to imply that no change in industrial relations will be possible or effective prior to a political solution being arrived at in South Africa. There have been important new initiatives in the industrial relations arena over the past few years; at the national level, in the relationship between Cosatu and the government around the National Manpower Commission, at the industry level where the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) has negotiated a landmark restructuring initiative, and at the company level in experiments at firms such as Cashbuild, PG Bison and Nampak.

Perhaps the most significant area of change is taking place at the company level, where attempts have been embarked on to examine the values that management and workers adhere to and that govern their interaction. In addition to the examples referred to above, there have been a few relationship-building exercises at other companies aimed at reducing the distance between management and workers. These micro-level initiatives are important in that they, in various ways, aim to change the relationships in the enterprise in ways that attempt to go beyond collective bargaining and the traditional forms of management-labour interaction which are facilitated by a regulatory framework.

It has been argued that these experiments 'in value-sharing between superordinates and subordinates neglect the structural dimension of the employment relationship. They lead neither to power-sharing nor sustainable developments' (Douwes-Dekker, 1992). There may be some truth in this argument, although it could equally be argued that the neglect of the structural dimension of the employment relationship is understandable given that this dimension cannot be changed without macro-level institutional modification - precisely the kind of change that becomes more likely once democratisation of the political process advances. The crucial point, however, is that change in industrial relations needs to proceed at both the micro and macro level simultaneously and that economic life and the relations that govern it should be restructured alongside of the broader processes aimed at reducing social inequality.

The major challenge in the present is therefore ensuring that these processes of change are articulated in the programmes of government, management and organised labour. Present developments appear, at least to observers, to lack this articulation between micro and macro level change in both the relations and institutions of industrial life. For example, Cosatu appears primarily orientated to the national political arena and the establishment of highly centralised forums, employers appear more active at the company level and the government displays no clear initiative.

Prospects

In summary, the Wiehahn decade could be seen as a period in which problems in industrial relations were allowed to surface for the first time in South African labour history. Unionisation of black workers flourished and as it did so, the workers who flocked to the democratic unions were given a chance to act to change their working lives. Change if they certainly did, in many respects, but most importantly by ensuring that the laws, the rules and the procedures governing union-management interaction were shifted to reflect the power of the unions and to guarantee them the space in which to continue organising and negotiating.

But while allowing problems to surface, the past thirteen years have not shown much evidence of management-labour relations changing in such a way as to deal with some of the more fundamental issue confronting the parties. These issues concern both the economy and the political role of management and organised labour.

With regard to the economic crisis, it is clear that far-reaching change is required in many areas of production in order to contribute to economic growth. For change in the organisation of production to be feasible, however, industrial relations at the enterprise level will have to undergo restructuring on a wide scale. A potentially fruitful focus for restructuring would be in the area of industrial democracy, that is, concerning issues of the right of employees to participate in management and economic decisions. The potential for conflict will remain so long as there are social factors generating this potential, for instance, hierarchical organisation in the workplace. But it does seem possible to envisage the existing patterns of inequality in South Africa becoming less arbitrary, less unjust and therefore more likely to receive some degree of acceptance from a wider section of the population. 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Decision-making beyond the scope of collective bargaining. For instance, effective answers to key micro problems, such as that of wage policy, will undoubtedly require change in the concepts of management structure, authority and control (Goldthorpe, 1974).

If industrial democracy is to become a meaningful issue on the industrial relations reform agenda, the 'ideological mind-set' of managers will have to change so as to create a situation in which workers are not afraid to question things and in which they are allowed to make changes. Equally, workers and their unions will increasingly have to concern themselves with the nature and organisation of production, as some have already started doing.

Furthermore, it may be necessary to reconsider forms of workplace organisation, other than the traditional union model, to ensure participation in the production process by non-union members or in multi-union situations. In this regard, critically revisiting the Wiehahn Commission's discussion of workplace organisation and decentralised collective bargaining may be appropriate, as well as looking to the international situation.

Industrial democracy is not without its problems and has in certain situations been limited by the market constraints operating on capitalist firms and by the limited resources that unions alone can mobilise within a firm. Advances in industrial democracy will therefore have to be complemented by more overtly political roles on the part of organised management and organised labour. Clearly, significant progress has been made already by Cosatu and Saccola in attempting to reach agreement on a Charter for Peace, Democracy and Economic Reconstruction and in beginning to work through national forums. If this process is carried through successfully, the chances of the state, management and labour addressing problems of social inequality in various areas, through a set of policies that carry legitimacy and consensus, will be vastly improved.

The wide-ranging and assertive political initiatives undertaken by Saccola at the national level, will clearly need to be matched at the enterprise level, both in the way that management view labour and also by the extent to which workers are offered more tangible benefits and a more meaningful role. Equally, Cosatu's ongoing political role at the national level will increasingly need to correspond with organisational strength at the enterprise level.

Finally, to return to probabilities, it is likely that the conflictual and non-cooperative legacy of the past decade will continue to characterise industrial relations for a considerable period of time. At least it is now possible to contemplate South Africa moving into a new political era, one characterised by a more egalitarian restructuring of society that must profoundly affect the nature of industrial relations.

As it has become possible to identify new initiatives in the economic and industrial relations arena, however disparate and fragmented, so there are grounds for being optimistic about a more wide-ranging and sustained move from reform to restructuring of industrial relations. The conclusion reached elsewhere bears repeating here, namely that, 'Those who continue to defend and assert the old order will know only problems in a process that will remain an ordeal' (Nupen, 1970).

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