This 300 page book may prove to be a useful source document for researchers, and for industrial relations practitioners (including trade unionists) who wish to find out specific details on a particular industrial council. The author has undertaken an enormous task of collecting information on all industrial councils in South Africa, and combining this in a single volume for the first time. The Digest also contains an interesting 20 page section on the history of industrial councils.

However, as a contribution to the debate on centralised bargaining, and the potential reform of the industrial council system, it is highly limited. The limitations of the book derive largely from the fact that it is based entirely on secondary sources. While trade union and management press statements and interviews are quoted, not a single interview appears to have been conducted for the purposes of the book. This seems an extraordinary omission, and results in some irritating loose ends. For example, on page 56 the author states “it is not clear how this, [a dispute over the extension of an agreement in the engineering industry to non parties – JB] was resolved because the Agreement was finally extended”.

The absence of primary interviews also means that the book contains few pointers as to how unions and other players are dealing with some of the inadequacies of the system. For example, there is no mention of the fact that the Industrial Council for the Contract Cleaning industry in Natal has a constitution based on proportional representation, as opposed to the equal representation of all other councils which have multiparty membership.

No mention, either, is made of the fact that some industrial council wage agreements make provision for increases to minimum wages only (for example, the Transvaal Goods Transport Industrial Council), while others make provision for increases across the board (for example, the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metalurgical Industrial Council) – or, more importantly, that there are struggles being fought within some industrial councils around this issue.

No mention is made of the problems experienced in a number of industries as a consequence of the Minister exempting from agreements small industries and those which have been in business for less than one year. No explanation is provided as to why certain unions are not members of industrial councils, (for example, why SACCAWU is not a member of the various Tearoom industrial councils, and Transport and General is not a member of the various...
The author correctly points out that the structure and functioning of industrial councils is diverse, and that the "challenge is the welding of this diversity and differentiation into a coherent system of national bargaining structures that can provide real benefits to workers and ensure their active involvement in the negotiation of those benefits". However, in the same way that the book would have been enriched by interviews with relevant players at an industry level, some reflection on strategic developments within the trade union movement would have been illuminating.

There is no mention, for example, of the fact that the well publicised negotiations towards a revised Labour Relations Act have included submissions on the question of ministerial discretion with regard to the gazetting of agreements. Nor is there mention of the fact that during the course of 1991 and 1992, numerous complaints were lodged with the Minister of Manpower concerning the tardy gazetting of agreements.

Passing reference is made in the chapter on the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industrial Council to a 1991 agreement on training and industry restructuring (see pg 82), but no mention is made anywhere else of the fact that such agreements are increasingly being looked to within COSATU as a whole, and that such agreements form part of an overall approach to economic restructuring on the part of the Federation.

In addition to the omissions of the book, there are some annoying inaccuracies. For example, no mention is made anywhere of the fact that an industrial council has been established for Transnet. The author may put forward the Industrial Registrar's refusal to supply a list of registered industrial councils as an excuse (see pg 4). However, had the author approached any one of the labour federations or their affiliates to assist him, he would surely have succeeded in gaining access to such a list.

An historical inaccuracy appears on page 27, where it is argued that the registration was not a major issue in the period 1979 - 1982. While this was the case within the Federation of South Africa Trade Unions, it was certainly not the case for the trade union movement as a whole.

It remained at this time a major issue in the Unity Talks which ultimately made way for the formation of the Congress of Trade Unions in 1985.

The scope of the Passenger Transport Industrial Council in Natal is incorrectly described in that no mention is made of the fact that the scope does not include non members of the Bus Owners Association - thereby excluding the major passenger companies in the region, namely Putco, DTMB, and Kwa Zulu Transport (pg 215).

One last criticism – the typeface and layout make it an extremely difficult book to read.

It is a pity that a project which by its own admission consumed large resources and a great deal of time, could not have made a more significant contribution to the debate on centralised bargaining, and in particular to the debate on the limits and possibilities of industrial councils. For, as stated above, centralised bargaining has become the key to COSATU's policy on industrial restructuring and the development of a coherent and consistent wage policy. ☆