Preliminary Examination Comparative Labor in the US and South Africa

In the time allotted for this exam, you must write a total of three (3) questions, one from each section. Be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Section A.

1. Migrant labor has been the foundation of the South African economy since the late 19th century. What have been the major themes in the social history of migrant labor in South Africa over the past 50 years? Discuss the scholarly works which you consider crucial to understanding the trajectories of this vital aspect of the South African political economy.

2. What were the major forces that resulted in the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU)? How would you compare the relationship between COSATU and the “old” South African state in the 1980s, to the relationship between COSATU and the new South African state after 1994? Is there more continuity or more change?

Section B.

3. “Labor history” in the US has varied in scope. While some works focus primarily on struggles at points of production and union organizations that often mobilize them, others emphasize wider political movements that have intersected with and shaped trade unionist strategies, or open out onto community studies that on class, race, and gender distinctions that in different contexts generate or thwart the mobilization of workers as “labor.” How do you see these shifting scales of labor history changing over time in work that focuses particularly on African American labor? What are some of the chief contributions and omissions of examples of scholarship conducted at these different scales?

4. How have historians of US labor understood the ways in which racial categories intersect with strategies for extracting surplus value to shape the sectors, occupations, and tasks open for people of color to work in? Describe these intersections as they have shaped racialized categories of work in agricultural, domestic, industrial, and service sectors.
Section C.

5. It is often assumed that race and class categories are fundamentally the same internationally. In reading about race and labor in the US and South Africa, have you found these assumptions to be accurate?

6. Conventionally understood, the South African labor movement is characterized by its militancy. On the other hand, the US labor movement is generally understood to be characterized by accommodationist approaches and relative passivity. Which authors and works would you point to that trouble these characterizations and this distinction? Is the distinction upheld or challenged by major works of the last 10 years in the historiographies of labor in South Africa and the US?