

## **South African Trade Unions in a Time of Adjustment**

Geoffrey Wood

Volume 47, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t47pre01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

### Citer cet article

Wood, G. (2001). South African Trade Unions in a Time of Adjustment. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 47, 133–150.

# PRESENTATIONS: CLASS AND CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

## South African Trade Unions in a Time of Adjustment

Geoffrey Wood

DURING THE LATE apartheid era, the South African economy was both weakened by sanctions and disinvestment, and sheltered by the then government's protectionist policies. Democratization has brought with it both the lifting of embargos, and the phasing out of tariff barriers and decentralization incentives, which offered substantial state subsidies for industries located near the former bantustans. This has posed certain challenges for organized labour. On the one hand, the South African trade union movement retains a significant following and organizational vitality in a decade associated with union decline, and enjoys an unprecedented degree of political influence on account of its alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC). On the other hand, it has had to contend with a diminishing pool of potential recruits as a result of widespread retrenchments and restructuring, particularly in core areas of the economy such as the metal and mining industries. Moreover, the unions face all the difficulties of attempting to develop a coherent policy agenda that not only ameliorates, but also presents genuinely viable alternatives to, the process of adjustment. In other words, the challenge is to retain the integrity of a union voice whilst continuing to compromise where necessary with both state and capital.

Geoffrey Wood, "South African Trade Unions in a Time of Adjustment," *Labour/Le Travail*, 47 (Spring 2001), 133-50.

Although this paper deals with some of the general challenges facing organized labour in South Africa, its primary focus is on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), by far South Africa's largest and most effective union federation.<sup>1</sup> The federation has 1.2 million members. Most affiliates are at least 50,000 members strong, and have histories of organizational effectiveness and militancy that far surpass most other employee collectives.

Unfortunately, while there is a considerable body of literature on union growth and decline, it tends to be somewhat fragmented.<sup>2</sup> The changing role and strength of trade unions has been ascribed to changes in the world economy, state policies and the composition of the workforce, and/or internal organizational factors.

According to transformation theory, managerial responses to these pressures have resulted in the adoption of more hard-line policies towards labour.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Pollert has suggested that unions have primarily come under pressure not as a result of global economic forces, but rather as a result of more hard-line state policies.<sup>4</sup> Governments have a range of possible policy options towards unions. Alternatively, it has been argued that whilst global economic forces overshadow the practice of industrial relations, such forces can be ameliorated — or exacerbated — by national institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Overt governmental hostility seems to have accentuated any organization problems, whilst a more neutral or sympathetic position seems to have facilitated union activity.<sup>6</sup> This would account for the relatively stronger showing of the Canadian unions than their US counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Hyman notes, variations in the strength of the union movement between national contexts can be partially ascribed to distinct manifestations of trade union identity, forged by historical experience, and different strategic choices.<sup>8</sup> Nowhere in the world is it possible for a union to be completely sheltered from the forces of globalization. It would seem, however, that the lack of overt state hostility and a particular kind of union identity would facilitate organizational activity. In South Africa, the labour movement has fared relatively well in the 1990s. The following sections of this paper explore the possibilities for the labour movement retaining — or indeed enhancing — its workplace strength in a context of a developing economy re-entering a world stage

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg 1991), 2-4.

<sup>2</sup> John Kelly, "The Future of Trade Unionism," *Employee Relations*, 19, 5 (1997).

<sup>3</sup> J. Godard, "Managerial Strategies, Labor and Employment Relations, and the State: The Canadian Case and Beyond," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35, 3 (1997), 399.

<sup>4</sup> Godard, "Managerial Strategies," 399.

<sup>5</sup> Godard, "Managerial Strategies," 400.

<sup>6</sup> John Kelly, "The Future of Trade Unionism."

<sup>7</sup> Godard, "Managerial Strategies," 399-400.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hyman, "Trade Unions and the Disaggregation of the Working Class," in Mario Regini, ed., *The Future of Labour Movements* (London 1992), 164.

which has now globalized, and contributing to the process of nation-building whilst effectively servicing the needs of its members.

*Background: The Rise of Organized Labour in South Africa*

In the early 1970s, a fresh impetus to the organization of African workers was given through the establishment of a number of new industrial unions (sometimes referred to as "independent unions," to distinguish them from older unions linked to one of the existing conservative union federations), mostly in the Durban region, under the tutelage of a small core of white intellectuals and former union officials. After a series of mergers and realignments, these unions coalesced into two main federations by the mid-1980s — the non-racial Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) and the very much smaller black consciousness (later Africanist) National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). COSATU had an initial membership of 400,000, but, by 1990 it had reached the 1.2 million mark.<sup>9</sup> This rate of expansion then slowed, with the federation having 1.3 million members in 1994.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, NACTU represented some 327,000 workers at this stage.<sup>11</sup>

The landmark Wiehahn reforms of 1979 had deracialized South Africa's statutory system of collective bargaining and dispute resolution, and introduced an Industrial Court to adjudicate unfair labour practice claims. To participate in the system, African trade unions had to register in terms of the Labour Relations Act. After initial reservations, most did so. The Wiehahn reforms gave the independent unions legal recognition and protection. Subsequent decisions by the industrial court entrenched the right to strike, and forced employers to bargain in good faith with representative trade unions.

During the 1980s, union participation in the statutory collective bargaining machinery, as well as formal and informal channels of mediation and negotiation, did not lead to a decline in militancy. Indeed, the incidence of strike action spiralled, whilst the unions became increasingly assertive politically (and gradually closer to the then banned ANC). This continued militancy was a product of the social movement nature of the unions, which had not been politically incorporated because of the apartheid system, which — *inter alia*, in the form of statutory and informal job colour bars, and the pass laws — permeated all aspects of workplace relations.<sup>12</sup> This resulted in increasing consensus between formerly "workerist" (i.e. those who believed the primary focus of the unions should be building shop

<sup>9</sup>National Labour and Economic Development Institute, *Unions in Transition: COSATU at the Dawn of Democracy* (Johannesburg 1994), 7.

<sup>10</sup>National Labour and Economic Development Institute, *Unions in Transition*, 7.

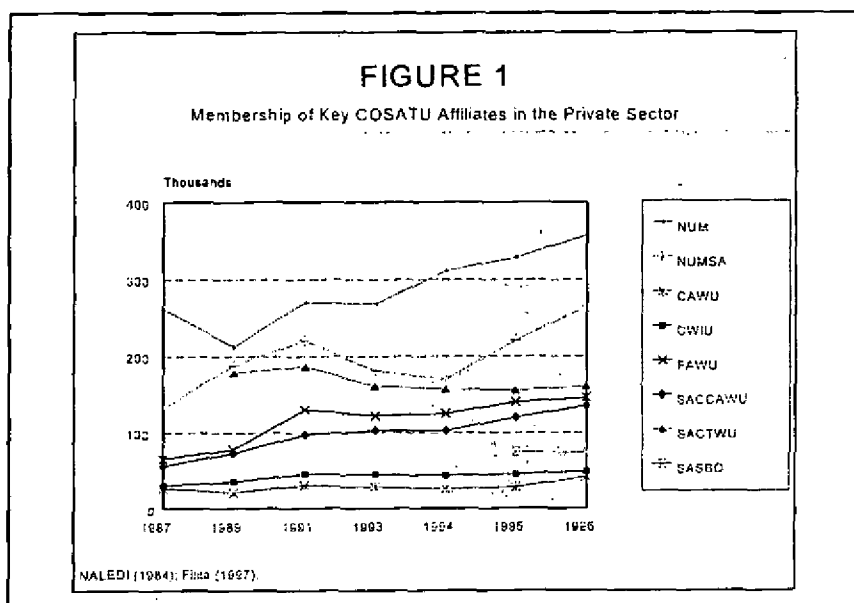
<sup>11</sup>National Labour and Economic Development Institute, *Unions in Transition*, 7.

<sup>12</sup>Eddie Webster, "Introduction to the Labour Section," in G. Moss and I. Obery, eds., *South African Review* 4 (Johannesburg 1987), 217.

floor organization) and "populist" (i.e. those who favoured close alliances with mass-based community organizations) elements in COSATU.<sup>13</sup>

*The Decline of Manufacturing and the Rise of the Public Sector Unions*

By 1993, union membership in key areas of the private sector had begun to decline. Above all, this affected unions operating in the metal and mining sectors, most notably the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), both COSATU affiliates.<sup>14</sup>



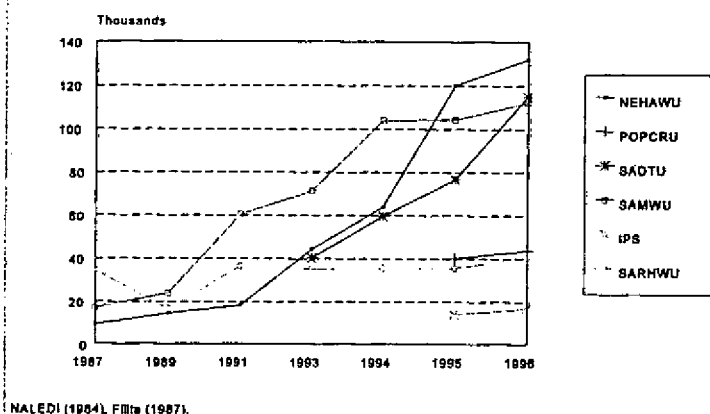
Large-scale retrenchments had taken place in both these sectors. In the case of mining, this was a product of a stagnant gold price coupled with escalating costs of extraction. NUM's membership had begun to decline as early as 1988, owing to large scale dismissals following the disastrous 1987 mine workers' strike. Meanwhile, the metal industry (including the important motor industry) faced problems of competitiveness following moves to reduce tariff barriers. Other areas where trade union membership declined included the chemical and textile industries. These losses were, however, more than offset by rapid growth in the public sector.

<sup>13</sup>Karl von Holdt, "COSATU Congress: Elections, Voting, New Ballots," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 16,1 (1991), 14.

<sup>14</sup>D. Sikweba, "COSATU: Advancing, Retreating or Standing on the Spot?," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 1 (1997), 6-16.

FIGURE 2

Membership of Key COSATU Affiliates in the Public Sector



As was the case with the private sector, most of the new public sector unions were concentrated under the umbrella of the COSATU federation. By the early 1990s, public sector unions constituted its fastest growing segment. In 1993, COSATU decided to specifically target the public sector for action and growth.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the COSATU public sector unions still face certain constraints against further expansion, most notably as a result of the desire of certain groupings to preserve a distinct, professional status (e.g. nurses) and owing to deeply entrenched racial inequalities.<sup>16</sup>

In their early days, the predominantly African independent trade unions operating in the private sector placed great emphasis on the training of workplace representatives in basic industrial relations skills. In contrast, this form of worker education has been increasingly neglected not only by many of the new public sector unions, but also a number of older COSATU affiliates in the manufacturing sector.<sup>17</sup> This has had negative implications both in terms of their capacity to

<sup>15</sup>W. Dobson, "Industrial Action", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 17, 6 (1993), 31.

<sup>16</sup>Phillip Dexter, "Restructuring the Public Sector," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 17, 2 (1994), 34.

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey Wood, "Health and Police Unionism in the Eastern Cape: Attitudes, Perceptions and Prospects," *Transformation*, 33 (1997), 11-15.

consolidate early membership gains, and to coherently implement policy decisions. These problems were particularly pronounced given the difficulties many of the new public sector unions experienced in balancing the needs of professional and blue collar workers. In the case of the National Educational, Health and Allied Workers Unions (NEHAWU), this led to difficulties in meeting the needs of nurses, and the subsequent proliferation of splinter unions dedicated to organizing this sector.

*Against the Tide: The Revival of Private Sector Unionism in South Africa*

This pattern of declining membership in the manufacturing sector, coupled with growth in public sector unionism was not unique to South Africa, as it mirrored similar trends evident in many of the advanced societies. What was unique to South Africa was the recovery of most of the core private sector unions by 1995, with unprecedented levels of penetration being reached by 1996.

Most notably, both NUM and NUMSA seem to have recorded significant gains in membership from 1995 to 1996, despite on-going cutbacks in employment. Given the organizational difficulties facing the South African unions in the late 1990s, it is possible that membership figures may be somewhat exaggerated. What is clear, however, is that the haemorrhage has been stemmed. In addition, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the Construction and Allied Workers Union (CAWU) have also enjoyed significant increases in membership. The latter's growth can, however, be partially ascribed to a modest upturn in the construction industry over the 1995-6 period, as a result of increased infrastructural spending in the traditionally African townships.<sup>18</sup> The reasons underlying the revival of trade unions in the mining and metal industries are less obvious. The most likely explanation would, however, be the sheer organizational vitality of both the NUM and NUMSA. Despite the poor performance of the mining sector — above all, the core gold mining industry — the NUM had managed to rebuild its organization following the disastrous 1987 strike. According to a 1998 survey of COSATU members (conducted by the author, Eddie Webster, Roger Southall, Janet Cherry, Johann Maree, Christen Psoulis and Dave Ginsburg), over two thirds of NUM members regularly attended union meetings, with effective shop steward structures being present at almost all unionized workplaces.

Ninety-seven per cent of all respondents to the 1998 survey said that they had shop stewards at their workplace. This compares with 99 per cent of workers surveyed in 1994, a change that was not statistically significant.<sup>19</sup> This represents only a slight decline, and demonstrates that, despite the challenges of the late 1990s, COSATU has managed to maintain its shop floor-based organizational structures, at

<sup>18</sup>Tanya Rosenthal, "CAWU Membership Grows", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 20, 4 (1996), 15-16.

<sup>19</sup>Chi squared was 5.487, D.F.2 and significance 0.064.

least in the formal sense. This would contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle of unionization based around democratic accountability, whereby new employees would be exposed to effective mechanisms for the election and recall of workplace representatives, encouraging further participation in union activities.<sup>20</sup>

NUMSA's somewhat less spectacular recovery can most probably be ascribed to similar causes. Even in the bulk of unionized workplaces where large scale retrenchments had taken place, NUMSA managed to retain a significant shop floor presence, facilitating the subsequent expansion into hitherto unorganized categories of work, above all into the higher job bands.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) continued to haemorrhage members up until late 1995, but now seems to be experiencing a modest turnabout. The South African textile industry has been particularly adversely affected by the phasing out of protectionism, resulting in more clothing imports from the Far East.<sup>22</sup> This led to major cutbacks in employment — SACTWU's penetration of this sector has, in fact, deepened. Nation-wide surveys of COSATU members have indicated that SACTWU has a far less deeply entrenched tradition of organizational militancy and effectiveness than NUM and NUMSA making it rather more difficult to recover from any numerical setbacks.<sup>23</sup>

Trade unions which are not affiliated to COSATU have had an even rougher time. Most notably, the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) has lost almost one third of its members since 1994 and now has some 230,000 members.<sup>24</sup> NACTU still remains a significant force in the chemical and construction industries, but in other areas has become increasingly marginalized. NACTU's largest affiliate is the South African Chemical Workers Union, which is almost as strong as its COSATU counterpart.<sup>25</sup> Most NACTU affiliates, however, are very much smaller, and in some cases have had an unenviable reputation for extreme conservatism, most notably the National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers and the Black Trade Union (Blatu).<sup>26</sup> Again, shop floor organization in NACTU affiliates has tended to be very much weaker than their COSATU counterparts.<sup>27</sup> Given the spate of recent affiliations to COSATU, and the latter's gradual mopping up of nonunionized, blue-collar

<sup>20</sup>Carol Pateman, quoted in Geoffrey Wood, "Shopfloor Democracy in the Congress of South African Trade Unions," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the South African Sociological Association, Saldhana (1999), 4.

<sup>21</sup>Pateman, "Shopfloor Democracy," 20.

<sup>22</sup>*Shopsteward*, February-March 1996, 15.

<sup>23</sup>See Dave Ginsburg *et al.*, *Taking Democracy Seriously* (Johannesburg, 1995), 5-45.

<sup>24</sup>T. Filita, "COSATU Marching Forward," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 1 (1997), 36.

<sup>25</sup>National Labour and Economic Development Institute, *Unions in Transition*, (Johannesburg 1994), 64.

<sup>26</sup>J. Matiko, "SATS Strike," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 12, 4 (1987), 7.

<sup>27</sup>See Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg, 1991).



workers in the industrial sector, federations outside the COSATU umbrella have had to compete for a rapidly diminishing pool of potential recruits. Some of this growth has been at the expense of South Africa's other major union federation, the Federation of South African Labour (FEDSAL). FEDSAL currently has 255,000 members, but the bulk are organized into conservative staff associations or craft unions.

Based on an employee survey conducted in Britain, Waddington and Whitston assert that individuals who joined unions as a result of fears of "insecurity" at work are likely to be less pro-active, and more prone to conducting a "keeping their heads down approach."<sup>28</sup> There is indeed little doubt that those who joined unions in the cold South African climate of the late 1990s will be prompted by very different reasons to those who joined in the heady days of the 1980s.

Nonetheless, according to the 1998 survey, some 71 per cent of COSATU members regularly attended union meetings. It seems that the overwhelming majority of COSATU workers are still actively involved in union affairs. The survey found that such attendance was particularly high when issues of importance beyond the workplace, or related campaigns were being discussed.<sup>29</sup> There is little doubt that participation in such campaigns forms an integral part of union organizational life in South Africa.

In turn, this can most probably be ascribed to particularly close linkages between union members and members of more disadvantaged groupings. Given the high number of dependants per black worker in a time of large scale unemployment and the nature of informal networks of support, those with jobs remain under considerable pressure to seek improved material conditions through whatever means, including strike action.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the existence of such networks could even provide assistance to striking workers.<sup>31</sup> In other words, shrinking employment does not necessarily make for less militancy amongst union members and potential union members.

In addition to retaining its strength in traditional areas of activity, COSATU has made new inroads amongst white-collar workers. The federation's "open doors" policy led to the affiliation of the 75,000-strong South African Society of Banking Officials (SASBO) in 1995. SASBO is a predominantly white collar (and white) union, the only such affiliate within the federation. It seems to have a somewhat uneasy relationship with other COSATU unions, and abstained from participating in socio-

<sup>28</sup>J. Waddington and C. Whiston, "Why do People Join Unions in a Period of Membership Decline?" *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35, 4 (1997), 535.

<sup>29</sup>Geoffrey Wood, "Shopfloor Democracy in the Congress of South African Trade Unions," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the South African Sociological Association, Saldhana (1999), 25.

<sup>30</sup>See Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress* (London 1983), 69-71.

<sup>31</sup>See Ari Sitas, "Worker Responses in the East Rand to Changes in the Metal Industry," PhD Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 1988.

economic debates at COSATU's sixth National Congress.<sup>32</sup> Although COSATU remains committed to a policy of "one-industry, one-union," SASBO leaders have made little secret of their hostility to suggestions of a merger with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), which has a significant membership amongst cleaning workers employed by banks.<sup>33</sup>

### *Deregulation and Divisions*

There have been cautious moves towards a legal recognition of a dualistic labour market within South Africa. Newly emerging unions and/or those operating in newly organized sectors do not enjoy the same degree of legal protection as those concentrated in more core areas characterised by a relatively high degree of penetration. In terms of the Act, unions, which gain a certain degree of representivity, are automatically entitled to recognition, and a range of organizational rights (for example, pertaining to shop steward structures and union access to the workplace). As Du Plessis *et al* note, in this context, representativeness can either be viewed in terms of a simple majority, or in terms of "sufficient representation."<sup>34</sup> The latter allows for a union (or coalition of unions) that falls short of the 50 per cent threshold, yet has a significant membership, to be considered representative.

The relevant threshold of representativeness is then applicable to any registered trade union seeking organizational rights at the firm. However, where an industry is covered by a Bargaining Council (a statutory based forum for industry-wide collective bargaining), trade unions that participate thereon are automatically entitled to all these rights, irrespective of their level of support at individual workplaces. In this sense, the system greatly favours established unions that operate in industries covered by Bargaining Councils. The continued existence of a Bargaining Council in an individual industry, however, depends on the support of both unions and employers. Increasingly the latter (and, in a few cases the former) have chosen to opt out, forcing a reversion to plant level bargaining.

Those unions operating in the growing number of industries outside of the ambit of Bargaining Councils have, first of all, to establish a firm presence at the workplace, in order to be entitled to these rights of organization. Above all, it may be in smaller firms, particularly those located on the periphery, that unions may battle to attain the level of support required to conduct basic union business at the workplace.

It should be noted that it might be extremely difficult to ensure that the Act is adhered to in more conservative regions, in components of the agricultural sector, and by smaller employers in the smaller urban centres. Moreover, by designating individual workers as independent contractors, it is possible for firms to opt out of

<sup>32</sup>Malcolm Ray, "Chalk and Cheese: SASBO and COSATU," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 3, (1998), 34-48.

<sup>33</sup>Ray, "Chalk and Cheese," 22, 3, 48.

<sup>34</sup>Johann Du Plessis et al., *A Practical Guide to Labour Law* (Durban 1996), 240.

the Act completely, and avoid having to deal with unions at all. Heavily unionized employers would probably be extremely reluctant to jeopardise an established relationship with a union for an uncertain future — at the time of writing, the bulk of firms that have chosen the “independent contractor” route have been smaller employers and those operating from greenfields industrial sites. Given the political clout of the South African labour movement, it is not likely that, for the foreseeable future, the overwhelming strength of organized labour in the mining and manufacturing sectors will be diluted. It is equally unlikely that individual firms operating in these areas will be able to undercut their competitors through the adoption of labour “unfriendly” policies.

### *Organizational Challenges and the Rise of Splinter Unionism*

In 1994, a number of prominent COSATU leaders were elected to parliament as MPs, by virtue of the federation's alliance with the African National Congress. This represented the start of a “brain drain” of talented union office bearers, ranging from shop stewards to national leaders to both business and government, owing to the changed political climate and the need for affirmative action. In the case of some affiliates, this has led to a “revolving door” situation, characterised by a debilitatingly rapid turnover of officials.<sup>35</sup> Regional and local officials are generally poorly paid, with salaries ranging between R1600 and R4300 per month, and often lack a career path compared to what the state and business can offer.<sup>36</sup> This brain drain has severely weakened the capacity of both the national federation and individual affiliates.<sup>37</sup> This situation has been exacerbated by the perceived remoteness of national leadership,<sup>38</sup> and by the fact that a conspicuous minority of the latter seem to live a highly profligate lifestyle.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst the bulk of unionised employees belong to COSATU affiliates, the latter's hegemony has been somewhat eroded by the proliferation of splinter unions. From late 1996 to May 1997, over 100 new trade unions were registered.<sup>40</sup> Many were the product of divisions within COSATU affiliates. For example, the Mouthpiece Workers Union (MWU) was established following the apparent assassination of at least ten workers at the Amplats refinery. In 1998, the President of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), Abraham Algulhas, and a number of followers were expelled. Whilst CWIU leadership claimed that this was due to organizational

<sup>35</sup>Malcolm Ray, “Will Bigger Be Better?”, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 3 (1998), 66.

<sup>36</sup>T. Filita, “COSATU Marching Forward,” *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 1 (1997), 39.

<sup>37</sup>Sam Shilowa, “Interview,” *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 1 (1998), 49.

<sup>38</sup>*Shopsteward*, October–November 1996.

<sup>39</sup>See, for example, *Mail and Guardian*, 3 July 1998.

<sup>40</sup>Ian Macun and Eddie Webster, “Recent Development in South African Industrial Relations and Collective Bargaining: Continuity and Change,” *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 22, 1 (1998), 42.

bungling, Algulhas alleged that this was due to his membership in the Trotskyist Workers International for the Reconstruction of the Fourth International.<sup>41</sup> The ousted President has now launched his own union, the Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers Union. At roughly the same time, a breakaway grouping of former Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) members formed the South African Food and Allied Workers Union (SAFAWU).<sup>42</sup> Four years earlier, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) also experienced a split, resulting in the launch of the Turning Wheels Union. This split has, again, been variously ascribed to Trotskyist activity or simple incompetence. On the one hand, these breakaways reflect some of the organizational difficulties COSATU has had to contend with, following the loss of some of its most experienced officials. On the other hand, as Ray<sup>43</sup> suggests, this may indicate the limits of COSATU's "one-union, one-industry" policy, and that formal unity has on occasions come at the expense of the interests of important grassroots constituencies.

It should not be presumed that the real divisions within COSATU are those between an implacably radical grassroots, and an increasingly conservative leadership. There is considerable diversity in the attitudes and opinions of rank and file members, with important divisions on regional and gender lines.<sup>44</sup> Internal tensions do exist and may, however, result in certain incoherencies in union policies and actions for the foreseeable future. The unions still represent coalitions of different types of workers, of different organizational traditions, and of both workplace and community activists. This broad bringing-together is reflected at the level of both grassroots and the "commanding heights."<sup>45</sup>

### *Reorganization, Representivity and Transformation*

In response to the challenges of the 1990s, COSATU established the September Commission in 1996. The Commission was entrusted with investigating the present and future role of the unions, and exploring ways in which COSATU could influence events. It argued that the federation's continued prosperity depended on a core of key officials, but that structures of direct accountability also needed to be developed. Hence, all six national officers — including COSATU's President, General Secretary and their deputies — are to become full time officials. At the same time, a new Central Committee is to be established. This committee will be composed

<sup>41</sup>Malcolm Ray, "Dissension or Division: Conflict in CWIU," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 1 (1998), 24.

<sup>42</sup>Malcolm Ray, "Will Bigger Be Better?" *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 3 (1998), 65.

<sup>43</sup>Ray, "Will Bigger Be Better?" 70.

<sup>44</sup>Geoffrey Wood, "Shopfloor Democracy," 11-15.

<sup>45</sup>Geoffrey Wood, "Trade Unions and the Labour Market in South Africa: Current Issues and Future Challenges," in Karl Wolmuth et al, eds., *African Development Perspectives Yearbook: Regional Perspectives on Labour and Employment* (New Brunswick 1996), 89-90.

of both the COSATU secretariat and worker delegations, which, it is hoped, will increase worker involvement in the policy formulation process. At the time of writing, it was unclear if the recommendations would contribute to the bureaucratisation of the labour movement, or indeed, enhance channels of communication.

There has been a tendency over the last twenty years for the membership of South African unions to become increasingly skilled.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, unionized workers can be seen to constitute a relatively fortunate labour market, "insider" grouping, in contrast to less privileged "outsiders," such as temporary employees, the young, and those on the rural periphery. This has led to frequent allegations that the labour movement represents the interests of an elite grouping, who are selfishly pursuing their goals regardless of the long term consequences in terms of employment and economic growth. There is little doubt that the grassroots sentiments expressed at COSATU Congresses reflect some awareness of broader concerns and interests, based on an aggregation of "particularistic aspirations and discontents."<sup>47</sup> This represents both a legacy of the struggle of the 1980s and the fact that most employees are linked to more marginalized groupings through the operation of extended networks of support alluded to above.

Nonetheless, due recognition must be given to the fact that most economically active South Africans are engaged in peripheral work — most notably in the informal sector — and are unlikely to ever be in a position to enjoy organizational rights.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the personal linkages, the South African labour market remains firmly divided between "haves" and "have-nots," who intrinsically have competing interests.<sup>49</sup>

There is little doubt that there has been something of a "loss of innocence" in the labour movement. The labour movement has become a major player on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Easy pickings as a result of pressures for black empowerment may have benefited union pension funds, but they have also led to a number of former union officials accumulating personal fortunes as a result of performance-linked pay packages. This has led to considerable unease within sections of the labour movement, with allegations that such activity represents more speculation than wealth creation, and that it is unlikely to promote a genuine redistribution of wealth.<sup>50</sup> Lipman and Harris argue that "the crunch time has yet

<sup>46</sup>Dave Ginsburg et al., *Taking Democracy Seriously* (Durban 1995), 14-15.

<sup>47</sup>Richard Hyman, "The Future of Employee Representation," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35, 3 (1997), 325.

<sup>48</sup>Geoffrey Wood and Richard Haines, "Eastern Cape Labour Market in Transition," *Koers*, 60, 3 (1995), 1-21.

<sup>49</sup>Wood and Haines, "Eastern Cape Labour Market in Transition," 1-21.

<sup>50</sup>Deanne Collins, "An Open Letter to Johnny Copelyn and Marcel Golding," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 1 (1997), 79-80.

to come: when the interests of union members conflict with those of their new employers," the latter potentially being, indirectly, the unions themselves.<sup>51</sup>

At factory level, however, the unions retain the power to make or break schemes for reorganising work. Early attempts to introduce Japanese forms of participation in the workplace proved stillborn in the teeth of sustained employee resistance.<sup>52</sup> Employee participation schemes, which have been relatively successful, have involved the unions throughout the planning and implementation process, a good example being the Volkswagen "workplace democracy" experiment.<sup>53</sup>

There are, of course, two basic reasons for promoting worker participation: for the sake of enhancing productivity or for the engendering of workplace democracy for its own sake. The relative strength of the South African union movement has meant that these two have had to be conflated, with rather mixed results. For example, the Workplace Forum system, introduced as part of the broadly-negotiated 1995 Labour Relations Act, represents something of a compromise between competing agendas, between the desire to promote South Africa's global competitiveness and to secure a long term role for organized labour. Workplace Forums are consultative bodies, focusing on practical issues such as the organization of work, but not on areas which normally fall within the ambit of collective bargaining, such as wage and wage related issues. In addition, they have a joint decision-making role in areas such as disciplinary and grievance proceedings, unless otherwise regulated by a collective agreement.<sup>54</sup> From the union's point of view, it was hoped that the forums could serve as a new focus of shopfloor organization, given the effects of the above-mentioned brain drain. Forums can only be established through an application to the relevant authority by a representative trade union in a workplace with 100 employees.<sup>55</sup> Workplace Forums are generally popularly elected by employees, with seats being allocated according to the occupational distribution of the workforce.<sup>56</sup> This ensures that workers who are not members of the union — in the absence of a closed shop agreement — also have a say on the Forum. On the one hand, this may lead to demarcation disputes. In other words, employees who, on account of their non-union membership, believe that they are being excluded from the collective bargaining process, may use the Forum as a means of airing their grievances over substantive issues such as pay. This can lead

<sup>51</sup>A. Lipman and H. Harris, "Socialist Hope: Dead and Gone?" *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 6 (1997), 70.

<sup>52</sup>See Sakhele Buhlungu, "Trade Union Responses to Participative Management: A Case Study," MA thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 1997.

<sup>53</sup>Eddie Webster, "Race, Labour Process and Transition: The Sociology of Work in South Africa," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the South African Sociological Association, Johannesburg (1998), 5.

<sup>54</sup>Geoffrey Wood, "Workplace Forums," *Productivity SA*, 24, 3 (1998), 19-23.

<sup>55</sup>Mark Anstey, "Can South African Industrial Relations Move Beyond Adversarialism?" *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 19, 4 (1995), 2-43.

<sup>56</sup>*Government Gazette 16861* (Pretoria 1995), 94.

to the Forum exceeding its brief, or bitter internal disputes over what it should actually be doing. By the time the 1995 Labour Relations Act was implemented, many employers had already begun to experiment with a range of new production concepts involving enhanced employee participation. Of course, mechanisms specifically tailored to the needs of individual plants are inherently more flexible, and may give management a freer hand in reshaping the organization of work.

This, and the fact that sections of the union movement remain uncertain as to the relationship between the Forums and existing bargaining structures, has resulted in the new system getting off to a rather slow start. At the time of writing, only a handful of Forums have been established in South Africa, few in core areas of the manufacturing sector.

### *Political Pressures and Influences*

South Africa's second democratic elections took place in June 1999. As noted earlier, in the 1994 elections, COSATU joined the South African Communist Party (SACP) and ANC in the Tripartite Alliance, headed by the latter. There is little doubt that COSATU's organizational muscle greatly strengthened the ANC election campaign. COSATU's backing was, again, invaluable to the ANC in 1999, despite the weak and divided nature of the political opposition.

There have been periodic suggestions that COSATU may seek to develop a more independent political stance following the next elections, and, even, revisit the question of a worker's party, possibly in conjunction with the South African Communist Party (SACP). Indeed, at COSATU's 1997 Congress, it was resolved to increase ties with the SACP, and to provide the latter with some financial support.<sup>57</sup> During 1997, COSATU's opposition to the government's adoption of the neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) economic policy became increasingly strident. GEAR represented a significant policy shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which served as a major plank in the ANC's 1994 election campaign. The unions played a major role in the formulation of the broadly neo-Keynsian RDP. In contrast, the ANC did not consult its Alliance partners when formulating GEAR, which calls for reduced state involvement in the economy, and a greater reliance on market forces. Since the 1994 elections, the ANC has moved steadily rightward, in response to pressures from the World Bank, the IMF and the business community.

The SACP was equally outspoken in denouncing this rightward shift in the run up to its 1998 Congress. At the latter, President Mandela bluntly informed delegates that members of the Tripartite Alliance who were unhappy with the ANC's recent policy directions should refrain from public sniping, or leave the Alliance.<sup>58</sup> This seems to have rather taken the wind out of the sails of those who were hoping to

<sup>57</sup>D. Sikweba, "COSATU: Advancing, Retreating or Skipping on the Spot?" *South African Labour Bulletin*, 21, 1 (1997), 7.

<sup>58</sup>*Mail and Guardian*, 3 July 1998.

float an independent socialist agenda whilst still within the safe harbour of the Tripartite Alliance. Both the SACP's and COSATU's opposition to GEAR has become much more muted, and the leaders of both organizations have taken great pains to reiterate their support for the ANC-headed Alliance in the 1999 elections. Much vaunted possible alliances between other civil society groupings such as civic associations and women's groupings have yet to materialise. Indeed, COSATU has battled to define clearly its role in the transition.<sup>59</sup> South African elections are, by global standards, rather expensive affairs, making it extremely difficult for a new left-wing party to have an impact on the electoral process, even if it was possible to agree on clear alternative policy alternatives.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, relations between the union movement and the ANC remain close, with an associated weakening in union autonomy, at least when it comes to broad socio-political issues.

Moreover, there is scant support amongst rank-and-file for any move away from the Alliance. According to the 1998 worker survey, over 70 per cent of COSATU members believed that the Alliance was the best way of safeguarding workers' interests in parliament. Even prior to the commencement of the formal election campaign, 63 per cent announced their firm intention of voting for the ANC. Only ten per cent believed that COSATU should form its own "workers' party," whilst some three per cent believed that COSATU should form an alliance with another political organization independent of the ANC. Given the deeply entrenched tradition of rank-and-file accountability within COSATU, the leadership is in no position to ignore such sentiments.

Nonetheless, whilst pledging loyal support for the ANC during the election campaign, relations between COSATU and the ANC took a turn for the worse immediately thereafter. The annual round of wage negotiations between the major public sector unions and the government — conveniently held immediately after the June elections — broke down, leading to a series of demonstration strikes. At the time of writing, the dispute remained unresolved. Both sides, however, have taken care not to turn the dispute into a major trial of strength between the government and the labour movement.

It is clear that many benefits accrue to the ANC from the Alliance. Less immediately obvious is what COSATU gets out of the Alliance. Writing in 1994, Von Holdt suggested that the possibility of "strategic unionism" had emerged, "a labour-driven process of strategic change," building on the COSATU unions' early role as a social movement.<sup>61</sup> Through close links with the ANC, the unions could steer the latter into a more leftward direction than would otherwise be the case. This

<sup>59</sup>D. McKinley, "The Sixth COSATU Congress: Grappling with the Socialist Challenge," *Debate*, 2, 1 (1998), 98-101.

<sup>60</sup>Roger Southall and Geoffrey Wood, "Political Party Funding in South Africa," in Peter Burnell and Alan Ware, eds., *Funding Democratization* (Manchester 1998), 211.

<sup>61</sup>Karl von Holdt, "What of the Future of Labour?," in Eddie Webster *et al.*, eds., *Work and Industrialization in South Africa* (Johannesburg 1994), 306.



would involve an ongoing commitment to radical reform "based on independent labour and popular organisation."<sup>62</sup>

As a result of negotiations between business, the state and organized labour, the National Economic, Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) was established in 1994. This body brought together the statutory National Manpower Commission (NMC) and the autonomous National Economic Forum (NEF), as a forum where representatives from state, business and labour could jointly seek consensus on broad labour and economic policies. One of the first tasks of NEDLAC was, in fact, serving as a negotiation forum for the 1995 Act. Within its structures, NEDLAC incorporates four specialised Chambers — Development; Trade and Industry; Financial and Monetary; and Labour Market — to deal with specific aspects of policy.<sup>63</sup> Underlying NEDLAC is a stated aim for broader "social partnership."<sup>64</sup> In an age where there has been a global trend away from corporatism, NEDLAC represented an explicit step in a corporatist direction. NEDLAC, however, has become increasingly marginalized in the policy formulation process.

More recently, it has been suggested that other national forums such as the Mining Summit and the Jobs Summit have given the unions unique opportunities to shape national economic policy.<sup>65</sup> Despite the rhetoric, the unions have, at this level, been forced, to a large extent, to focus on ameliorating rather than challenging the process of restructuring and deregulation. The latter represents a multi-faceted process that has included the dropping of tariff barriers, reduced state interventionism in the economy, and the transformation of state-owned utilities into commercial enterprises. Nonetheless, even a moderating role would be preferable to the political wilderness, whilst it is clear that the rank-and-file remain heavily committed to the ANC, a deep-seated loyalty that was forged during the years of struggle against the apartheid regime. Whilst the unions may retain some of the characteristics of a social movement, it would be far more difficult to mobilise the rank and file against a democratically elected (and, clearly, popular) government than against an authoritarian state. Again, its links with the ANC would make COSATU very much more attractive to potential members than NACTU, which is aligned to the politically inept (and numerically tiny) Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). To conclude, it seems likely that the Alliance will hold. It should be recognised that there are serious differences between the ANC and the unions. However, there is no reason to believe that they will lead to a rupture, given the interests both sides have in maintaining the Alliance.

<sup>62</sup>Von Holdt, "What of the Future of Labour?" 306.

<sup>63</sup>Louet Douwes Dekker, "Labour Market Flexibility in South Africa: A Preliminary Investigation," *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 19, 2 (1995), 16.

<sup>64</sup>See Douwes Dekker, "Labour Market Flexibility," 16.

<sup>65</sup>See Glenn Adler, "Engaging State and Capital: Labour and the Deepening of Democracy in South Africa," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the South African Sociological Association, Johannesburg (1998).

*The Persistence of Collective Action in a Cold Climate*

Of course, the real question emerges as to whether the persistence and relative prosperity of the South African labour movement in a time of adjustment can be emulated elsewhere, particularly given the general retreat of unions in most of the industrialised world. The easy way out would be to argue that South Africa is a unique case, on account of the specific nature of the apartheid system. Trade unions in several other southern African states - such as Zimbabwe and Namibia - also seem in relatively good health, a particularly remarkable achievement considering the shrinking number of formal sector jobs in these countries.<sup>66</sup> What these countries have in common is a dominant party system, and a lack of credible political alternatives. This, in turn has resulted in unions filling the vacuum by adopting a higher political profile, and by making union membership attractive both to those seeking greater security at the workplace and those in need of a vehicle for expressing their broader economic and political concerns. Above all, this would distinguish southern African unions from those operating in Canada, accounting for the relative dynamism of the former *vis-à-vis* the latter.

South Africa again has a single-party dominant system, albeit one where that party has tended to rely on the organizational muscle of COSATU. As noted earlier, participation in internal COSATU organizational structures seems to be partially dependent on the existence of focused political campaigns, even if many of the newest members may be primarily motivated by concerns of job security. Whether or not the unions can play a major role in shaping state policy, or in the establishment of a credible independent left opposition is, as we have seen, debatable. What is clearer, however, is that the relative strength of organized labour in South Africa is not only a product of South Africa's immediate past, but also of present political realities. Whilst some of the strength of South African unions *vis-a-vis* their European counterparts can be attributed to a history of internal democracy, above all, it is the political context that has allowed the former to assume such a prominent role.

*Conclusion*

In many respects, the South African labour movement remains a force to be reckoned with. Most independent unions have successfully consolidated the gains made during the years of growth. Organized labour has become a powerful political lobby, with South Africa's largest union federation being in alliance with the ruling party. Moreover, contrary to global trends, unions in the manufacturing and mining sectors have increased their penetration, whilst labour legislation has, to date, continued to accord an important role to employee collectives. At the same time,

<sup>66</sup>See Andrew Murray and Geoffrey Wood, "The Namibian Trade Union Movement," in Gilton Klerck *et al.*, eds, *Continuity and Change: Labour Relations in Independent Namibia* (Windhoek 1997).

however, the unions face serious challenges. There is little doubt that few of the independent unions have the internal organizational effectiveness they enjoyed in the early years of their existence. Therefore, it is unclear whether new recruits have the same degree of militancy and commitment as those who joined during the "struggle years" did.

Above all, the unions have yet to develop a clear alternative agenda to the increasingly neo-liberal direction taken by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) a problem that has beset the labour movement globally. Even if they did so, it remains doubtful whether they will ever be in a position to put such an agenda into practice (again a situation that is hardly unique to South Africa). Indeed, it will be extremely difficult for the union movement to affect events to such an extent as to be able to drive an alternative process of transformation to the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxies, even if (given their historical role as a social movement) they are in a stronger position than their North American counterparts to ameliorate some of their excesses.