

# Between Marginalisation & Revitalisation? The State of Trade Unionism in South Africa

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**This article provides an overview of the structure and organisation of the contemporary trade union movement in South Africa. It identifies seven broad trends in the labour market and their impact on the labour movement. It then examines the variety of initiatives by unions to tackle the problems generated by these trends. The article suggests that these initiatives are largely ad hoc and uncoordinated. It concludes that there is a need to go beyond traditional union structures to explore imaginative ways of engagement with the unemployed, the new working poor, their own members, employers, government, the new social movements and labour movements in other countries. However, it suggests that it is premature to pronounce the marginalisation of labour in post-apartheid South Africa. If well-coordinated and prioritised, the revitalisation initiatives identified in the article open up the opportunity for labour to contribute towards the emergence a new job-creating developmental path in South Africa.**

During the 1980s and early 1990s the South African trade union movement emerged as a model of a militant and progressive movement simultaneously improving the wages and working conditions of its members while engaged in a successful struggle for democracy against the apartheid regime (Adler and Webster, 2000; Buhlungu, 2001). However with the transition to democracy and processes of elite formation in post-apartheid South Africa, this combination of workplace and community struggle - labelled social movement unionism - has undergone an 'erosion as solidarity has fractured along new and old lines' (Von Holdt, 2001)

The advent of democracy has opened up new opportunities for the labour movement to both consolidate its organisational gains and to win further concessions from employers and the state. The first of these concessions was the creation of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) in 1994. This was followed by the new Labour Relations Act in 1995, which provided for the right to strike, organise at plant level and created the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). In addition, the new government confronted the legacy of the apartheid regime by introducing a Skills Development Act to accelerate skill development and an Employment Equity Act to provide equal opportunities for previously disadvantaged sections of the workforce. The institutional innovations that flow from this new labour regime created a new terrain for labour.

However, concurrent with these changes, labour was confronted with a new set of challenges arising out of globalisation. In particular, the increasing pressures on the South African economy to compete in the global market in the context of a new work paradigm. This work paradigm encouraged enterprises to distinguish between a core of skilled workers and a growing pool of unskilled, casual and therefore dispensable workers. Thus the transition is paradoxical for labour in that on the one hand, it strengthens the rights of labour, while it erodes them and bypasses the new institutions, on the other.

As a response to this changed environment in 1996 COSATU commissioned a report on the future of trade unionism in South Africa known as the September Commission, after the commission's chairperson, Connie September, COSATU's Vice-President at the time. The report (September Commission, 1997) constituted an important intervention as it was the first systematic analysis of the changing political and economic environment facing trade unionism under the new generation of post-apartheid leaders. The report recommended that in order to move towards a scenario of high growth, COSATU needed to embrace what it described as social unionism. Six years have now elapsed since the release of the September Commission report. In 2002 COSATU began an Organisational Review that culminated in its 8<sup>th</sup> Congress in September 2003. This article is an assessment of the state of the labour movement ten years into South Africa's new democracy.

The need to revitalize the labour movement has been the central focus of a group of labor scholars in recent years. The most extensive research has focused on the reawakening of the American labor movement under new leadership and new strategic directions (Voss & Sherman, 2000; Turner, Katz & Hurd, 2001). At the heart of this revitalisation strategy is an attempt to shift labour away from traditional business unionism to a new 'social movement unionism'.

In this article we engage with the 'revitalisation debate' from a Southern perspective, that is, from a country which has been engaged in a century-long struggle for political liberation and now faces the daunting challenge of overcoming a legacy of under-investment in social and human development. However, unlike labour in the North, the South African labour movement is relatively young and is not subject to the same oligarchic tendencies that animated the revitalisation debate. Thus the challenge of union revitalisation in South Africa and, indeed the rest of the South, entails more than simply trying to strengthen existing union organisations. There is a need to go beyond traditional union structures to explore imaginative ways of engagement with the unemployed, the 'new working poor', their own members, employers, governments, the new social movements and labour movements in other countries.

The article is divided into three parts. First we provide an overview of the structure and organisation of the trade union movement since 1997. Second, we identify seven broad trends in the labour market and their impact on the labour movement. Finally, we examine the variety of attempts to tackle the problems generated by these trends. Our central concern is the impact of the transition in South Africa - both the transition to democracy, as well as the transition to a more competitive and open economy - on labour as an economic, political and organisational actor. To what extent is labour being marginalised in post-apartheid South Africa or has a process of revitalisation begun?

We conclude by suggesting that it is a little premature to announce the marginalisation of labour in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead we identify a range of initiatives that, if well coordinated and prioritised, could reposition South African labour as a key actor in shaping a new job-creating developmental path.

## Structure & Organisations: An Overview

It is important to begin this overview by examining the structure and organisation of the South African labour movement. As illustrated in Table 1 below, currently there are 3.6 million union members in 485 registered unions. Although there was a slight drop in the latest figures, union membership has remained remarkably stable around 3.5 million. It has been estimated that in three sectors of the economy – education, public administration and mining/construction – union density is as high as 60 per cent (Torres, et al. 2001:51).

The structure of the labour movement continues to mirror the past. The first aspect is the large number of unions and union federations. In 2002 there were 16 union federations registered with the Department of Labour (Department of Labour, 2002). Indeed, as Table 1 shows over the last seven years the number of registered unions has nearly doubled, from 248 in 1995 to 485 in 2002. Importantly, many of these unions are small and are struggling to survive. Those that are large tend to be a result of mergers that have taken place over a relatively long period of time.

A second feature of union structure is that the majority of unionised workers are concentrated in a few unions in three federations, as Table 2 below illustrates. In the case of COSATU there are 10 affiliates with more than a 100,000 members each. By contrast, none of the National Council of Trade Unions' (NACTU) 22 affiliates has more than 50,000 members, with many being 5,000 members and below.

**Table 1: Unionised Workers and Registered Unions, 1995-2002**

Year	Registered Unions	Members
1995	248	2,690,727
1996	334	3,016,933
1997	<b>417</b>	3,412,645
1998	463	3,801,388
1999	499	3,359,497
2000	464	3,500,000
2001	485	3,900,000
2002	504	3,600,000

Source: Department of Labour. 2002. *Annual Report*.

**Table 2: Membership of the Largest Labour Federations in SA, 2003**

Federation	Membership
COSATU	1,864,121
FEDUSA	527,628
NACTU	300,000

Source: Compiled from union reports and interviews with key union leaders.

Third, in spite of the growing concentration and coordination of union activities through such institutions as NEDLAC where there is a common labour caucus, the labour movement remains highly fragmented, racially, occupationally, politically and by organisational style as illustrated by Figure 1 over. As Figure 1 shows, COSATU, the largest federation, remains predominantly black, blue collar, politically aligned to the ANC and the SACP and relies on a combination of strategic engagement and militant mobilisation in the workplace and on the streets using traditional tactics such as strikes and stayaways. By contrast, and in spite of its attempts to distance itself from its white staff association image of the past,

**Figure 1: Fragmentation of Labour in South Africa, 2002**

	<b>COSATU</b>	<b>NACTU</b>	<b>FEDUSA</b>
<b>Race</b>	Predominantly black	Black	Majority non-black
<b>Occupational categories</b>	Predominantly blue collar	Blue collar	White collar
<b>Politics</b>	Aligned to ANC/SACP	Origins in Pan-Africanism & Black Consciousness but non-aligned	Non-Aligned
<b>Organisational Style</b>	Mobilisation & lobbying	Lobbying	Lobbying

Source: Based on interviews with key union leaders, August 2003.

Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) continues to draw its membership from the upper end of the labour market, which is predominantly white, coloured and Indian, and white collar. Their largest affiliate, the Public Servants Association (PSA) consists largely of white civil servants from the apartheid era. This federation is non-aligned politically and relies heavily on lobbying to influence the political process. It also emphasises the individual provision of services and benefits for its members.

NACTU, the smallest of the three represents distinct political traditions - Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness - which have not yet found an effective voice in the new South Africa. To some extent their constituency is similar to COSATU's<sup>1</sup> but its organisational style relies on influencing informal political networks. According to NACTU general secretary, Cunningham Ngcukana, the federation sees its role as a 'partnership in transformation' (interview, 11 August 2002) rather than as an oppositional social force.

However, largely as a result of a drop in foreign funding, NACTU has seen 'a steady erosion of its membership and has been forced to close down most of its provincial offices and retrench staff' (Andrew Levy Employment Publications, 2003; *The Star*, 3 September 2003; an interview with Ngcukana, 14 August 2003). The recent formation of Solidarity (previously MWU-Solidarity) in 1997 and the Confederation of South African Workers Unions (CONSAWU) in 2002 mirrors and deepens these divisions.

The fourth feature of union structure is that the federations are driven by their affiliates and therefore exhibit a high degree of decentralisation. The majority of federation structures have limited organisational resources and decision-making lies with affiliates, thus diminishing the capacity of federations to mobilise workers or to exercise any control and monitor the activities of workers. FEDUSA has a small head office staffed by 10 full time officials funded from an annual budget of about R4 million. It has no regional offices or staff. NACTU also has a small head office of 16 officials and two regional offices in Durban and Cape Town. It also means that it is difficult to coordinate and articulate a coherent set of common economic and political policies.

The final aspect of union structure is the strikingly uneven distribution of resources between and within federations. This results in uneven participation in the new labour market institutions that have been created since 1994 such as NEDLAC, the National Skills Authority, and the South African Qualifications Authority, as well as the traditional collective bargaining structures such as bargaining councils. On

the one hand, these unions and federations have relatively large head offices and regional offices. COSATU's 19 affiliates have a combined total of 1 831 full-time officials, with 275 of these in belonging to one union alone, the National Union of Metalworkers Union (NUMSA) (COSATU, 2003).<sup>2</sup> They have regular newspapers or journals, use e-mail for communication and have up-to-date websites. Some of them also have specialised departments focusing on research and union education (see Figure 2 below). COSATU, in particular through the establishment of the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI) in 1992 has access to in-house research expertise. NALEDI employs 13 full-time research staff providing union leadership with up-to-date information on issues such as labour market and economic trends for processes such as the job summits and the NEDLAC policy processes. COSATU has also established a policy unit consisting of seven staff members, one of whom has a PhD in economics and three have masters degrees. In addition, there are five members in the federation's parliamentary office in Cape Town.

By contrast neither NACTU nor FEDUSA has a dedicated research department and both are forced to 'outsource' their research to consultants and labour service organisations. As a consequence these federations often struggle to keep up with the constant demand for inputs on policy on a range of fronts with employers and the state.

A similar inequality exists in the field of union education and training. Only COSATU and most of its affiliates have specialised education departments and full-time education officers. COSATU affiliates have a total of seventy full time educators at national and regional level (COSATU, 2003). In addition, both COSATU and FEDUSA created in 1997 a joint labour education institute, the Development Institute for Training, Support and Education for Labour (DITSELA), dedicated to the design and delivery of trade union education and training programmes. From March 2002 to March 2003 DITSELA trained 3,076 'learners' in a variety of education activities including short courses and advanced courses in organising, labour law, union educators and a leadership course for women. Currently the institute employs 17 full-time staff members and has a budget of nearly R5 million (DITSELA, 2003).

We have suggested that the legacy of past divisions and organisational practices continues to shape the structure of the contemporary labour movement. Is it possible for labour to break from this legacy of fragmentation and potential marginalisation and revitalise its structures? To answer this question we need to examine current trends in the workplace, the labour market and industrial relations.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Resources**

Resources	COSATU	FEDUSA	NACTU
<b>Education Dept</b>	Yes	No; Participates in Ditsela	No
<b>Research Dept</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Internet Usage</b>	Yes	Limited	No
<b>Media (e.g. Newspaper)</b>	Yes	Yes	Came out once, discontinued
<b>E-mail</b>	Yes	Partial + fax	Fax
<b>Mergers</b>	Many	Some	Few

Source: Based on interviews with key union leaders, August 2003.

## Trends in the Restructuring of Work & Industrial Relations

### Changing Structure of the Labour Market

A key feature of the labour market today is a growing informalisation of work, which can be seen in the rapid growth of street vendors and homeworkers in the urban areas. Using the various October Household Surveys (OHS) and the more recent Labour Force Surveys (LFS) a recent report suggests that the informal economy has increased from 965,669 in 1997 to 1,873,000 in 2001 (Devey et al. 2002).

The changing structure of the labour market is creating new divisions between workers and creating organisational dilemmas for the labour movement. These divisions can be conceptualised as shown in Figure 3 below.

As they grapple with the challenges of transition, trade unions face a 'crisis of representation' that involves two dimensions. The first dimension is an external one as trade unions lose their capacity to provide a voice for this 'new working poor'. The rights of a growing number of formally employed workers (Figure 3, Quadrant 1) are increasingly under threat from those workers who are either outsourced into precarious and lower paid jobs (Figure 3, Quadrant 2) or are retrenched and attempt to become self-employed (Figure 3, Quadrant, 3 and 4). For the new working poor, trade union rights do not exist and they have no representation in the new labour relations system. For many in this new social group 'work' does not involve a regular income: in fact for many there are no income at all, but rather 'payment in kind'.

For most of the new working poor their employment status is a temporary one as they oscillate between 'employment', 'self-employment' and 'unemployment'. The official unemployment rate for 2001 was 26.4%, using the narrow definition of unemployment, while the broad rate is 37%, a figure that includes those who are not actively seeking work and are characterised as 'discouraged' workers. This level of unemployment implies a jobless total of 7 million, with more than 40% of the rural population unemployed (Bhorat and McCord, 2003). Unemployment takes its most extreme form amongst African women in rural areas a high of 47.2%. These are the 'truly disadvantaged'. In the context of economic liberalisation and cost-recovery in social services such as health and education, they become a potential constituency for the new social movements whose leaders are regarded by some as 'ill-informed demagogues' (interview, Ngcukana, 14 August 2003).

**Figure 3: The Changing Social Structure of the Labour Market**

Employed			
<b>'Casual'</b>	<b>Quadrant 2</b> Outsourcing Contract workers No benefits	<b>Quadrant 1</b> New work order Team work Participation	<b>Formal</b>
	<b>Informal</b>	<b>Quadrant 4</b> Hawkers Home workers	<b>Formal</b>
	<b>Self-employed</b>	<b>Quadrant 3</b> Formal SMMEs (Small, Medium & Micro Enter prises)	

\* We would like to thank Johann Maree for suggesting this conceptualisation of the South African labour market.

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## **The Internal Crisis of Representation**

The internal dimension of this crisis of representation involves those in Quadrant 1, many of whom have experienced a marked decline in the quality of service provided to members in certain unions. According to a survey of union organisers by NALEDI, a 'central reason for poor delivery of union services to members...(is) the weakness of shop steward structures' (Denga, Yanta and Marie, 2001).

This internal crisis of representation has led, in some cases, to workers breaking away from established unions to form rival ones. Sometimes, as in the case of Workers' Mouthpiece Union, these breakaways have been fueled by ethnic differences, opportunistic behaviour by management, and unscrupulous people who play on the workers' grievances.

The crisis is exacerbated by the fact that union membership today consists of a large number of skilled workers who have different needs to the members of the 1980s. As the NALEDI report argues,

*These members tend to be less trustful of union leadership and are difficult to mobilise into action. The new member challenges the abilities of union organisers, who developed their skills and strategies organising unskilled and semi-skilled workers (Denga, Yanta and Marie, 2001:4).*

In the past the power of unions in the workplace derived from a close relationship between leaders, shop stewards and the rank-and-file. But according to union veteran Bobby Marie today this relationship is being diluted by the emergence of an alternative set of relationships, between union leaders and the new political and economic elite (Marie, 1995:8).

A manifestation of this gap between leadership and the rank-and-file are growing instances of financial mismanagement among the larger unions, such as the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Worker's Union (SACCAWU) and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU). Financial mismanagement, the COSATU Organisational Review report argues, arises from the failure to control expenditure, especially when income declines (COSATU, 2003:27). The extent to which this has led to corruption remains unclear as in some cases it is simply a case of misuse of resources such as cellphones. However, in certain cases it has led to instances of serious corruption, while in others it arises from expenditure on lavish items such as expensive luxury cars, accommodation at five star hotels, and first class air travel.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Introduction of New Human Resource Management Practices**

The traditional system of industrial relations, where wages and conditions of employment are regulated or negotiated collectively, at national, sectoral and enterprise level is under challenge. The parameters have changed and the new global environment is characterised by greater mobility of capital, more autonomy for individual enterprises, and increased competition on wages and labour costs. Employers have adapted to this new environment by restructuring production, establishing new patterns of work organisation and/or by relocating production units. More specifically there is a general trend towards decentralised bargaining at enterprise level. Consequently, there is a move towards individualism, coupled with new strategies to make employees identify more closely with the company.

Trade unions are responding to these new trends in contradictory ways. On the one hand, there is a strong commitment in COSATU to traditional centralized bargaining, a commitment that is reflected in the successful campaigns of several affiliates for sector-wide bargaining. It can also be seen in the new levels of cooperation with management emerging at sector-level through sector job summits. Eight sector level strategies designed to ensure job-creating growth have been developed by labour based research conducted by NALEDI, the COSATU Policy Unit, affiliates and labour service organisations over the past two years (interview, David Jarvis, 15 August 2003).

In contrast to these sector innovations, unions at the workplace level have failed to engage effectively with the new human resource management practices introduced by management. As COSATU argues in its organisational review: 'one of the critical obstacles facing unions is the absence of a COSATU strategy for workplace change' (COSATU, 2003:6).

### **Reconfiguration of the Alliance**

Another trend that continues to shape labour in post-apartheid South Africa is the tripartite alliance between COSATU, the ANC and the SACP. This alliance has been reconfigured by virtue of the transition and especially the move of the ANC into government since 1994. During the late 1980s COSATU was the *de facto* leader of the internal anti-apartheid movement. However, the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and then its success at the polls in 1994 and again in 1999, enabled the ANC to assert its dominance over both the SACP and COSATU. Instead of COSATU and the SACP drawing the ANC into their redistributive politics, the ANC was increasingly drawn into orthodox economic policies, thus marginalising COSATU and the SACP's redistributive programmes (Adler and Webster, 2000).

The dominance of the ANC inside the Alliance increased significantly after the passage of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR) in June 1996. Policy differences within the alliance came out into the open in 2001 as the government attempted to step up the 'restructuring of state assets'. In August 2001 they culminated in a general anti-privatisation strike called by COSATU in the midst of South Africa hosting the third World Conference Against Racism. The ANC National Executive Committee responded angrily in October alleging, in a confidential 'Briefing Notes' document, that an 'ultra-left' tendency had emerged that was attempting to 'transform COSATU into a political formation independent of the ANC' (ANC, 2001:4).

In the wake of this unprecedented, angry and public name-calling, two bilateral meetings were held between COSATU and the ANC on 12 January and 9-10 February 2002. For a while it seemed as if these bilaterals had defused the public conflict and a public statement was made after the second bilateral affirming the common commitment of both parties to the 'National Democratic Revolution (NDR)'. However, since then there were no meetings of the alliance and public mud-slinging occurred once again when COSATU went on another general strike in against privatisation in October 2002.

### **The Rise of New Social Movements**

Running side by side with this political conflict within the alliance, and for the first time in post-apartheid South Africa, a significant challenge from below emerged



from outside the alliance structure. Modelled on the anti-globalisation movement that emerged after the protests in Seattle in 1999 these decentralized new social movements constitute the beginnings of what some have described as a global civil society.

These movements, such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum, and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, emerged in response to the growing commodification of basic social services, such as health, water and electricity (Desai, 2002). The emphasis on cost recovery arises out of the government's macroeconomic policy, which stresses fiscal austerity. Some of these movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign are drawing on the rights-based discourse of the new constitution in order to bring about a shift in power, with an appeal to the Constitutional Court for the provision of anti-retroviral drugs.

### **The Globalisation of Capital**

A key part of workplace change is the process of restructuring of capital through financial deregulation. With the permission of the state, key corporations such as Anglo-American, South African Breweries, and Old Mutual, have shifted their headquarters to London. In addition, parastatals such as TELKOM have listed on the major international stock exchanges, such as the London Stock Exchange and the New York Stock Exchange. Others, such as De Beers diamond mining, have delisted from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, while **EDDIE: WHAT IS GRENCOR? (GRENCOR)** has 'unbundled i.e. decentralised into separate operating units.

### **The Colonial Legacy of Underdevelopment**

South Africa's colonial past continues to impact on the lives of working people through the lack of social infrastructure in the townships and rural villages. Furthermore the white minority continues to dominate all levels of the economy. As part of its attempt to deal with this lack of black economic ownership the government has actively promoted Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). Labour's response to this legacy has been multi-pronged: they have contributed to the development of an industrial policy, they have been actively involved in the sector job summits, they have made important contributions to the Growth and Development Summit in 2003 and some have established union investment companies.

**The decision to set up union investment companies was a dramatic shift in union policy and practice. The growing gap between union leadership and their members allowed the new 'union entrepreneurs' to undertake their investment activities in virtual secrecy. Whatever the explanation for this new development, the age of 'comrade capitalism' has arrived in COSATU. Error! Reference source not found. DON'T KNOW WHERE THIS CAME FROM?! text missing ...**

Today there are more than twenty union investment companies (two of which are currently registered on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange) and there is no turning back although, with the exception of two, they are all struggling (Iheduru, 2001).

### **Strategies of Union Revitalisation**

Unions are clearly overburdened by the multiplicity of demands that are being made on them by the seven trends identified above. There is a sense in which union leaders

are realising the limitations in their responses to the new work order and are searching for new forms of trade union organisation. This includes the need for new organising strategies for new kinds of workers, as well as organisational forms for workers that cross sectors, or organisations that connect with the new social movements emerging outside the workplace. It is to these innovative responses that we now turn.

Over the last decade both federations and unions in South Africa have gone through processes of strategic planning in response to the trends identified above. Arising out of these organisational change processes some have failed to implement new strategies and meet the challenges highlighted in the previous section. They include affiliates in NACTU who have failed to maintain membership of bargaining councils due to lack of representivity or are unable to implement congress decisions on mergers (NACTU, 2001:30). However there are also individual unions in COSATU, such as SACCAWU, which have failed to implement congress decisions (COSATU, 2003).

There are, on the other hand, unions, and indeed federations, that have developed initiatives that have the potential to result in the revitalisation of labour. Revitalisation, Mantashe, general secretary of the NUM argues, is a long process, which involves 'rebuilding brick-by-brick'. In other words, there is no quick turnaround to revitalisation (interview, Mantashe, August 2003).

As we suggested earlier labour world-wide has been engaged in attempts to revitalise itself. In their comparative study of union revitalisation Frege and Kelly have identified six strategies of union revitalisation; an organising strategy that focuses on the acquisition of membership; organisational restructuring that focuses on internal reorganisation including mergers; partnerships with employers; political action; international links; and coalition building with other social movements (Frege and Kelly, 2003:9).

Although all six of the above strategies can be identified in South Africa, labour has also attempted to deal with the colonial legacy of underdevelopment. Below we build on these six and add a seventh development initiative to show how each one is a response to a trend identified in **Section II** above.

### **Membership Recruitment**

A key trend identified in the previous section is the growing informalisation of work. The September Commission report devoted two chapters to the possibilities and pitfalls involved in organising vulnerable sectors of workers. It identified two options for the labour movement. First, that it fails to organise or defend the growing layers of flexible workers, that the unions' bargaining position is undermined, and that it ends up 'being based in a shrinking section of the working class' (September Commission 1997:140). The second option is that it commits itself to organise flexiworkers, and wins a floor of acceptable conditions thus preventing 'flexibility, from undermining workers' rights' (September Commission 1997:140). While the Commission (and COSATU) supported the second option the federation has been less successful in implementing it.

However, NUM has in its recent collective bargaining agreement in August 2003, succeeded in introducing a number of clauses which attempt to regulate outsourcing. First, the primary employer, that is, the mining company has full responsibility for

the contracted worker. Second, the secondary employer, that is, the labour broker who provides the services, must be registered (and must show proof of payment of registration fees). Third, the employer must provide basic coverage for such benefits as retirement or death (interview, Mantashe, 2003). Mantashe believes that employers have begun to realise that outsourcing does not offer a solution to their employment problems.

Innovative activists since the early nineties have been responding 'on the ground' to the changing nature of work. Based on the model of SEWA in India, the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) was formed in Durban in 1994 with the aim of representing the interests of self-employed and survivalist women engaged in the informal economy in the rural and urban areas.<sup>4</sup> ~~delete~~

The South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU) took a formal decision in 1999 to actively recruit informal workers, mainly home workers, but also those informally employed in so-called residential factories (Bennett, 2003). It began recruitment on a pilot basis almost exclusively in the residential areas of Cape Town. Cape Town is a major centre of clothing production and with the introduction of trade liberalisation many workers were retrenched. Industrial homework intensified as a result; 150 trade union members have been recruited on the 'Homeworker Project'.

The clearest case of a union 'reinventing' itself to adapt to the changed circumstances in South Africa is Solidarity.<sup>5/4</sup> In 1990 it expanded its membership to include steel, chemical, electricity and telecommunications. In 1997 it appointed a new general-secretary Flip Buys and new, more professional staff were appointed. In 1998 it removed race from its constitution. At the core of this 'reinvention' was a shift towards a more service-oriented approach to its membership or what could be called 'entrepreneurial unionism'.

### **Organisational Restructuring**

In response to the crisis of representation, all unions have been involved in attempts of organisational restructuring through internal reorganisation and/or mergers. This process, what could be called 'organisational modernisation', is a response to the competing imperatives in a trade union to be 'democratic, on the one hand, and the desire to achieve administrative efficiency, on the other' (Buhlungu, 2001:vi). Buhlungu argues that these tensions are subject to contestation, which takes the form of different approaches to organisational modernisation. He identifies three possible approaches to organisational modernisation, namely entrepreneurial, ideological and career/professional. This can be illustrated through the different responses amongst South African unions and federations.

An example of the first, the entrepreneurial response to the representation crisis, is that of Solidarity but this tendency can also be found in other unions and federations. Indeed the general secretary of COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi, was referring to this tendency when, in an address to the 2003 SAMWU congress, he warned the labour movement that it was under threat from 'opportunism, self centredness and naked careerism' (*Business Day*, 20 August 2003).

An example of the ideological response is the breakaway group in the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU), which emphasises greater accountability of leadership to the rank and file and mass

mobilisation. In a press statement CEPPWAWU accused the breakaway group 'of being members of the leftist anti-privatisation forum (APF) who were trying to impose their political beliefs on union members' (*Sowetan*, 14 May 2003). The breakaway group has demanded a national workers' referendum to decide on the desirability of COSATU's alliance with the ANC. They feel that CEPPWAWU is 'trying to impose the relationship between the ANC and COSATU on union members who are not necessarily ANC members' (CEPPWAWU Shop Stewards of the Wits Region, 2003).

An example of the third response, the career/professional approach, can be found in many of the affiliates in COSATU and Fedusa [what is this?]. This approach tends to emphasise administrative efficiency and functional bureaucratic structures as a key component of revitalisation. Fedusa, as part of a strategy of rationalisation, reduced the number of affiliates from 27 to 21 (interview, Milani, 11 August 2003).

In response to recommendations of the September Commission, COSATU decided in the late 1990s to establish 'super-unions' which brought together existing unions in allied sectors. The rationale was to pool resources to achieve economies of scale in an environment where some sectors of the economy were in decline. Since then at least three super unions have been established in the mining/construction sectors, paper/printing/chemical sectors and the transport/security sectors.

Furthermore, the commission made a strong case for COSATU to 'adopt a systematic and long-term programme for organisational renewal focusing on building effective, democratic and innovative organisation' (September Commission, 1997:173). However, while the report was tabled at the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1997, COSATU 'failed to adopt such a systematic programme of organisational renewal' (COSATU, 2003:9). The main weakness, the report suggests, was that 'the organisational renewal programme was not driven and co-ordinated by the federation and was generally not prioritised by both affiliates and the federation' (COSATU, 2003:9). Against this background, COSATU established an organisational review commission whose recommendations were tabled and discussed at its 8<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2003.

### **Co-operation with Employers**

Since the late 1980s, when management in South Africa companies began to introduce new human resources management, there has been a trend towards developing closer co-operation between unions and employers. This culminated in the establishment of the National Economic Forum in 1992, which later became the National Economic Development and Labour Council institutionalising social dialogue. These co-operative relationships between employers and unions were designed to position companies on the 'high road', a route that emphasises skills through training and co-operative relationships between employers and unions. These ideas are captured in the Workplace Challenge (WPC) initiative, an agreement between the Department of Trade and Industry, trade unions and employers. The main objective of the WPC project is to deal with the challenges faced by industries due to South Africa's re-entry into the global market and to assist industries to be more competitive (NEDLAC, 1997).

### **Political Action**

COSATU believes that there is a tendency within the ANC that is promoting a narrow form of unionism where 'workers are only interested in shopfloor issues'

(COSATU, 2003b:7). In response to the reconfiguration of the Alliance, COSATU has developed a two-pronged programme of political action to recapture working class influence over the ANC. The first prong involves a return to mass mobilisation through the stayaway tactic, a tactic that has been used every year since 2000 over the federation's opposition to privatisation.

The second prong of COSATU's political strategy involves an attempt to recapture the ANC by contesting the hegemony of the right wing within the party. As COSATU president, Willie Madisha puts it, to ensure that 'the bourgeoisie does not run away with this revolution' (interview, Willie Madisha, 14 August 2003). In the words of the 2015 Discussion Document, 'In the current ANC National Executive Committee there is not a single serving trade unionist or an activist of the mass formations' (COSATU, 2003b:17). The document goes on to complain that,

*Once elections are over we go back into the painful reality of being sidelined for another five years. All too often, COSATU's letters do not even get the courtesy of a response, and we are routinely told that 'government must govern, there is no dual power, there is no co-determination, and COSATU must not treat the Alliance as a bargaining chamber' (COSATU, 2003b:18).*

In the words of Joe Nkosi, COSATU's vice president, COSATU's strategy is intended to 're-own and redirect the ANC' (Interview: Joe Nkosi, 13 August 2003). This is in sharp contrast to the strategies pursued by FEDUSA and NACTU which depend almost exclusively on lobbying government officials (see section II above). An important arena for this lobbying process is the Presidential Working Group on Labour where all three federations are represented. In these forums this lobbying approach is sympathetically received and contrasted with that of COSATU's 'confrontational style' (Interview, Chez Milani, 11 August 2003). Which strategy is likely to succeed is a matter for speculation. However, a careful reading of COSATU's documents suggests that if COSATU fails in its strategy to reclaim the ANC it is likely to be drawn closer to the other federations with the aim of creating one powerful federation.

## **Coalition Building**

A crucial question arising from the emergence of the new social movements is whether they will establish links with the labour movement and whether, in turn, the labour movement would like to establish links with them. So far there have been very few formal links, although when mass campaigns have been run quite often many of the participants, such as in the October 2002 stayaway, were drawn from the members of these movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). It is important to stress, however, that many of these movements are more akin to single issue non-governmental organisations, which remain fragile and may not be sustainable.

However, there is a sense in which union leaders are realising the limitations in their responses to this new wave of social activism and are searching for new responses. As Willie Madisha argues,

*COSATU must find ways of pulling the new social movements close to COSATU. It must find ways of working closely with them. COSATU, the ANC and the SACP were involved in the formation of the APF, the TAC and LPM (Landless Peoples' Movement). Now they have abandoned them and see them as an enemy (interview, Willie Madisha, 14 August 2003).*

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that a resolution was passed at the COSATU Congress in September 2003 agreeing to attempt to establish links with the new social movements where it was felt there was common ground between them. This resolution reflects the ambivalence of COSATU towards at least some of the new movements. The divisions between COSATU and some of these new movements are quite sharp, as can be illustrated by the fact that for the first time since 1950 there were two May Day celebrations in major centres in 2003.

### **International Trade Union Links**

As a response to the globalisation of capital, South African unions have become actively involve in the established international trade union organisations such as the ICFTU. Indeed, for the first time in 2000 the ICFTU Congress was held in the South, in Durban. South African unions also remain active in the global union federations (GUF) such as the International Chemical, Mineral and Energy Federation (ICEM) as well as the International Transport Federation (ITF). Many of these GUFs, such as the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Union, have been active in the Southern African region and have successfully organised workers across borders. Although a regional trade union co-ordinating body, the Southern African Co-ordinating Council (SATUCC) exists, it is largely donor-driven and seems incapable of developing any regional campaigns. A particular innovative response to globalisation is COSATU's involvement in SIGTUR, the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights.

### **Developmental Initiatives**

The lack of jobs opportunities in rural areas led the NUM to establish co-operatives after the dismissal of 40,000 mineworkers during the 1987 mineworkers strike. Known as the Mineworkers Developmental Agency (MDA) it evolved from a co-operative into a small business development agency for retrenched miners and their dependents. A number of other unions, including SACTWU and NUMSA, have established co-operatives designed to create jobs.

However, the establishment of co-operatives, as well as the attempt to organise the self-employed, raises conceptual and organisational problems. First, are self-employed workers to be classified as 'workers' or are they are seen as aspiring entrepreneurs? Of course they are not workers in the traditional sense as they do not earn a wage, or when they do earn a wage in a co-operative, it is very small. Furthermore, if they are self-employed they are not employees and therefore do not have an employer to bargain with.

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**Figure 4: Assessment of Revitalisation Initiatives**

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TRENDS	RESPONSES
Changing structure of labor market	<b>Membership recruitment</b>
Crisis of representation	Organizational restructuring
New human resource management practices	Cooperation with employers
Re-configuration of alliances	Political action
The emergence of new social movements	Coalition building
Increasing globalization of capital	International trade union links
Colonial Legacy of Underdevelopment	Developmental initiatives

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## Conclusion

The pressure on unions to identify with the goals of national development, as defined by the new political elite, is considerable under a government elected by all South Africans. In post-colonial Africa, for example, governments have expected unions to play a dualistic role: first, that of sacrificing their 'narrow' interests to the overall demands of national development; and second, the representation of the job interests of the ordinary members. The argument for this reversal of the primary role of unions to be developmental rather than representational has been based on the belief that trade unions represent a small and allegedly privileged proportion of the labor force in Africa (Pillay & Webster, 1991).

The latter assertion is, of course, only partially true. First, as we have argued, one needs to distinguish between those in secure employment and those in precarious employment, what we have described as the working poor. Second, the gap between the employed and unemployed is narrowed through the redistributive mechanisms of extended families. In many households, without this redistribution many families would have no income at all.

Indeed COSATU claims to represent not only the employed, but also the working poor and the unemployed. We have identified seven initiatives that labour has undertaken in order to revitalise itself and to move beyond its existing members and structures to engage with the unemployed, the new working poor, government, the new social movements and labour movements in other countries. It would be premature to conclude whether these initiatives are succeeding. However, what is clear is that these initiatives are largely ad hoc, inchoate and uncoordinated. This, we have argued in **Section 1**, is partly the result of the structure of the labour movement in South Africa, which retains much of the fragmentation that it inherited from the past. In particular, the fact that the federations remain affiliate-driven and decentralised makes it difficult for South African unions to develop and implement a coherent revitalisation programme. The result is to reproduce the same zigzagging, or as it was picturesquely described by the September Commission as the *skorokoro* option, with growing fragmentation and a strong culture of self-enrichment. These contradictions in union practices are most clearly captured in the deeply problematic involvement of trade unions in the stock market, what we have called 'comrade capitalism'.

But it would be premature to announce the marginalisation of labour in post-apartheid South Africa. There are critics who argue that the days of organised labour are numbered and that the decline of the industrial working class is irreversible (for example, Castells, 1996). In stark contrast, there are others who see the decline of labour as a phenomenon essentially associated with the developed industrialised North. They point towards the rapid spread of fordist-type production in parts of the South, such as China, and see the re-emergence of traditional labour (see Silver, 2003). Our approach is that neither of these extremes reflects the state of labour in South Africa, as the industrial base of the economy remains relatively strong. However there are trends, such as the growth of the service sector and the informal economy, that demand new forms of organisation by labour. We have identified some of these revitalisation initiatives which open up the opportunity, if well-coordinated and prioritised, for labour once again to shape a new job-creating developmental path in South Africa.

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### **Endnotes (need to cross-check with text/jan) funny fonts!**

1. One significance in constituency is the presence of the union for black journalists, the Media Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA). Another historic difference is the existence of a small but influential group of white officials in COSATU (Buhlungu, forthcoming) and their absence in NACTU.

2. It should be noted that statistics on the actual number of unions and the membership of each union remain fluid. For example at the September 2003 Congress COSATU's affiliates had increased to 21.

3. Some visiting overseas unionists have expressed shock at this blatant display of conspicuous consumption in the context of widespread poverty. Of course we are not suggesting that this is the norm amongst unionists in South Africa. But the failure to sanction those individuals who do use the system gives the impression that it has become part of individual enrichment and display of power, which has been observed. Indeed, as the ex-general secretary of COSATU boasted recently, 'I was driving a Jeep Cherokee while still general secretary of COSATU, just as I had a better house then than now' (*The Star*, 12 June 2003) He is now the premier of Gauteng.

4. Formerly the conservartive whites only Mynwkers Unie. It changes its name and constitution in 1997 to open membership to other races and categories of workers. However, the union remains essentially white.

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