

South African unions: *still growing?*

IAN MACUN* examines the dramatic growth in union membership during the '80s and the changing patterns emerging in the 1990s.



During the 1980s, South Africa was one of the few countries where unions grew very rapidly. Trade union membership increased from little more than 700 000 in 1979 to over 2,7 million in 1991.

This was despite

poor economic conditions, a repressive political climate and harsh, conflictual industrial relations. Membership climbed most steeply in the "progressive unions" – those that today are affiliated to COSATU and NACTU. Indeed, COSATU was by far the fastest growing union federation in the country, if not in the world. However, recent reports have pointed to a membership decline in certain key COSATU affiliates during the early 1990s.

This article looks at the factors which shaped the massive growth of the 1980s and those likely to play a role in the future.

Measuring union growth

Union growth generally refers to the change in

the number of union members. This can be measured in two ways:

- in overall terms, by looking at the actual number of union members, or
- in relative terms, that is, the number of union members as a percentage of the number of potential union members. This measurement is commonly referred to as union density.

An accurate assessment of union growth needs to look at both these measures, as they convey different information. For example, employment and actual union membership may decrease while union density increases.

Union growth is not only about numbers. It also raises issues of union representivity, influence and power. The relationship between numbers and power is not clear cut. It is wrong to assume that strong, militant unions inevitably attract many workers and thereby increase the power of such unions. At most it can be said that union growth and union power are significantly related. If nothing else, growth is a necessary condition for union power.

Growth in the 1980s

Prior to 1979, there was little substantial growth among established (racially based, registered) unions; total membership increased

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from 400 000 union members in 1956 to 701 758 in 1979. The dramatic increase in membership is really a feature of the 1980s (see Table 1).

unions; 33% of the total membership of all registered unions. By the end of 1991, COSATU membership stood at 1 258 853 in 14 affiliated unions (46% of total membership).

COSATU's membership is unevenly distributed. By far the largest proportion is concentrated in the manufacturing division, followed by mining (see Table 2 for a rough breakdown).

Employment has not increased significantly within the manufacturing sector. Between 1985 and 1991 the total numbers employed remained relatively constant at around 1,43 million. Black employment, however, increased slightly from 1 108 486 in 1985 to 1 116 618 in 1991.

Despite relatively stable employment levels, membership rose rapidly within COSATU affiliates organising in manufacturing – CWIU, FAWU, NUMSA, PPWAWU and SACTWU. Jointly, their membership grew from 147 672 in 1985 to 672 951 in 1991, a growth in union density from 10% to

48% of the total workforce in manufacturing.

COSATU has few white members. Union membership in relation to black employment therefore shows even more dramatic growth, with union density increasing from 13% in 1985 to 60% in 1991.

It should also be noted that growth within manufacturing has been uneven. Some COSATU affiliates, FAWU for example, grew rapidly in the late 1980s, while others, for example CWIU, grew much more slowly.

The very substantial growth of unionisation in manufacturing during the 1980s and the relatively high union density, particularly among black workers, distinguishes South Africa sharply from other advanced industrial countries, where the public sector often has the highest union density.

However, COSATU's growth in manufacturing shows signs of levelling off. Between 1988 and 1989, 163 590 workers joined COSATU affiliates in the manufacturing sector, whereas between 1990

**TABLE 1:
EMPLOYMENT, UNION
MEMBERSHIP AND DENSITY 1979-90**

Year	Employment (non-agric)	TU membership	Density (%)
1979	4 579 900	701 758	15.32
1980	4 812 968	808 053	16.78
1981	5 026 935	1 054 405	20.97
1982	5 132 001	1 225 454	23.87
1983	5 056 366	1 273 890	25.19
1984	5 117 321	1 406 302	27.48
1985	5 036 935	1 391 423	27.62
1986	5 066 287	1 698 157	33.51
1987	5 141 993	1 879 400	36.55
1988	5 225 950	2 084 323	36.55
1989	5 261 531	2 130 117	40.48
1990	5 282 552	2 458 712	46.54
1991	5 137 849	2 718 970	52.92

Not only have unions grown in absolute terms post 1979; there has also been substantial growth in the density of union membership. By the end of the 1980s, with a union density of around 40% (and still growing), South Africa was similar to countries such as West Germany (42%), Italy (45%), the Netherlands (37%) and the UK (52%).

Unlike in South Africa, union density in many advanced industrial countries dropped from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. In some countries, such as the USA, UK, Netherlands and Italy, union density decreased by between six and seven percent. This was due to a drop both in the number of union members and the number of people employed.

The COSATU story

Within the overall South African picture, it is useful to look at the position of COSATU – the largest grouping of organised workers in South Africa. At the time of its formation in late 1985, COSATU had 462 359 members in 33

TABLE 2:

ECONOMIC DIVISIONS, EMPLOYMENT AND COSATU MEMBERSHIP BY MAJOR AFFILIATES, 1991

DIVISION	EMPLOYMENT	MEMBERSHIP	COSATU AFFILIATES
Mining	608 486	269 622 (44%)	NUM
Manufacturing	1 418 722	676 570 (48%)	CWIU, FAWU, NUMSA, PPWAWU, SACTWU
Electricity, gas & water	46 650		
Construction	378 800	30 123 (8%)	CAWU
Wholesale & retail	785 926	96 628 (12%)	SACCAWU
Transport	342 275	91 034 (27%)	TGWU, SARHWU, POTWA
Financing & insurance	189 340		
Community, social & personal services	1 304 250	94 876 (7%)	NEHAWU, SADWU, SAMWU

Source: SA Labour Statistics, 1992 (CSS) and COSATU Secretariat Report 1992

Notes:

1. Agriculture is excluded and the employment figure represents a total for all racial groups, taking December or fourth quarter figures.
2. The percentage in column 3 represents COSATU members as a proportion of total employed in the sector.

and 1991, 91 233 workers joined. In other words, while COSATU continued to grow in manufacturing up to 1991, it has been growing much more slowly.

In the last two years, these trends have continued. NUMSA recently reported that its membership had declined in absolute terms – from almost 281 000 in 1991 to 238 000 in 1993 (NUMSA 1993 report). This sharp drop has gone hand-in-hand with declining employment levels in the metal industry and may not mean decreased union density. By contrast, COSATU's two major affiliates in the public sector, NEHAWU and SAMWU, are

growing dramatically. In 1991, their membership (jointly) was 67 000; in 1993 it stood at over 115 000.

COSATU's growth during the 1980s can be contrasted with the gradual decline of the exclusively white trade unions, whose membership dropped from 350 000 in 1981 to approximately 235 000 in 1990.

Explaining union growth in the '80s

It is often assumed that the absence of black political rights in South Africa has caused workers to join unions in large numbers. While there may be some truth in this, it is not clear

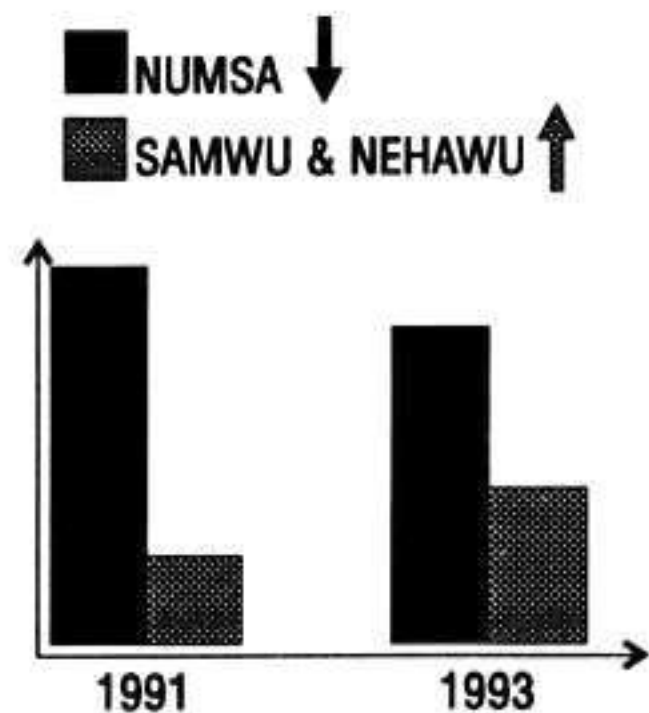
UNION MEMBERSHIP - A CHANGING PICTURE

During the 1980s:

- total union membership rose from 800 000 to almost 2,5 million
- the progressive unions grew especially rapidly

In the 1990s:

- = Manufacturing unions are struggling to maintain members, eg. the giant metal union NUMSA has seen membership decline from 281 000 (1991) to 238 000 (1993)
- = Public sector workers are unionising, eg. two COSATU public sector unions (SAMWU & NEHAWU) have seen their combined membership almost double from 67 021 (1991) to 115 249 (1993)



how important political issues have been in union growth. There was no especially big increase in union membership between 1984-1985, when the mobilisation accompanying the massive labour-led stayaway in the Vaal triangle might well have attracted workers to join unions. On the other hand, when the state was in a particularly repressive phase from mid-1986, union membership did, in fact, increase quite substantially.

Moreover, to argue that political conditions and political unionism were a major influence on union growth implies that workers have a primarily political motivation for joining unions. It could just as well be argued that many workers' political ideas and motivations are more likely to be shaped once they have joined a union, by the union's organisational activities. In short, the union movement's political character and the political conditions facing workers during the 1980s could have facilitated union growth, but were not necessarily the major reasons why unions grew so rapidly during this period.

Organisational and economic factors are more likely to have been particularly important in union growth. As the most substantial membership increases have been amongst the progressive, non-racial unions, the organisational factors that have contributed to rapid growth have been mainly those of leadership and union mergers/consolidation. As Erwin and Morris argue, leadership after 1973 "proved capable of holding unions together and of evolving strategies which were successful in resisting employer and state repression".

In the early 1980s, unions grew in spurts and spread from sector to sector, rather than advancing in all sectors simultaneously and at a similar pace. This growth pattern is determined to a significant extent by union leadership and their particular strategies.

Leadership as a factor in union growth applies at both national and local levels. In South Africa, the development of shopsteward structures, which acted as local leadership, has been particularly significant in ensuring union growth during the 1980s. Erwin and Morris

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have pointed out that an active shopfloor leadership was key to effective recognition battles and, by offering a democratic alternative to the established, registered union movement, attracted workers to the progressive unions.

The consolidation of trade unions during the 1980s, principally through the formation of COSATU and NACTU, gave an added spurt to union growth. COSATU's merger policy, according to Baskin, created unions "which were stronger numerically and organisationally, and better able to make rational use of their resources and personnel. Strong, nationally organised industrial unions were the foundation for both a quantitative and qualitative growth in membership."

Economic factors have also played an important role. There is a clear correspondence between union growth and increases in the Consumer Price Index during the 1980s. From 1985 to 1991, the shape of the curve in the graph of union membership mirrors that for prices almost exactly. Further, real wages for black workers rose during the 1980s and can safely be assumed to be significant in the growth of unions.

While increasing prices could be said to lead workers to unionise to defend their standard of living, so workers also join unions to improve

that standard. Workers may expect unions to raise money wages regardless of what is happening to prices. During the 1980s, therefore, both price increases and unions' ability to raise wages acted as positive influences on union growth.

In summary, union growth was facilitated by the legal reforms which 'legitimised' black unions after 1979 and by the political conditions of the time. But it was driven by a combination of organisational and economic factors. The most important factors causing rapid union growth during the 1980s are probably those associated with the socio-economic status of black workers and the particular organisational features of the progressive unions. The organisational character of the progressive unions has probably affected union growth more than the political character.

Prospects

What are the prospects for union growth in the 1990s? Overall union membership and density are likely to continue to increase, but at a slower rate than during the 1980s. The recent slowdown in union growth in manufacturing probably points the way to overall union growth in the future.

Future union growth may also assume a more



cyclical pattern, showing upswings and downswings in membership, rather than a steady upward growth. This does not necessarily mean that the overall growth trend will suddenly be reversed. Recent reports pointing to a membership decline within COSATU (see SA LABOUR BULLETIN, Vol 17 No 1) are probably identifying a short-term, downward fluctuation in membership rather than a change in the trend of union growth. Overall growth will, however, depend on increasing unionisation of workers outside the manufacturing sector and the lower skill categories of the workforce.

Retrenchments and job loss may cause a conflicting picture to emerge – declining union membership accompanied by increasing union density. This trend is likely across all sectors of the economy and will certainly be significant within manufacturing and mining. As union density increases, unions may face a 'saturation' effect; that is, the larger the percentage of workers in an industry belonging to unions, the more difficult it becomes to further increase union membership. This occurs partly because there are fewer workers left to recruit and partly because those who are left may be less willing to become union members.

While the continuation of a positive trend in overall union growth and density is likely, at least in the medium term, the factors determining growth are becoming more complex and less predictable. Adverse economic conditions are likely to make workers continue to join unions, but they will also make it increasingly difficult for unions to secure the material benefits their members expect.

The unions themselves have been undergoing changes that may make it difficult to sustain membership growth. Key unions in COSATU appear to be facing serious leadership and organisational problems which may impact negatively on future growth (see Bobby Marie's article in SA LABOUR BULLETIN vol 16 no 5). Moreover, national political and economic negotiations are placing an additional burden on union resources and on

national and local leadership. The organisational factors (particularly leadership) that were so important to the growth of unions in the 1980s may thus be less significant in affecting union growth in the 1990s.

The influence of political factors will certainly be more complex and it is difficult to predict any positive influence on union growth. Clearly the political conditions of the 1990s are quite different from those of the '80s. The ANC, PAC and SACP will arguably start having a more direct effect on the lives of South Africa's workers as the decade progresses. If nothing else, workers will in future have a greater choice in how they act to affect their material circumstances; unions will no longer be the only avenue.

A new form of government, more sympathetic to the interests of labour, could benefit employed workers in various ways. The inevitable change in union-state relations could well lead to a situation in which union federations are able to pass on benefits to the working class via national policy initiatives, rather than having to rely on company and industry-level bargaining, as has been the case up to the present. This could result in unions losing some of their immediate appeal to workers.

It is ironic that while labour legislation and changing political conditions are becoming more favourable to progressive South African trade unions, their development and growth faces a range of new challenges. The growth of trade union membership can no longer be imagined as a steady upward trend. If growth is to continue, the unions will have to embark on new strategies. They will need to experiment, take risks, and make carefully weighed choices.

References

- I would like to acknowledge, with thanks, the research assistance of Andrew Frost. Recent figures on membership in NUMSA and the public sector were supplied by Jeremy Baskin.
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