



Have Trade Unions Become Irrelevant?

1. Introduction

On 8th November 2014, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), South Africa's largest single trade union, was expelled from trade union congress COSATU after 27 years of membership. The separation was quite fractious and ended up with the courts finally ruling that NUMSA could not force COSATU to convene a congress (at which NUMSA had hoped it would be reinstated and COSATU's relationship with the ANC and the government would be redefined). The breakup stemmed from several resolutions taken by NUMSA, including that of refusing to support the ANC in the 2014 national elections, even though COSATU as part of the Tri-Partite Alliance had agreed to support the ANC financially and politically.

It is obvious from the various issues among trade unions that the sector is not doing well, and that it is undergoing serious realignment and upheaval. From the Marikana conflicts between AMCU and the NUM, which lead to the death of some union members allegedly at the hands of other unionists, to the hostility between COSATU and NUMSA, the organisations appear to be turning on each other. The Marikana tragedy also highlighted the fact that the trade unions are not fighting the same battles. The proliferation of unions in general, sometimes even in the same sector or the same company, and the lack of cooperation between the various federations and trade unions also points to a very unsettled sector.

With all these issues going on, what is especially striking is that trade union membership is declining. Even more than that, confidence or trust in trade unions is also in serious decline.¹ Taken together, these factors raise the question of whether trade unions have become irrelevant or even obsolete.

2. A History of Conflict

Trade unions in South Africa are not new to conflict. When the country's first trade unions were started in 1881 and after, they were for white workers. At the turn of the century, coloured and Indian labour organisation took place, especially from 1913, but African workers never really organised seriously until around 1919. This racially divided nature of trade unions would remain to a greater or lesser degree until the 1980s, with the formation of COSATU. The racial segregation among trade unions persisted because the mainly white trade unions often colluded with owners of industry to reserve positions and privilege for white workers. An example of this was the 1918 agreement when white mineworkers persuade the Chamber of Mines to agree that no position filled by a white worker should be given to an African or Coloured worker.

These historical events and ideas are crucial because to some extent they still play themselves out in the present trade union scene. Trade union Solidarity for instance, though it asserts independence from any political party, still sees itself as a defender of the rights of racial minorities.² This has meant that the trade unions still reflect many of the political issues and social fault-lines of the day.

Into this mix, there are professional and class fault-lines that divide trade unions, with some deliberately disassociating themselves from the more militant and mass-based unions, and some which align themselves with the ANC/COSATU alliance being at odds especially with the newer and more militantly socialist unions such as AMCU.

Some have argued that the state's reaction through the police to what were perceived as threats by AMCU was not just an attempt to

restore order in the mines, but also a reaction to perceived threats to mining economic policy. They suggest that the state reacted partly from the perception that such unions are pushing the agenda of the Democratic Socialist Movement and other radically left-wing interests that allegedly seek to destabilise the mines³.

So, are these trade unions simply workplace manifestations of wider political forces, or do they actually make a difference to workers; and are they still relevant to society? What about those who are unemployed? Are their voices heard in these trade union spaces?

4. Organising the Unemployed

There are various attempts at organising the unemployed, with the appearance of the Unemployed People's Movement, based mainly in Durban and Grahamstown, and which collaborates with other poor people's movements such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo*.

However, when it comes to the greater masses of the unemployed, trade unions are often criticised for fighting for higher wages for those already employed, thereby supposedly closing the door on those that are unemployed. The argument is that if wages were kept low, then more people would be employed. This fight is a long and historical one, and at the end of the day, irrespective of the ideology one holds, the ideal is to strike a balance between having more people employed while at the same time ensuring that employees actually receive fair wages that they can actually live on.

5. The Unions Are Bleeding

There seems to be consensus that most trade unions have been a great force for change in the workplace and the country. But it seems that for most people this refers to the unions' historical role; their present and future role is less certain.

In an HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) study presented by Steven Gordon at the CPLO roundtable on trade unions recently, the results show the public's dwindling trust and confidence levels in trade unions. The fall in trust levels is not only among people outside of the unions, but also among members of unions themselves. Public trust in the unions had fallen from 43% in 2011 to 29% in 2013 and the trend was a downward one.⁴

At the same discussion the commentator and writer, Terry Bell, gave a worrying prognosis for the future of employment as the world changes and technology replaces workers. Mr Bell argued that it seems as if the movement towards a post-employment society is inevitable as no one is really facing up to the future where unemployment becomes more and more normal and prevalent.

6. Unions Are Still Necessary

Speaking at a the same roundtable discussion, member of parliament and labour lawyer Michael Bagraim commented that while, in his view, trade unions were not taking workers seriously and were really not doing their work properly, he nevertheless agreed with all the speakers that trade unions were indispensable to a balanced economic environment. He was reflecting a view held by many that indeed trade unions and trade unionism in general are facing a lot of challenges, but in the present economic system trade unions were not only relevant but necessary. Their role was based on the need for balance in the tussle between employers and employees, but if they failed to fulfil that role properly, they would continue to lose members and be pushed towards becoming irrelevant.

7. Conclusion

Three things seem quite clear. First of all, it is clear that trade unions cannot assume that they can continue to do things as they were done in the past. The relationships with political parties cannot be assumed anymore; instead, there needs to be reflection on what and how these relationships should be. The second issue is that until trade unions respond to the needs of the community, and not simply to their own partisan interests, and until they are seen as institutions acting with integrity, they will continue to bleed membership and relevance. Finally, though many within market economies like South Africa still hold on to arguments by F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman that trade unions distort economic markets, most people, even those who might not like trade unions themselves, do recognise the need for human collective solidarity especially for the protection of the right of the poor and the weak in any economic system. As long as there is economic activity where collectives of one sort or another are involved, with control and benefits being negotiated, unions will always be necessary

as a fundamental expression of the need for human collectives to work together for justice, especially in the economic context.

In many ways the state of the trade union sector is simply another reflection of the state of South African society.

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¹ <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/labour/2013/10/22/sas-unions-bleed-members-on-loss-of-trust>

² On 28th September 2014 Solidarity announced that it had lodged a complaint with the UN about the South African government and what it termed its 'failure to report' on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. It claims that it is opposed to affirmative action because the policy is against the constitutional values of non-racialism, and discriminates against minorities. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/party/solidarity-to-complain-to-un-over-racial-discrimin> Though it is identified as primarily pro-Afrikaans and not pro-white, some have criticised that claim as an attempt to hide racial preference as cultural preference.

<http://opinieplatform.co.za/2015/05/02/solidariteit-moet-bruin-nederlandse-vakuums-vul/>

The union also claims to be different on the premise that it is a Christian union based on a Christian value system. Note that some other trade unions might not profess to be following Christian values but might incorporate these in their ethos, like the National Teachers Union, NATU, which in its 'teacher's pledge' asks "the Almighty, and those great teachers who went before me lead, guide and strengthen me so that I may uphold this pledge until I join them in eternity". It would be worthwhile to see whether such religious identifications actually make any difference to their behaviour.

³ <http://socialistparty.ie/2013/08/south-africa-one-year-after-the-marikana-massacre/>

⁴ <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/hsrc-review-march-2013/the-state-of-the-union>

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