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See book for list of references

Introduction

A central theme that recurs in many chapters in this volume is the changing role that COSATU now plays in the post-apartheid political dispensation. The systemic political and legislative reforms ushered in by the ANC in the 1990s were designed not to usher in a socialist society, the ardently-desired goal of many union activists in the 1980s (Lewis, 1986; Pityana and Orkin, 1992), but a deracialised and stable capitalism (see McKinley and Lehulere, this volume). The essential conditions of labour subordination therefore remain, only now overlain at a national level with a social democratic political structure with a black complexion. This structure has taken the form of a corporatist political arrangement centred on the Tripartite Alliance and NEDLAC. Tripartism has yielded the unions certain historical gains, including the passage of relatively progressive labour relations legislation, including some elements of the *Labour Relations Act 1995*, the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 1997*, the *Employment Equity Act 1998*, and the *Skills Development Act 1999*. As a result of this legislation, trade unions have now achieved what Gramsci (1919) called 'industrial legality', whereby the restrictions on managerial arbitrariness mark a historical advance for trade unions. In many respects, therefore, the institutionalisation of unions that occurred in the 1990s is a significant gain for the black workers of South Africa who were denied any role in the old political order.

The question that is tackled in this chapter is whether these gains have come at the price of neutering much of the dynamism that made the federation such an explosive force for change in the 1980s. Specifically, can COSATU and its affiliates continue to be regarded as a model of social movement unionism (SMU), which comprises the following elements: mass mobilisation of members; internal democracy; broad social objectives; alliances with progressive social movements; functional independence from political parties; and recognition of diverse membership (Lambert and Webster, 1988; Waterman, 1993, 1999; Scipes, 1993; Seidman, 1994)? Or, have the processes of bureaucratisation and

routinisation evident in most Western unions after their initial explosive growth period (Webb and Webb, 1920; Lester, 1958; Michels, 1962) now become dominant?

The continued existence of social movement unionism as a moving force in South African unions has been debated by many commentators. Much of it suggests that SMU has survived, albeit in a modified form. Hirschsohn (1998), for example, while suggesting that it is 'premature [in the late 1990s] to assess whether COSATU still exemplifies SMU' (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 661), favours on balance a relatively 'optimistic' assessment. Hirschsohn admits several potential or actual problems affecting the continued survival of SMU in COSATU. These include organisational problems arising out of rapid growth and incorporation into centralised bargaining and economic policy making, the 'brain-drain' of leaders evident from shop stewards to general secretaries, declining participation levels by rank and file members, the transformation of representative structures to mere conduits of communication, and the steady erosion of worker control over policy issues (Hirschsohn, 1998, pp. 660–1). While some of these, Hirschsohn believes, are inevitable accompaniments of the growth of the federation, the end of the struggle against apartheid, and the need for 'bureaucratisation and professionalisation… to serve members efficiently' (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 661), COSATU does face potential problems. According to Hirschsohn, '[I]f links with local communities disintegrate and COSATU narrows its social agenda to focus just on labour issues' it will simply 'mature into an independent form of political unionism' common in the West (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 662). If, furthermore, worker control and membership participation falls away, this would 'signify the degeneration of SMU into a form of political unionism potentially captive of political forces' (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 662).

While recognising the danger of COSATU's mutation into more conventional forms of political unionism, Hirschsohn (1998) appears to favour an interpretation that SMU is still intact in its essentials, using for evidence the 1994 survey of more than 600 COSATU members by Ginsburg and Webster (1995) which found evidence of worker control over shop stewards and a vibrant democratic and participative culture at grassroots level. Hirschsohn (1998) suggests, furthermore, that SMU may be advanced in the South African context by the federation's adoption of 'strategic unionism', combining 'negotiation inside the institutionalised political and industrial relations framework and collective action outside' (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 662). This, he suggests, takes SMU 'a step further' – 'whereas SMU involves mobilization around a common set of demands,

strategic unionism requires commitment to a coherent developmental vision and a program of economic, social and political transformation' (Hirschsohn, 1998, p. 660).

Ginsburg and Webster's (1995) study was replicated four years later by Wood and Psoulis (2001), who suggest that COSATU affiliates have been 'able to check oligarchic tendencies' and that 'the overwhelming majority of COSATU members continue to actively participate in the internal democratic life of their unions' (Wood and Psoulis, 2001, p. 300). The result is that 'COSATU has thus reaffirmed its social movement role' (Wood and Psoulis, 2001, p. 310). The study finds, *inter alia*, widespread involvement in strike action (66 per cent of respondents reported having taken strike action on one or more occasions since 1994, a figure rising to 85 per cent in manufacturing), regular attendance at union meetings (71 per cent reported attending meetings more than once a month, only a small drop from the 76 per cent in the 1994 survey), support from other unions during strikes (31 per cent), a strong interest in party political matters, and a willingness to take 'mass action' in the event that the Government does not deliver on its promises. The result, according to Wood and Psoulis (2001, p. 310), is that COSATU 'remains one of the most effective trade union federations in the world'.

Similar to Hirschsohn (1998), Adler and Webster (1995) point to problems increasingly evident within COSATU and its affiliates since onset of political transition in the early 1990s. One is the breaking of the mandate principle, as peak union representatives increasingly strike deals with employers and government representatives without referral back to members. The second factor is 'a growing gap between leadership and the base' (Adler and Webster, 1995, p. 96), with locals turning into 'the passive recipients of the national directives', and the decline of the motivating union vision (Marie, 1992). Third is the domination of the ANC within the Tripartite Alliance (Adler and Webster, 1995, p. 98). They conclude that 'if the labor movement does not address the problems head on, it … runs the risk of bureaucratisation and co-option, with its power – historically based on its capacity for disciplined mobilization – slowly ebbing away' (Adler and Webster, 1995, p. 99). Nonetheless, they too point to the Ginsburg and Webster (1995) survey as evidence that any further tendencies in this direction will be met by stiff resistance from members as 'the principles of radical reform remain deeply embedded in the culture of the organization [COSATU]' (Adler and Webster, 1995, p. 98).

Other writers are more doubtful that much remains of SMU within COSATU. Incipient trends towards demobilisation evident even before the fall of apartheid (Keet, 1992; Marie, 1992; Rees, 1992) have since 1994

become fully fledged (Gall, 1997; Bezuidenhout, 1999; Clarke and Bassett, 1999). There is a variety of evidence pointing to the weakening of many of COSATU's original organising principles. One is the question of union demands, and the way in which they have been re-framed and fundamentally changed in the process. For example, one of the key union demands in the 1980s was for worker control. This involved not just fighting over 'manning' rates of equipment, dealing with noxious fumes and excessive heat, but also driving out racist supervisors and managers. Since the early 1990s, however, the demand for control at work has been increasingly channelled into involvement in industry restructuring committees modelled explicitly on the Australian experience in the 1980s. COSATU affiliates have in the past decade increasingly taken responsibility for cutting costs at work in an attempt to achieve international competitiveness for the South African business sector. NUMSA has been a leading proponent of this strategy since the early 1990s, but other unions have also moved in this direction (Desai, 1995; von Holdt, 1995; Maree and Godfrey, 1995; Catchpowle *et al*, 1998, Rachleff, 2001).

Likewise, the labour reforms of the mid-1990s have allowed the black unions some influence over terms and conditions of employment and rights to organise, but, some writers suggest, this has been matched by a retreat from a frontal challenge to the employer 'right to manage' to an acceptance of the needs of productivity and competitiveness under the rubric of 'strategic unionism' (Gall, 1997; Barchiesi, 1999).

The changing industrial and political character of COSATU may also be illustrated by the decline in the strike rate, the Wood and Psoulis (2001) survey data notwithstanding. At the height of the struggle against apartheid in the late 1980s, the number of strike days peaked at nine million. In the five years 1990–94, the number of strike days was approximately four million each year. In the years following the 1994 elections the number of strike days fell sharply, to 650,000 by 1997. In 1998 and 1999, there was something of a recovery, but the figure then fell back again to only half a million in 2000 (South African Institute for Race Relations, 2001). The overall trend is for a decrease in militant strike activity, but with an increase in the relatively symbolic centrally-controlled 'days of action' aimed at strengthening the negotiating leverage of the COSATU leadership in Tripartite Alliance discussions (see McKinley and van Driel, this volume).

Although the rapid increase in retrenchments in core areas of union strength has been an important factor curbing union militancy, more significant has been the widespread political disorientation arising from the

changed political environment post-1994. Who, now, black workers ask, is the real enemy? Under apartheid it was clear – the enemy was the racist state and its apartheid structures. Now, under the rhetoric of the 'national democratic revolution', whose second stage has been indefinitely suspended, there is no clear line of march for union members and activists. Is the ANC Government an enemy when it announces plans to privatise the state airline, electricity, water, garbage collection, and the railways, or when it pursues its neo-liberal GEAR programme? Or is the ANC Government merely undertaking the necessary measures required to free up funds for social development? Is the ANC Government itself the enemy, or is it, perhaps, only its misguided policies? What attitude should workers take to the ANC Government when it works closely with Volkswagen management in the dismissal of 1,300 car workers? (Rachleff, 2001).

Workers seeking to clarify the new lines of power and loyalties in the new political dispensation are discouraged from doing so by leading figures in the labour movement aligned to the SACP, forever endeavouring to lend the ANC Government a 'working-class bias' (see McKinley, this volume). The wholesale redeployment of a generation of union leaders and the tight personal connections that exist between union leaders and senior government figures also contributes to the mystification process that shrouds the current political alignment. These poachers-turned-gamekeepers lend credibility to Government measures that would have been steadfastly resisted had they emanated from the National Party Government prior to 1994. The result at grassroots level is widespread bewilderment, demoralisation, and a perception that the union movement is beating a continual retreat, as admitted in COSATU's 1997 September Commission Report.

In order to shed light on the question as to the continuing existence or otherwise of social movement unionism within COSATU, I present my own findings based on fieldwork in the Wits East region of NUMSA in the period 1997 to 2001.[1] The Wits East region of NUMSA, centred on the East Rand, the heartland of the nation's engineering industry, comprises six locals: Springs, Wadeville, Germiston, Alrode, Benoni and Germiston. NUMSA membership in 2001 in this region was approximately 30,000, concentrated mostly in the engineering sector. The largest plant is Scaw Metals (forge, foundry work and moulding), which is owned by the Anglo American Corporation and which employs 4,500 workers (2,500–3,000 of whom are NUMSA members). Most of the medium to larger sized engineering companies in the East Rand are members of the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA).

In my assessment of SMU, I focus on what I believe to be the most important element of social movement unionism, namely the presence of representative and participatory democracy (including factory-level membership mobilisation). Consideration is also given, however, to independence from political parties and links to non-workplace political struggles.

Representative and participatory democracy

Changes in representative and participatory democracy within NUMSA in the East Rand cannot be divorced from the context of industrial and political demobilisation that occurred during the 1990s. Indeed, participatory democracy is, in large part, synonymous with membership mobilisation. It has long been understood by union activists internationally that members' participation in their union comes alive during industrial campaigns, and this is certainly true in South Africa, where the significance of the strike in fostering SMU in the 1980s cannot be exaggerated. The Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) in Transvaal, forerunner of NUMSA, was effectively built by strikes (FOSATU Annual Report, 1982, cited in Ruiters, 1995, p. 106) which were the workers' basic weapon. As one long-time NUMSA shop steward, now organiser, Tebogo, explained:

> NUMSA has been a striking union, that's our character. If you don't strike for two or three years, your members forget about you. What used to unite people was the strike (interview, 2001).

Or, as Vusi, NUMSA organiser since 1984, put it: 'Strikes play a key role. Without the strike, you can forget about the union' (interview, 2001).

The situation today is rather different. The Labour Relations Act (LRA), although doing much to protect shop stewards from victimisation, at least in the larger plants, also prohibits strikes at any time over disputes of right (including disputes over dismissals or victimisation) or over disputes of interest during the life of an agreement. The impact has been dramatic. As Thami, an organiser first active in the mid-1980s, explained:

> The hands and feet of the workers are tied by the LRA itself. It's not like before when we don't agree, we bang the table and say 'We're walking out of this factory and you'll face the consequence of the workers!'. And there'll be a stoppage of the workers. So now it's not the same. As an official, I'll ring up and say 'Comrades, you know

> what you need to do now. You'll have to declare a dispute' (interview, Thami, 2001).

This diversion of workers' grievances towards formal channels of dispute resolution has a detrimental impact on the fighting spirit of the workers, and at times requires the organiser to act as an industrial police officer. Tebogo described a not untypical exchange:

> Workers would want to go back to the olden days, but now you can't. I tell the workers you can't go on strike over this issue … If the workers say, 'No, we must strike. This is our chance to get this manager who is not a human being. We just want to strike to show him that we are people'. I led many strikes. Now I must tell the workers, 'No you can't go out on strike'. It hurts me most of all (interview, 2001).

There are occasions, then, when rank and file members and union officials come into conflict on the question of whether or not to strike. However, the new labour relations environment is also breeding passivity within the ranks of the union and a growing dependence on paid union staff. NUMSA organiser Elias reports that the new system:

> … reduces activism at the factory floor. Workers tend to be complacent and want everything on a plate. Even issues that they have to take up themselves, they say, 'No, we've got an organiser'. They come to you and say 'You're clever, we know you're clever'. They put you on a pedestal. They channel through you first. This has affected the level of activism (interview, 2001).

Vusi, who was elected shop steward in 1979 and became an organiser in 1984, reported that:

> There's a vast difference between the old days pre-1984, especially 1990, and now. Before 1990, workers were willing to learn… Now, even the smallest thing, an organiser must be involved (interview, 2001).

A closely related point is that the job of organisers begins to change. Their work is increasingly tied up in preparing for legal cases, and they are required to spend a considerable amount of their time preparing for appearances before the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and

Arbitration, rather than factory-level organising. They become, as one organiser put it, 'para-legals'. For this reason, unions are now devoting significantly more resources to legal officers, of which NUMSA now has 15, one in each region, plus five in the head office. Accompanying these is a changing attitude to the law. Once the law was regarded as the instrument of oppression by the apartheid state. Now it is regarded as 'our law'. In the 1980s, militant unions such as NUMSA used to conduct extensive internal debates involving organisers and stewards as to which laws to use and which to break by direct action, based on a series of industrial and political considerations. Now, however, as the union's national education officer, Dinga Sikwebu, explained:

> … what must go to court and what must not go to court is subject to the legal department downstairs. Their role and status have become so important. We try to ensure worker control over cases through dispute committees, but legal expertise rather than strategy is now prioritised (interview, Dinga Sikwebu, 2001).

The job of shop stewards has also changed substantially in the new labour relations dispensation. The introduction of shop steward facilities, including office space, access to telephones and faxes, and access to union cars, stop-order facilities (payroll deduction of union dues), and paid time off work to attend union business was an important gain for shop stewards in the 1980s, particularly at a time when South African unions were desperately poor. These resources allowed for better vertical communication within the union and for more efficient operation of the union within the factory. Two aspects of this trend, however, contribute to a weakening of internal democracy. One is the stop-order facility, which has been a boon for union finances and has reduced the scope for personal corruption available when dues were collected by hand. However, as Sikwebu points out, it has also had its disadvantages:

> The introduction of stop-order facilities is a conquest for the unions but it severs the link. It's just like you're paying off the furniture! (interview, Dinga Sikwebu, 2001).[2]

Time off work for union training courses and union conferences is another example of a gain which has had some negative ramifications. The chair of the Wits East regional executive, Zakhele, argues that:

> This is shop steward empowerment in terms of labour relations skills, management skills, and economic skills. We're engaged in the budget of the country, how we want to see it, and the like (interview, 2001).

However, the time taken off work by the stewards for training courses and conferences may also be contributing to weakening the links binding members and their representatives at factory level. If they are rarely at work, how can they understand what members need, and how can members hold them accountable? The weakening of local steward structures is exacerbated by the departure in the 1990s of an entire generation of experienced shop stewards resulting from industrial restructuring, redundancies, and promotions.

The broad trends that I have highlighted thus far are suggestive of a decline in grassroots mobilisation. How has this affected membership involvement in the affairs of their union? Before answering this question, however, it is important to confirm that representative democracy is still alive within NUMSA in the Wits East region, as the constitutional structures that gave MAWU and, later NUMSA, their democratic culture at local level are still in place. The key organising body is the Regional Executive Committee, which meets monthly and comprises 25 voting members – the four regional office bearers (the secretary, two chairpersons and treasurer), plus 18 rank and file delegates from the six locals, plus three rank and file nominees from the regional finance committee which is elected by the regional congress. Only one of these 25, the regional secretary, is a full-time official. In addition to these 25 voting members, the regional organiser, legal officer, education officer and administration officer also sit on the executive in an *ex officio* non-voting capacity. They are appointed by the executive and must report to it. The regional executive is in turn elected by a regional congress which meets every three months and which comprises delegates elected directly by local shop stewards councils on a pro rata basis. No appointed staff member has a vote in any of the union's constitutional structures. These structures ensure that the framework for effective representative democracy within NUMSA is still in place.

The same is true at local level. Local shop stewards councils still meet weekly, as do factory shop stewards committees, while factory general meetings occur weekly or fortnightly in the better organised factories. The concepts of mandate and worker control are still held to be important, and communication between the regional office and the local

offices is still working efficiently, according to union organisers in the regional and local offices (interviews, Thami and Sipho, 2001).

If the union's democratic structures and formal support for worker control and mandate are still much in evidence, it is clear that some of the real content of these structures and practices has been lost over the last decade. This is obvious firstly in membership attendance at union meetings, which is much reduced on the struggle days of the 1980s. Although it is hard to make direct comparisons because of the changing structure of locals over the years, attendance at local shop steward council meetings on the East Rand is down by approximately two-thirds on the early 1990s - in a typical local from approximately 150–200 to 60–70. Declining attendance is also evident at weekend workshops. This is intimately connected with democratic practices in the union, as lower attendance has a direct impact on the efficacy of mandate and report-back practices. NUMSA local organiser Vusi reported in 2001 that:

> Nowadays members aren't educated about processes; report-backs don't happen. There is poor attendance even at general meetings reporting back about wage negotiations. If attendance at the local general meeting is 300, then you say 'At least people have attended'. But before you used to say attendance is poor if you got 5,000! (interview, 2001).

The regional legal officer and former shop steward, Dumisani, reported on the interplay between declining interest amongst the members and the decay in shop steward traditions:

> Before, the situation was pushing you. Attending a meeting was so important. Workers are no longer what they used to be. You came back from a weekend meeting, workers armed you on the Friday with the arguments, and then early the follow week you reported back over two or three days. Today, workers don't want report-backs. Delegates are absent as they like. They don't attend shop stewards councils. The policy is that shop stewards must attend every shop stewards council, but that is not happening (interview, 2001).

A series of factors were mentioned by the union's activists as responsible for these trends, the most important of which was the change in the overall political situation. Political freedoms have brought workers many benefits, but they have had a contradictory effect on the operation of

trade unions as struggle organisations. The chairperson of the regional executive committee commented that:

> The level of activism has really dropped. Pre-1994, there was one agenda, that was to liberate South Africa. How, that was not an issue. The issue was to see liberation. Activism meant that everyone was conscious that 'I am a black person and cannot vote, I don't have any say in this government. I'm oppressed'. But now everyone is saying 'Now I'm equal, and the Constitution protects us equally' (Tseki, 2001).

NUMSA, like many other unions, has lost an entire generation of shop steward activists. Their replacements lack the historical memory of campaigning in the 1980s and, in many cases, they lack also a passion to bring about change.[3] This was noted by the union's legal officer:

> We don't have the shop stewards like the older generation of shop stewards. The new shop stewards have better education, but we don't have shop stewards who are activists like before. We have a few, but a few does not make the union strong (interview, Dumisani, 2001).

The younger generation of union activists enter the union with ideas that reflect the downturn in political radicalisation that took hold in South Africa in the early 1990s. Former chairperson of the Wits Central-West regional executive, Moss Manganyi, notes that:

> There is a new generation which is taking a stand and who say: 'We are born in a capitalist society and we can't change capitalist society. We have to fit in, and transform it in a way that it suits us' (interview, Manganyi, 2001).

Although opinions vary on this matter, some veteran organisers suggest that the newer stewards do not respect the older members of the union, nor the past traditions of the union:

> The old guys complain about the new shop stewards who speak English and say 'You must accept this, it comes from the Central Committee'. These old guys now they feel innocent, they feel ordered. The new ones just know *now*, after Mandela. Many new people act as if they're clever (interview, Bheki, 2001).

Perhaps the most corrosive feature of the new political environment is the loss of the spirit of self-sacrifice and solidarity characteristic of the struggle years. Bheki, a long-time shop steward and organiser since 1985, lamented that:

> That thing that 'An injury to one is an injury to all', that's nowhere now. Everyone is thinking for himself (interview, Bheki, 2001).

And another:

> Before the LRA, workers would strike even over an individual worker. Now that is no more there. Now, the workers are choosing which issues they will strike for. To us, things were better [in the old days]… Before, if someone was dismissed, the workers would follow up to see how far the case had gone. Today, the slogan is 'An injury to one...it's that man's baby!' (interview, Vusi, 2001).

The same organiser referred to the national campaign of solidarity with workers on strike at Simba Chips in 1984, an early FOSATU *cause celebre*:

> At that time, people were so committed, there was a consumer boycott to support that strike. Shop stewards were going all over the world to make the campaign successful. Never mind that you didn't work for Simba Chips, it was covered by FOSATU and people showed solidarity. Nowadays, it's very rare to see solidarity for other workers on strike, even within the same affiliate. Before, all the companies in the area would provide something for those workers, something for them to eat. Sometimes workers were involved in *siyalalas* [sleep-in strikes], and all the workers used to give them support, but not nowadays (interview, Vusi, 2001).

The increasing pervasiveness of 'looking after Number One' is reflected in increasing interest in promotion out of manual work into office jobs, managerial positions, or political openings. During the 1980s there emerged what Dinga Sikwebu calls the 'shiny shoe shop stewards', union delegates hailing from the townships rather than the hostels, who had matriculated, and were proficient in English. Such delegates were obviously potential supervisory material in the eyes of management, but their prospects for promotion were limited by the overwhelming nature of

the political struggle. Shop stewards taking managerial positions were regarded as traitors by their fellow workers and were accordingly shunned.

With political liberation in 1994, however, and with the example set by their national leaders fresh in their minds, the attraction of crossing sides has become much stronger for shop stewards and rather more common. In addition, companies are under pressure from the Employment Equity Act to meet affirmative action targets for appointment of blacks to managerial and supervisory positions, thereby creating more opportunities for promotion of stewards.

There is a similar pull on union organisers. Buhlungu's 1997 survey of full-time officials, including organisers, revealed some interesting statistics about their background and attitudes. Forty per cent of full-time officials had matriculated from high school, as against only 11.6 per cent of the black population aged over 20. One-third had a degree, as against less than 5 per cent of the black population. Ninety per cent were at the prime of their working lives, aged 24–45. Most of these officials had no long-term commitment to the unions: 90 per cent had worked for the union movement for less than eight years and two-thirds expected to leave the movement within five years. Nearly 30 per cent thought that they would be out of the unions within two years. Only 21 per cent had a long-term (10 years plus) vision of working for the union movement (all data, Buhlungu, 1999). For such officials, managerial positions with better pay and conditions are both feasible and attractive. In 2001, NUMSA local organisers were paid R5,000 per month, while human resource managers in the East Rand engineering industry were paid R15–20,000 per month, plus a car and other perks. Union organising, furthermore, is an exhausting vocation, as reported by Mzi, NUMSA organiser since 1990:

> We get home after 9 o'clock every night, we don't get overtime pay, and 80 per cent of organisers and union activists are divorcees. If the workers are on strike, we have to stay with the workers, even if it's a sleep-in. There are workshops at the weekends. The union won't accept excuses about your domestic life. You have to be committed in this struggle. If you're not, you will resign and go elsewhere (interview, 1997).

Although the absolute numbers of stewards and organisers taking managerial positions in a single year in the region is not large, probably not more than a dozen, the effect is cumulative and constitutes an important trend throughout NUMSA operations. In some companies (for example, Bevcan (a subsidiary of Nampak) and Mercedes Benz), virtually the entire

human resources department comprises former shop stewards. In addition to departures to management appointments, we must consider union activists quitting for ANC Councillor positions in the townships. Whether union activists depart for managerial or political positions, however, the effect is the same: to accelerate turnover of established leaders and to foster a growing perception that trade union positions represent an avenue for upward mobility.

Attitudes vary in regard to NUMSA activists quitting the movement for managerial jobs. Some argue that the union derives benefits. Tseki, shop steward and regional executive chairperson, argued that:

> If South Africa is to be productive, and there is no way that NUMSA is against productivity, we have to link it to training and empowerment. We say that we cannot leave the positions of management to be taken by people who don't know what is trade unionism. We need managers who can understand the unions and the history of South Africa (interview, Zakhele, 2001).

On the other hand, the constant turnover assorted with these movements has a demoralising effect, a feeling that 'you can't rely on your comrades anymore', as long-established networks of activists are broken up. The promotion of working class activists is a mirror of trends in broader society. A shop steward at the giant Scaw factory voiced a common complaint that:

> In South Africa at the moment we are talking one language, that is money. Everyone wants to move to business, to get money. The same as people want positions in the Government, to get money. They say 'I was starving financially, I want to get on'. It's not that they want to be loyal to the Government, it's just money (interview, anonymous Scaw shop steward, 1997).

NUMSA organiser Bheki commented on the loss of the struggle traditions in the union:

> When you are a unionist, all the time in your mind you've got workers. The people who don't know exactly what happens. The people who haven't been at school. Everything starts with them. AIDS starts with them. Shortage of food and water, it's them. Cut off electricity, cut off water, it happens to them. Is that what you've got in your mind? But today no-one has that in mind! Everyone thinks for himself. 'I must have a cell [mobile phone]. I must have a

> car, I must have a big house. I must have all the women'. But what the hell's that? (interview, Bheki, 2001).

In some cases employers are able to tap into this desire for social advance to eliminate shop stewards from the workplace. Vusi described the sequence:

> The employer goes to the worker and says 'This is not a core business and we want to outsource it. We think you are a very intelligent chap and you can run this business on your own.' They tell that person we are trying to empower blacks, and that person will just jump for this. When you try to ask the person, 'How long do you think that this company will give you the business before they get someone else in who will do the job more efficiently?' They say, 'No, no, no. This is black empowerment. You're just jealous!' (interview, organiser Vusi, 2001).

As former activists seek to advance themselves, so their ideas begin to change, to 'fit in' with what is acceptable to those who control entry into favoured jobs. As Vusi explained:

> The ANC is very clever. There is one guy who is my friend who I recruited and pushed to become a shop steward. Now that company has been closed down. Now he is active in the ANC meetings. You know, when we meet, he is talking a different language. When I say that I don't understand what is happening with the ANC, he says 'You expect delivery from the Government. If the Government does not privatise those things, how are they going to get money?' But is it true that if the Government privatised things, people would get delivery? To me, the answer is no! People benefit nothing (interview, 2001).

The process of personal advancement through the medium of union activism is accelerated by another gain of the 1980s which has now been inverted. The right to have shop stewards released from their work duties to attend union training programmes was an important advance in the 1980s and one which was consolidated in law with the *Labour Relations Act 1995*. Given the 'gravy train' phenomenon (Buhlungu, 1994), however, such training opportunities raise the chances for 'getting ahead', at least for a minority of stewards. Dinga Sikwebu reports that stewards flock to accredited courses in industrial relations, human resource development and

project management organised by technical colleges and universities. This trend has two potentially harmful effects. First, it fosters managerial ideology within the ranks of the trade unions. This is particularly significant because the stewards who work in the larger companies and who attend such courses tend also to have disproportionate influence within NUMSA itself. Second, it gives graduates of these programs the potential to move out of union activism, thereby worsening the problem of turnover.[4]

One other factor contributing to the decline in membership participation in union affairs since the early 1990s which was mentioned by many organisers was the corrosive impact of personal debt. In the 1980s, unions fought for and won the introduction of a provident fund, replacing the traditional pension scheme. The provident fund system has two great advantages over the pension. First, the provident fund can be accessed on quitting the job, rather than only on retirement. Second, financial institutions, and in particular loan sharks, recognise the provident fund as a form of collateral, and it may therefore be used as security for a mortgage or against a car loan or, indeed, for short-term ‘emergency money’ to supplement the weekly wage. Worker indebtedness has risen rapidly as a result, with detrimental effects on union activism. Fairly typical was the following comment by Bheki:

> These cash loans are killing our people. Because our people want higher things, they die forever. You want a car? You want a big house? They don’t want gradual things. They want to be seen higher. And they’re not going to attend union meetings. They’re stressed, they have their financial worries. Those are the things that kill our people and kill our organisations (interview, Bheki, 2001).

The other damaging effect of personal debt is that it undermines the potential to resist retrenchments:

> As an organiser you rely on the workers for information. Now, when you go there, the first thing they ask you ‘How much is the severance pay?’. The issue of how to fight the retrenchment is not an issue for them. If you fight the members, they go to the employer, and say, ‘How much is the severance pay, I want to volunteer.’ (interview, Vusi, 2001).[5]

In summary, the evidence gathered from interviews with organisers and local activists from the Wits East region of NUMSA suggests that participatory democracy and membership mobilisation are now under

significant threat. Although the formal structures continue to exist and much of the rhetoric of mandate and accountability is apparent, the participatory element of democracy which animated the union in the 1980s – grassroots mobilisation – appears to be in the process of slowly disintegrating.

Independence from political parties

Ever since the formation of COSATU in 1985, the federation has been aligned with the ANC, and in that sense has never been politically 'neutral' or, still less, politically abstentionist. This policy reflects, and helps consolidate, electoral support for the ANC amongst union members (Ginsburg and Webster, 1995; Habib and Taylor, 1999; Wood and Psoulis, 2001). Support for a political party by a union federation, however, must be distinguished from dependence. The fate of many African union movements has been one of subordination to post-colonial governments and their effective transformation into government agencies. It is this fate that FOSATU's first president, Joe Foster, warned against in his 1982 speech outlining the FOSATU vision (Foster, 1982). Twenty years later, it is clear that, although COSATU and its affiliates are by no means government agencies, they are very closely integrated into a political dispensation dominated by the ANC.

The issue of COSATU subordination to the ANC Government since 1994 is a recurring theme of many chapters in this volume (see McKinley and van Driel, this volume). Here I wish to focus on the specific case of NUMSA. NUMSA has traditionally been somewhat more independently minded than most COSATU affiliates in its relations with the ANC. Central to understanding this fact is the long-standing division within the union between the ANC-aligned leadership and an oppositional current of independent socialists, more critical of the ANC, many of whom hold important mid-level positions in the union and who have the respect of many grassroots militants. Although these two currents do not constitute hardened factions in any sense, debate within the union commonly revolves around the political positions advanced by the two 'sides', most evidently around the question of the alliance with the ANC. At NUMSA's founding congress in 1987, the union endorsed the Freedom Charter, but argued at COSATU's Second National Congress in the same year for a 'Workers' Charter' which aimed to give the Freedom Charter a more distinctly socialist perspective (Baskin, 1991, pp. 215–22). Six years later, the anti-charterist current succeeded in winning a vote at National Congress to

withdraw support for the alliance with the ANC, but this decision was subsequently overturned at the following Congress in 1996.

In 2000, the ongoing debate between the ANC loyalists and the independent socialist minority was given an extra edge, as the candidate for the position of national secretary who was aligned with the latter, Dinga Sikwebu, was sacked from his position as national education officer shortly before the congress and only reinstated following an uproar (Daniels, 2000). At the congress, the ANC's candidate, Slumko Nondwangu, only narrowly won the position, with four of the union's nine provinces supporting Sikwebu's candidacy.

The division within the union and the support that exists for a more critical stance in relation to the ANC amongst the grassroots membership helps explain the union leadership's regular criticisms of ANC Government policies, most notably GEAR. In 1998, NUMSA argued against COSATU deploying any of its leaders for the 1999 parliamentary elections, and in 2000 the union was the sternest critic of the Government's Millenium Labour Council, which aimed to marginalise union input into discussions around amendments to the Labour Relations Act (see Appolis and Sikwebu, this volume).

Notwithstanding the ongoing debates within the union, the years of political retreat since the highpoint of struggle in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the domination of the ANC within the Tripartite Alliance, have served to swing the debate within NUMSA in favour of the ANC-aligned leadership at national and local level. Allegiances to the ANC Government are not just ideological but personal. The redeployment of NUMSA leaders such as Bernie Fanaroff, Alec Erwin, John Gomomo, and Enoch Gondongwana has cemented strong bonds between ANC and NUMSA leaders at national and provincial level. These bonds can then be organised to mutual advantage, the clearest demonstration of this being the array of forces that was mobilised against the 1,300 dissident NUMSA members at the Volkswagen plant at Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape in the first half of 2000 (Rachleff, 2001).[6] The outcome was the sacking of the Volkswagen workers, the restoration of political control by the NUMSA regional office, and security of export production.

That political ties between NUMSA and Government ministers are now used, not as a means of pressing working-class demands on the Government, but as a means of transmitting Government demands on the union's membership, was clear from a speech given by former NUMSA Education Officer, now Minister of Trade and Industry, Alec Erwin, at the NUMSA bargaining conference in 2001. Erwin admonished the NUMSA leadership for 'losing control' at Volkswagen:

> You don't know how much damage that [strike] did…We had to send cabinet ministers to Germany on the VW dispute to convince them. Their concern – 'Your best union can't hold its factories'… If you want jobs you will have to show that as NUMSA, you are the union in the auto industry. If you can't show that, your agreements will get worse and worse, and we will get no investors (*NUMSA News*, June 2001, p. 4).

The leadership's clampdown on the Volkswagen dissidents is indicative of a concern expressed by several organisers in the Wits East region, namely a fear of expressing one's opinion openly, especially if such an opinion should be counter to the political line of COSATU and the SACP. Some union veterans report that the solidification of the Tripartite Alliance has been accompanied by growing intolerance towards any voices critical of the ANC. COSATU's position as leader of the liberation forces in the second half of the 1980s has now been inverted, with the federation playing a secondary role in relation to the ANC. Long-time NUMSA steward, Moss Manganyi, complained that:

> COSATU policy is now only 'Build the ANC; Build the Tripartite Alliance'. Beyond that, nothing else for the shop stewards! They know nothing else than 'Building the ANC, building the Communist Party'. In our days we would build the ANC for a particular purpose – so that you gain this. If you don't gain this, then away! ... Today there is no package of demands. Whether they throw you out of your house, whether you've got no land, whether there's no water or electricity, you still have to 'Build the ANC'! (interview, Manganyi, 2001).

In summary, NUMSA's leadership is ideologically and personally predisposed to close ties with the ANC Government but must contend with a more critical minority current within the union which is able to count on the support of many thousands of rank and file members who are sceptical, if not completely hostile, to the neoliberal drift of ANC Government policy. This situation prevents the tight identification of the union with the Government such as exists within, for example, the National Union of Mineworkers or the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union.

Links to non-workplace political struggles

The issue of political independence has a clear bearing on the third feature of social movement unionism considered in this chapter – links with outside communities and interest in non-workplace issues and a vision of broader social change, as opposed to narrowly 'economic unionism'. After some initial hesitation, MAWU/NUMSA was heavily involved during the 1980s in community stay-aways, involving workers, students, and township residents (Ruiters, 1995). In the late 1980s, following the declaration of the State of Emergency, COSATU affiliates, including NUMSA, were the only force capable of mobilising millions behind the Mass Democratic Movement. In the early 1990s, NUMSA organisers took an active role in combating state-sponsored township violence in East Rand townships such as Katlehong.

NUMSA has maintained a strong interest in non-workplace political campaigns since the coming of political democracy, both within South Africa and without, as a review of its triennial conference proceedings makes clear. The union has taken a consistent stand on measures to halt the spread of the AIDS virus endemic amongst the South African poor. It has also published extensive criticisms of ANC Government plans to privatise basic services.

Nonetheless, it is also necessary to point out the ways in which past traditions have withered in this respect. In particular, with the end of the political struggle for liberation and the associated transformation of ANC structures and township politics, shop stewards are rarely involved in ANC-aligned community politics. One organiser reports:

> Shop stewards don't attend ANC structures in the townships. Previously, the shop stewards were the pivot of the ANC in the township. They didn't participate in the union only. Now, those structures have collapsed and are led by people who are inexperienced. UDF structures are not there anymore: they used to pick up issues and mobilise. There's no drive in the townships (interview, organiser Vusi).

The collapse of township structures has created a vacuum which some community organisations have sought to fill. Non-union organisations, such as the various 'crisis committees', 'community councils' and 'anti-privatisation forums' in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, have now become the main force on issues such as land rights and housing for the poor, electricity and water cut-offs. However, being

forced by necessity to confront ANC Councillors, Provincial Governments and, indeed, the national Government, these committees are invariably drawn into conflict with the ANC and, for this reason, their campaigns receive little support from a NUMSA leadership loyal to the Tripartite Alliance and thus extremely sensitive to any accusations that it is 'rocking the boat' by giving comfort to non-party activists, sometimes dismissed as 'ultra-lefts'. The union's support for the Tripartite Alliance has clearly led to a narrowing of its preparedness to engage in the kind of community campaigns that it would once have endorsed (see van Driel, this volume).

Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine whether the traditions of social movement unionism embedded in COSATU in the 1980s still survive two decades later. In the case of NUMSA Wits East, it appears that three of the most important features of SMU – internal democracy, independence from political parties, and links to non-workplace political struggles, are under threat. The dominant factor explaining this shift has been the change in the wider political context. The consolidation of the new political dispensation that has emerged since the unbanning of the ANC and SACP in 1990 has seen a transformation in the culture of unionism in the factories. Unions have gone from being a leading force in a liberation struggle to the loyal partner of a governing party undertaking a neoliberal restructuring of the South African economy. The rationale of union action has gone from mass mobilisation, aimed at smashing both racial oppression and class oppression, to expert representation, aimed at marginal improvements in wages and working conditions, accompanied by increasingly tokenistic political campaigns directed at a Government with which the union movement is in alliance. This change in the political context has had a fundamental effect on the organising environment within the union: mobilisation has given way to passivity, self sacrifice to self-promotion, mass organising to legalism and institutionalisation, and political engagement to political alienation.

More broadly, this single case study suggests that social movement unionism may be a conjunctural phenomenon arising out of political repression. Once repression is removed, the institutional processes tend to pull trade unionism away from its oppositional bias towards integration, much as occurred in Western Europe and North America by the 1950s. Social movement unionism in post-apartheid South Africa therefore appears to be giving way to the type of social partnership unionism

common to Continental Europe, but without the material gains associated with the latter (Hyman, 1996). Unfortunately, space prevents further exploration of this important question in this chapter.

Although the moving force of social movement unionism appears to be on the retreat within NUMSA and COSATU more broadly, it is important to understand the counter-tendencies that exist. Just as the thoroughly institutionalised European and North American unions were shaken by a wave of working class struggle in the 1960s and 1970s (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978), so too the process of institutionalisation amongst South African unions may be reversed by mass movements from below. The potential certainly exists. Despite gains, black workers still commonly subsist in destitute circumstances, in an environment in which the wealth of the white minority has barely been touched and in which a minority of their own former leaders have now been absorbed into economic privilege. Unemployment amongst blacks is 40 per cent or more. Probably the majority of the black workforce are not covered by any meaningful labour protection, either from unions or from legislation, because they work in the unregulated sectors or sectors where government agencies or trade unions have little or no influence.

Members of NUMSA and other COSATU affiliates are acutely aware of these facts. Right-wing business and political commentators allege that the existence of such conditions means that black union members are part of a privileged elite. In reality, these conditions serve only to retard the overall living standards of black families which include union members, the unemployed, and the 'informally' employed. Such conditions therefore provide further fuel for union members' resentment at the fact that political liberation in 1994 has done very little to advance the economic interests of black workers. The outcome may in the end be a conscious rejection of union institutionalisation in favour of a return to some of the organising principles of social movement unionism used with such success in the struggle years and which contributed immensely to the destruction of apartheid.

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NOTES

[1] Research was undertaken over four months in 1997 and two months in 2001, during which time I reviewed primary and secondary sources on NUMSA, and conducted interviews with a number of both current and former office bearers, organisers, union officers, and shop stewards. These respondents were selected on the basis of their long experience as NUMSA activists and members, in some cases going back to the early days of MAWU in the mid-1970s. Average length of interviews was two hours. In addition to interviews, I also attended union workshops and meetings of the Springs and Wadeville shop stewards councils, and accompanied NUMSA organisers on several factory visits. I would like to thank Bafana Ndebele and George Choshane, Wits East regional secretaries in 1997 and 2001 respectively, for authorising my research. Thanks are also due to NUMSA Research Officer, Jenny Grice, for assisting in my project. I would like to record my appreciation to all those who agreed to be interviewed for my research but who bear no responsibility for the content of this chapter nor its interpretations. In the text pseudonyms are used for the organisers and the regional chairperson.
[2] For more discussion on this point, see the chapter by Appolis and Sikwebu in this volume.
[3] A 2001 survey by NUMSA head office revealed that 65 per cent of the union's members had joined since 1990.
[4] For more on this point, see interview with Appolis and Sikwebu in this volume. See also Bonner (2000).
[5] See also an article by Philemon Shiburi in *NUMSA News*, June 2001, on this point.
[6] See also Forrest (2000) for a different interpretation of the VW dispute.