

## Article

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### "The Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement: Mobilization of Diverse Constituencies in a Changing Context"

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# *The Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement*

## *Mobilization of Diverse Constituencies in a Changing Context*

**GEOFFREY WOOD**

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*There is a growing body of literature on the role and impact of unions in the developing world, and on their ability to mobilize members against a background of neo-liberal reforms. The South African trade union movement represents a source of inspiration to organized labour worldwide, but has faced many challenges over the years. This article engages with debates on union solidarity and worker democracy, and draws on the findings of a nationwide survey of members of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to explore the extent of fragmentation according to gender, age, skill level and ethnicity. The survey reveals regular participation in union affairs, democratic accountability, participation in collective action, and a strong commitment to the labour movement, but variation in levels of engagement between categories of union members indicates significant implications for union policy and practice.*

The issue of how to mobilize a wide range of union members through workplace democracy and collective action is significant for understanding

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contemporary industrial relations within the global context. In South Africa, this is particularly interesting, given its political and economic history, and relatively recent democratization. The South African trade union movement represents a source of inspiration to organized labour worldwide, but has faced many challenges over the years. Based on the findings of a survey of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) members conducted in 1998, Wood and Psoulis (2001) found high levels of internal solidarity. Drawing on the findings of a new nationwide survey of COSATU members, this article explores the extent of internal democracy and social solidarity within South African trade unions. Its main objectives are to: evaluate the political and economic challenges currently facing the South African labour movement; critically examine the current debates on union solidarity and democracy; investigate the findings of a nationwide survey of COSATU members to explore the extent to which there has been fragmentation according to gender, age, skill level and ethnicity; and reflect on the implications for South African trade unions and the broader labour movement.

### ***THE CHALLENGES FOR ORGANIZED LABOUR IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD***

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Central concerns of the recent literature on employment relations in Africa include the extent to which African countries have developed their own path in the face of specific cultural legacies and volatile external circumstances, rather than converging with dominant global trends (Berger, 1992; Jackson, 2002). A convergence in employer practices can be seen as representing both a move to “high road” functional flexibility and “low road” numerically flexible workplaces, characterized by low wages and union busting. However, the underlying logics of action adopted by different players means that national systems are guided towards a specific direction; homogenizing external forces have complex and contingent effects on employment relations, and therefore it is important to examine particular country experiences (Frenkel and Kuruvilla, 2002: 388).

#### ***Mobilizing Diverse Constituencies in the South African Labour Movement***

The South African trade union movement is arguably the strongest in the African continent, due to its role in the ending of apartheid and its continued growth in adverse circumstances. The first trade unions were established by immigrant craft workers who bargained on the basis of skill and then racial exclusivism. Various attempts were made at organizing

African<sup>1</sup> workers prior to 1970; however, these made little headway due to state repression and a reliance on a few key leaders and activists (Feit, 1975; Bonner, 1978; Friedman, 1987; Lambert, 1988). The formation of worker service organizations by student activists and former union officials in the early 1970s and their rapid transmutation into non-racial independent unions represented a new chapter in labour history (Maree, 1987; Friedman, 1987). Guided by previous experience, and inspired by the then buoyant British labour movement, a strong emphasis was placed on shopfloor democracy, the role of the shop steward,<sup>2</sup> and on worker education, making for an accountable leadership and a rapidly expanding coterie of activists (c.f. Maree, 1987; Friedman, 1987). The independent unions soon consolidated under the umbrella of federations, most as affiliates of COSATU, a “super federation” launched in 1985 (Fine and Webster, 1989), which acted as the leading internal opponent to the apartheid state.

### *The Decline of South African Unions?*

COSATU’s rapid expansion in the private sector in the 1980s, its equally rapid expansion in the public sector in the 1990s, and its role in the destruction of apartheid all represent major success stories (c.f. Donnelly and Dunn, 2006). To critics, this has tended to obscure the real challenges and compromises that threaten the labour movement. The opening up of global markets following the end of apartheid, and the reduction of protective tariffs have had both beneficial and adverse effects. On the one hand, South Africa has repositioned itself as an export-orientated economy, and is globally competitive in areas such as motor vehicle and component manufacture, steel, processed foods and niche textiles. On the other hand, this competitiveness has been attained through a shift to leaner manufacturing and wholesale job shedding (Barchiesi and Kenny, 2002; Donnelly and Dunn, 2006). The ability to sustain membership levels has been further threatened by the apparent inability to organize informal

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1. In South Africa, categorization of ethnic and racial groupings is contentious. Following official usage in the post-apartheid era, and use by ethnic groups themselves, the term African refers to those of black African descent, Indian to those of South Asian (India/Pakistan) descent, whilst coloured denotes mixed racial origin, as well as those of Indonesian descent and first peoples (ethnic Khoi and Bushmen). The term “black” denotes all these groupings together.

2. In line with Britain, the term “shop steward” is employed by most COSATU affiliates for elected workplace representatives. Those in the National Union of Mineworkers are designated “shaft stewards,” whilst “chapels” of journalists are led by a “father.” For convenience and accepted convention, the term “shop steward” is employed throughout.

workers (von Holdt and Webster, 2008), which in many developing countries is now the way of life for many (Peetz and Ollett, 2004).

In the formal sector, apparently high levels of social solidarity can mask internal divisions and power inequalities (von Holdt, 2002), with evidence of a growing gap between leaders and ordinary members, and leaders moving into lucrative careers in government or the private sector (c.f. Donnelly and Dunn, 2006). Moreover, a culture of majoritarianism, whereby after vigorous debate, decisions become binding on all, with little tolerance of further dissent, may be useful when facing state repression, but can, over the long term, prove organizationally debilitating (von Holdt, 2002; Buhlungu et al., 2007).

### ***UNION STRENGTH, SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND INTERNAL DEMOCRACY***

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The underlying causes of the decline in union membership in a range of national contexts have been the subject of considerable debate. Common explanations centre on changes in government ideologies and policies, and the globalization of markets (c.f. Godard, 1997). Heightened competitive pressure on firms can result in renewed emphasis on numerical and wage flexibility, with hard line policies undermining unions within the workplace.

Democracy represents the cornerstone of union strength, making for organizational vitality, and a solid basis for outreach (Moody, 1997). Internal union democracy is, quite simply, about the extent to which members take part in meetings and internal elections, whether the latter are regular and fair, and whether there are mechanisms in place for recall (Morris and Fosh, 2000). Should unions fail to represent the needs of their constituents, they will invariably fail (Wood, 2004). Social solidarity centres on the extent to which union members identify with a shared cause, and are prepared to act together.

It can be argued that within the labour movement, social solidarity and internal democracy are closely linked. However, solidarity extends further than internal union democracy. Solidarity can be defined as: "...a community of interests, feelings, and actions...A community of interests refers to the existence of similar material conditions and a realization that these interests can be best advanced through collective means" (Turner, 2005: 519). But workers may not actively engage with unions, if they see the latter as ineffective (Frege, 2000; Turner, 2005). Moreover, in which areas do members see trade unions as making an impact? The fortunes of organized labour depend on key decisions made at historic moments, not only regarding tactics, but also end goals (Hyman, 1997). Whilst this may

simply focus around the employment contract, and enhancing terms and conditions of service, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the most effective unions have also focused on articulating the wider concerns of their members regarding social justice and inclusion (Hyman, 1997, 2003). But workers may hold a collective orientation without this leading to the reconstitution of solidarities via a union (Frege, 1999). Joining a union becomes worthwhile if the union is capable of voicing the aspirations and expectations of members, which in turn is dependent on internal democracy (Greene, Black and Ackers, 2000). In other words, democracy and a belief in the value of participation can motivate people to join a union (d'Art and Turner, 2007). However, it has been argued that whilst internal democracy may make unions more effective as a voice of worker concerns, it may also make it harder for any deals with firms to stick; complex accommodations can be undermined by constant demands from below (Olson, 1982). In contrast, more recent work has argued that effective internal democracy provides the surest route to union revitalization (Behrens, Hamann and Hurd, 2004), with a need to actively involve the rank and file (Moody, 1997).

The circumstances and nature of solidarity form the central concern of mobilization theories of trade union effectiveness. Mobilization theory sees industrial relations not simply as the operation of bargaining structures, but as the product of social processes, while underlying mobilization is a shared sense of grievance, with management being squarely blamed for their misfortunes (Kelly, 1998). There is little doubt that in apartheid South Africa a racial division of labour and fordist methods, coupled with wider social injustice and an inability of the apartheid state to politically incorporate the unions provided a powerful basis for mobilization (Webster, 1987; Wood and Psoulis, 2001). In turn, this made for high levels of solidarity, as workers closed ranks against visible injustices both within and beyond the workplace. This persisted in the early post-apartheid years. However, in the early 2000s, there is some evidence to suggest that unions have experienced a weakening of their position, which may represent a decline in internal democracy. The removal of immediate grievances may have undermined the basis of solidarity, and union membership in manufacturing has decreased in line with large scale job losses, even if penetration rates have remained robust (c.f. Makgetla and Seidman, 2005). A further weakening may have come from elected union officials becoming increasingly remote from the real concerns of rank-and-file; internal democracy within the federation has become increasingly less effective, reflected in bitter internal disputes and the proliferation of breakaway unions (Rachleff, 2001). Yet, such unions have tended to be under-resourced, reliant on charismatic leaders and generally have faced opposition from the bulk of union members, employers and the post-apartheid government (c.f. Rachleff, 2001). Moreover, South

African labour legislation accords a range of organizational rights to individual unions that are representative—in most cases, with over 50% penetration—of the workforce at large, that are denied smaller players. Hence, in most cases, COSATU unions have survived breakaways without having to take the concerns of dissidents on board.

### *Measuring Social Solidarity and Union Democracy*

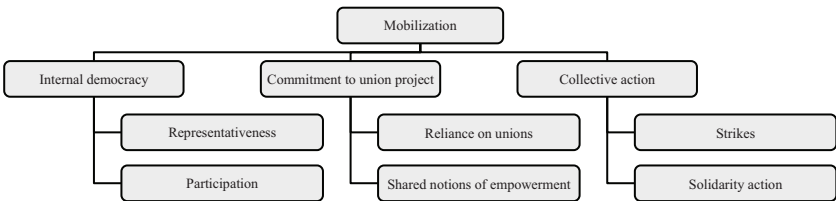
The foundations of effective mobilization rest on three factors: the “inclusiveness and scope of representation,” a sense of shared common interests, and a willingness to engage in collective action (Kelly, 1998; Wood and Psoulis, 2001). Therefore, firstly, we examine the issue of internal democracy. Greene, Black and Ackers (2000: 77) argue that central to internal union democracy are representativeness (i.e. are leaders regularly elected), and participation and involvement (democracy is meaningful unless most of the rank and file actively participate in union affairs). It is essential to consider both the existence of ballots and the extent of participation (Flood, Turner and Willman, 2000; Morris and Fosh, 2000). Thus, we examine the extent of participation in union meetings, not as a central measure of democracy, but as a means to explore the extent to which formal democratic structures are really meaningful to the bulk of members (Chan et al., 2006). There is also the issue of representativeness, the extent to which a genuine shopfloor democracy is functioning, in terms of the procedures and regularity of elections for workplace representatives.

The sense of shared common interests is perhaps the most difficult aspect to measure; here we focus on views as to the relative importance respondents assigned to trade unions vis-à-vis alternative forms of collective expression such as political parties (Moody, 1997). Whilst it might seem that asking existing union members about their views on the worth of belonging to a union might be a leading question, people may support an institution in principle without having much faith in its effectiveness. In other words, people may remain members of a union for historical reasons, and may no longer feel that belonging is really worthwhile (remaining for reasons of inertia, sentiment or residual solidarity), and hence are not likely to actively promote the interests of the union or participate in its internal life (c.f. Frege, 2000).

Then there is the question of strikes and solidarity action. Strikes represent both the epitome of mobilization, and promote further solidarity and mobilization; hence, they represent both a consequence and a cause of solidarity, while unions tend to enjoy considerable growth in membership and density in situations where strike action is high (Kelly, 1998). Hence, we explore strikes as a measure of the depth and effectiveness of mobilization. We also include participation by workers in solidarity action. As workers

are less likely to have a direct personal stake in any benefits that may flow from such action, this provides a good measure of intra- and inter-union solidarity. Union members can be motivated by instrumental reasons, rather than solidarity, but whilst all individuals may partially join unions for instrumental reasons, instrumentalism alone cannot make for union viability; solidarity is vital (Snape and Redman, 2004). The above discussion is summarized in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1  
**Key Foundations of Mobilization**



Source: Madsen (1996); Moody (1997); Kelly (1998); Wood and Psoulis (2001).

Having assessed the key foundations of mobilization, we then turn to assess the extent to which there is fragmentation according to member characteristics. Whilst there are strong forces driving union members together, there are also pressures driving them apart. All unions embody centripetal forces, driving towards unity, centring on a shared commitment to maximize wages and to impact on the regulation of the employment contract. However, they also embody centrifugal forces, as unions often bring together individuals with differing backgrounds and life experiences; in addition to national and regional variations, key cleavages include gender, age, skill, security of tenure, and ethnicity (Hyman, 1992; Moody, 1997; Wood and Psoulis, 2001). Women are often confined to the lower stages of the production chain and/or to the poorest paying jobs (Berger, 1992; Déom and Mercier, 1992; Moody, 1997) and are more often found in temporary employment than men, whilst a disproportionate share of domestic duties may inhibit participation in the labour movement (Baskin, 1991; Berger, 1992). Secondly, a generational gap between older workers and the post-apartheid generation may undermine the basis of solidarity. This cleavage may be worsened by global processes towards individualization and the diffusion of more instrumentalist approaches to work (Allvin and Sverke, 2000). Thirdly, workers may be divided on the basis of skill, particularly given a global tendency towards the polarization of skills in labour markets (Kelly, 1998). Finally, workers may be divided on ethnic lines, a problem



that may be particularly pronounced in South Africa, on account of the legacy of apartheid (c.f. Moody, 1997; von Holdt, 2002). Thus, in the apartheid era, workers were divided into different ethnic groups: black, coloured, Indian and white, and often treated differently according to these distinctions.

### ***RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS***

Against this background, the following section measures factors that provide a foundation for a union's capacity to mobilize its members, and assesses the extent to which these factors seem to hold for diverse groupings. The principal research objectives are operationalized as follows:

- R1: To measure the level of internal democracy among COSATU's membership and assess whether gender, age, skill level and ethnicity are significant predictors of difference.
- R2: To investigate the persistence of COSATU members' commitment to the union project, and assess whether gender, age, skill level and ethnicity are significant predictors of difference.
- R3: To ascertain COSATU members' experience of industrial action, and whether membership characteristics such as gender, age, skill level and ethnicity are significant predictors of difference.

#### ***Method***

In order to fulfill these research objectives, the subsequent analysis draws on a survey of COSATU members, conducted in 2004. COSATU is, by a substantial margin, the biggest and most effective union federation in South Africa, with a membership of around 2 million in 2004. The survey covered various issues within the broad remit of parliamentary and workplace democracy, the more general findings of which can be found elsewhere (Buhlungu, 2006), and followed previous rounds in 1994 and 1998 (see Ginsburg et al., 1995; Brookes et al., 2004). As with the previous surveys, the 2004 survey covered COSATU members located in provinces where most of South Africa's population and industry are centred: Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Gauteng, and North-West Province; this meant that the small minority of COSATU members located on the rural periphery in other provinces were not covered for time and logistic reasons. In total, the sample was a total of 655 COSATU members. The survey was supported by national COSATU leadership, with backing from their regional offices. It was administered in face-to-face interview format at workplace level, using area sampling, firstly by province, and thereafter, individual unionized workplaces were randomly selected from Telkom listings (the

national telephone company), thus excluding very small and informal businesses, which were unlikely to be unionized. Selected organizations were then contacted to confirm if they had a union presence; where this was not so, they were removed from the listing, and replaced by another organization, also randomly selected. Firms were advised of the nature of the survey and its union backing, and access was arranged. Finally, individual worker-respondents were selected systematically, proportionate to overall workforce size. The lack of accurate union membership lists precluded the use of an alternative method, while a survey of those attending union meetings would only have included those active in union affairs.

As we focused on COSATU, a limitation of this research is that we did not cover members of other unions; it is nevertheless the case that the federation is the largest organization of its kind in South Africa, and covers a range of sectors. Moreover, any potential divisions between union members are, arguably, less likely when they are members of the same federation, and therefore, the findings are more pertinent.

The analysis employs multinomial logit models to examine each of the three research objectives outlined above, drawing on unweighted data from the combined sample of 655 respondents. Multinomial logistic regression provides equivalent results to binary models, but allows the use of multiple categories of response, where this provides more nuanced results. Moreover, by using SPSS, it is possible to evaluate the results through the more accurate log-likelihood tests rather than approximate Wald tests.

## ***FINDINGS***

The results are split into three sections incorporating: (1) internal democracy; (2) member commitment to the union project; and (3) collective action. The potential explanatory (predictor) variables used in developing these models in each case are presented in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1  
**Explanatory Variables**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Description</i>
Gender	1 if Female; 0 otherwise
Ethnicity	1 if speaking Indo-European language; 0 if Indigenous (African)
Skill level	1 if semi-skilled or skilled; 0 if unskilled
Age	1 if over 35 years old; 0 if otherwise

3. Please see appendices within the volume by Buhlungu (2006) for details on survey respondents.

All of the variables presented in Table 1 are factors, that is, categorical (nominal or ordinal) explanatory variables, and in the case of age, skill level and ethnicity, were condensed into binary variables to obtain clearer analytical validity. Thus, age was categorized into those who were likely to have been economically active prior to apartheid's demise versus those who were not. Until the start of the 1990 De Klerk reforms that signaled the start of the process towards democratization, many Africans remained in secondary education until their early 20s. This was, at least partly, due to disruptions to secondary education caused by mass school boycotts. Skill level again represents an important divide, because until the 1980s most Africans were relegated to unskilled work, but from this period onwards, they gained access to semi-skilled and more skilled occupations. Workers were asked to give their skill level as categorized by their employer: as such, this question does not take account of additional informal skills that might exist. A further variable is ethnicity (measured by the proxy variable home language). Whites, and to a lesser extent, members of other ethnic minorities who were Indian or of mixed ethnic origin, had a privileged existence in the workplace prior to the ending of apartheid. The revitalization of the labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s centred on organizing African workers; less clear is the extent to which the unions have met the needs of hitherto privileged minorities. We have therefore explored the effects of home language—indigenous (9 different Nguni languages) or indo-European (two)—to distinguish African respondents from ethnic minorities. Further analysis on divisions within these two groupings may shed more light on internal divisions within the South African labour movement, a task which, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>4</sup>

The first research objective, outlined below, is investigated in the section that follows.

R1: To measure the level of internal democracy among COSATU's membership and assess whether gender, age, skill level and ethnicity are significant predictors of difference

In order to address this objective, the data analysis commenced with the development of summary statistics for each of the two dimensions of internal democracy outlined above: participation (attendance of union meetings) and representativeness. It was found that in response to a question asking about the frequency of attendance at union meetings ( $n = 629$ ), 74% of respondents had attended meetings at least once a month. At the same

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4. As is the case worldwide, the South African gene pool is very mixed, reflecting many years of colonization and resettlement; hence, the term ethnicity provides a better descriptor than race, which would suggest a particular genetic origin.

time, the figure was 74.5% for those who had elected a shop steward within the last three years.

Thus, high numbers of union members attended union meetings at least once a month, and similarly high numbers took part in shop steward elections within the last three years. In addition, attendance at union meetings was high in both the 2004 survey, and in the previous two surveys. Summary statistics are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
**General Levels of Attendance of Union Meetings in 1994, 1998 and 2004**

<i>Frequency of attendance</i>	<i>Year of survey (%)</i>		
	<i>1994</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>2004</i>
Never	14	10	8
Once a week	34	41	28
Once a month	43	36	46
Once a year	6	7	8
Do not know / cannot remember	4	6	10

Note: N = 629 for 2004; 639 in 1998; 623 in 1994.

The figures suggest high levels of participation that are arguably enviable to many developed and developing countries. Although, by 2004, a lower number of workers attended union meetings on a weekly basis, it can still be noted that fewer workers never attended meetings. The move toward monthly attendance might be due to less frequent meetings, reflecting practical organizational issues, but this could still impact on the long term reconstitution of solidarity. Following this initial analysis, multinomial logit models were developed in order to determine the predictive ability of each of the four potentially explanatory variables for the two dependent variables relating to participation and representativeness.

Firstly, in order to assess levels of participation, the multinomial variable “attendance at union meetings” was used as the dependent variable, with responses divided between those who attended once a week, those who attended once a month, those who attended once a year, and those who never attended meetings. Likelihood ratio tests showed that gender and ethnicity were significant, while age and skill level were not. These results are shown in Table 3.

A backward stepwise regression similarly pointed to the significance of the two predictors, and furthermore, it was found that no 2-way interactions were significant.

TABLE 3

**Likelihood Ratio Tests for Multinomial Model for Attendance  
of Union Meetings (N = 629)**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	146.502*	0.000	0	
Gender	172.310	25.807	3	.000
Age	148.888	2.385	3	.496
Skill	148.953	2.450	3	.484
Ethnicity	183.211	36.709	3	.000

Note: The chi-square statistic is the difference in -2 log-likelihoods between the final model and a reduced model. The reduced model is formed by omitting an effect from the final model. The null hypothesis is that all parameters of that effect are 0. This reduced model is equivalent to the final model because omitting the effect does not increase the degrees of freedom.

These conditions are equally relevant for all similar tests within this paper, but are not repeated beneath each model due to space constraints.

There are various possible explanations for the finding that both gender and ethnicity were significantly related to attendance at meetings, with females and those from indigenous backgrounds less likely to attend. Factors contributing toward the reduced likelihood of women's regular attendance at union meetings could include discrimination against women within trade unions, and the general tendency for women to be primarily responsible for domestic duties, while further factors that affect the propensity of women to attend union meetings include the persistence of conservative, patriarchal values, and sexual harassment (Baskin, 1991; Berger, 1992). Periodic moves to promote a greater degree of gender equity in unions, including the reservation of a proportion of executive offices for women, have made little headway. Nonetheless, it should be reiterated that the proportion of women regularly attending union meetings is still enviably high; cross-tabulations show that whilst somewhat lower than their male counterparts, 63% percent of female COSATU members attended union meetings at least once a month. In terms of ethnicity, differences probably reflect the persistence of different union traditions previously discussed. At the same time, age and skill level did not show statistically significant differences.

The second model investigated the explanatory power of each of the independent variables for representativeness, this time taking as the dependent variable "participation in the election of a shop steward within the last three years." The cut off point of three years was selected due to the

constitutional requirements by unions such as the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers South Africa) to hold workplace committee elections once every three years (NUM, 2006). As background to this analysis, it can be noted that in the 2004 survey, 26% of those interviewed held the position of shop steward. Moreover, 96% of respondents stated that they had shop stewards within their workplace. Likelihood ratio tests for the four independent variables are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4  
Likelihood Ratio Tests for Multinomial Model for Election  
of Shop Stewards (N = 621)

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	55.280	0.000	0	
Gender	60.027	4.747	1	.029
Age	58.232	2.952	1	.086
Skill	56.330	1.050	1	.306
Ethnicity	55.301	0.021	1	.884

Table 4 suggests that gender appears to have some explanatory power for predicting the likelihood that union members have elected a shop steward within the last three years, with women less likely to have been involved during this time period than men. However, ethnicity does not seem to have been a relevant factor in this case. There were slight differences in age—a somewhat higher proportion of workers under 35 had never participated in elections for shop stewards—which may reflect the gradual emergence of a more instrumental approach to work (Waddington and Whitston, 1997); however, taking the other factors into account, this was not statistically significant.

The second objective was to evaluate member commitment to the union project and to assess whether factors such as gender, age, skill and ethnicity predicted differences in this.

R2: To investigate the persistence of COSATU members' commitment to the union project, and assess whether gender, age, skill level or ethnicity are significant predictors of difference.

In order to operationalize the concept of commitment to the union project, members were asked whether they could rely on political parties to protect worker interests, and alternatively, whether they would always need trade unions to protect their interests. The latter does not, of course,

measure whether they see their current unions as representing their interests or not. However, it does gauge the extent to which union members believe that they will always need unions, a view that, at least in part, is likely to be shaped by their own experiences of belonging to a union, and whether the latter has been worthwhile. When asked whether they agreed with the statement that “Workers cannot rely on political parties to protect their interests,” a relatively small majority (53%) of trade union members either agreed or strongly agreed. With regard to whether “workers will always need unions to protect their interests,” it was found that the vast majority (95%) responded positively to this, thus suggesting a degree of commitment to the union project. We cannot assume that a negative view of political parties would make workers more reliant on unions. However, COSATU’s often outspoken position within the Tripartite Alliance is likely to be popular amongst those who question whether political parties are sympathetic to worker interests. Again, this does not mean that members would not seek other outlets, such as NGOs, especially if the union did not seem to be representing their interests, a question that did not form part of the survey, but might usefully be included in future rounds.

To assess whether each of the four independent variables (gender, age, skill level and ethnicity) were able to help explain these results, two further multinomial models were developed. The first tested the dependent variable relating to the ability of political parties to represent interests, asking whether respondents strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement outlined above. The results of this model are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5

**Reliance on Political Parties to Protect Worker Interests (N = 653)**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	152.882	0.000	0	
Gender	155.691	2.808	3	.422
Age	160.073	7.191	3	.066
Skill	157.845	4.963	3	.175
Ethnicity	156.206	3.323	3	.344

In this case, there were no significant findings: there was not a large variation in the numbers of those who did, and did not rely on political parties to represent their interests. However, in terms of reliance on the

labour movement, the use of a further model reveals that there is an apparent lack of consistency across different groupings (see Table 6).

TABLE 6  
**Reliance on the Trade Union to Protect Worker Interests (N = 654)**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	92.300	0.000	0	
Gender	100.665	8.365	3	.039
Age	98.621	6.321	3	.097
Skill	96.997	4.697	3	.195
Ethnicity	99.612	7.312	3	.063

While the figures for age and ethnicity are not significant, there was a statistically significant difference on the basis of gender ( $p < 0.05$ ). The figures for women mirror their lower degree of participation in union affairs. In summary, it would seem that whilst the overall figures are high, the lower degrees of participation in union affairs by women were also accompanied by generally less positive views on the long term need for unions.

This leads us to the third, and final, research objective:

R3: To ascertain COSATU members' experience of industrial action and whether membership characteristics such as gender, age, skill level and ethnicity are significant predictors of difference.

As indicated above, the level of involvement in collective action is an important indicator of the union's ability to mobilize workers. Within the survey, respondents were asked whether workers in their workplace had taken part in official strikes supported by the union, again analyzing differences according to the gender, age, skill, and ethnicity of workers. In 1998, 70% of respondents reported that workers in their workplace had been involved in official strikes since 1994 ( $n = 602$ ) while in 2004, the equivalent figure was 60% ( $n = 647$ ). Although by 2004, workers were less likely to have participated in official strikes, the numbers were nevertheless relatively high. As in the previous cases, a multinomial logit model was employed in order to assess the explanatory power of the four independent variables of gender, age, skill and ethnicity (see Table 7).

There were no significant differences according to member characteristics. Thus, the differences between different categories of worker in terms of participation in union affairs were less evident when it came to taking



TABLE 7  
**Participation in Official Strikes (N = 654)**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	59.365	0.000	0	
Gender	59.373	0.008	1	.930
Age	60.232	0.866	1	.352
Skill	62.384	3.019	1	.082
Ethnicity	59.425	0.059	1	.808

part in industrial action. Responses to a further question on whether unions had received support in their industrial action from other unions showed that for a relatively large minority (31%), this had been the case. Again, Table 8 reveals that there were no significant differences between particular categories of union members.

TABLE 8  
**Support from Other Trade Unions (N = 655)**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Model Fitting Criteria</i> -2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	<i>Likelihood Ratio Tests</i>		
		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	57.626	.000	0	
Gender	57.905	.279	1	.598
Age	57.684	.058	1	.809
Skill	57.715	.089	1	.765
Ethnicity	57.631	.005	1	.944

In short, solidarity action by unions was reported by just over a third of respondents, and different categories of labour were more-or-less equally likely to receive such support for industrial action in their organization.

***DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: FRACTURE  
OR SOLIDARITY? SOUTH AFRICAN UNIONS  
IN A CHANGING WORLD***

The rise of South African unions in the highly repressive political climate of the 1970s and 1980s, and the way in which they have coped with the challenges facing them in the early 2000s, highlight the complex effects

of institutional setting and broader economic changes. In the 1980s, they faced repressive state action, but were strengthened through the improved bargaining position of an increasingly skilled African workforce, and the groundswell of popular resistance to the indignities of racial discrimination and material inequalities both within and beyond the workplace, culminating in the mass insurrection of the 1980s. Since democratization, COSATU has been in a formal alliance with the ruling party, the African National Congress, and its junior partner, the South African Communist Party, and has more recently engaged in a coalition with NGOs aimed at addressing poverty and unemployment (Davies, 2005). In doing so, it has engaged with policy and legislative processes, but in a “complex and uneven” fashion (Cherry, 2004: 145).

The post-apartheid constitution is one of the most progressive in the world: citizens enjoy full rights to free association; unions enjoy legal protection, and have a wide range of organizing rights. However, economic liberalization has resulted in successive waves of job-shedding (Barchiesi and Kenny, 2002; Donnelly and Dunn, 2006), leading to a small pool of workers employed in formal sector work of a permanent nature. Moreover, given the activity of other social movements, workers have had various opportunities to voice their interests. This could have led to a decline in the influence of trade unions (Frege, 2000). A further consideration for the labour movement is that apparently high levels of internal democracy and solidarity have not precluded periodic internal disputes, leading to the formation of breakaway unions (Rachleff, 2001; Hlatswayo, 2005). In short, the post-apartheid era has been one of both opportunity and challenge.

The main objectives of this paper were to: evaluate the political and economic challenges currently facing the South African labour movement; critically examine the current debates on union solidarity and democracy; investigate the findings of a nationwide survey of COSATU members to explore the extent to which there has been fragmentation according to gender, age, skill level and ethnicity; and reflect on the implications of the literature and study’s findings for the South African trade unions, and for the broader labour movement.

The analysis of the survey has suggested persistently high levels of internal solidarity in the post-apartheid era. The overwhelming majority of members regularly participate in union affairs; there is a deeply embedded culture of democratic accountability, a high instance of participation in collective action, and a strong commitment to the labour movement. But at the same time, the findings suggest that women are somewhat less active in union affairs than men. This is despite periodic efforts to resolve this imbalance, and the acknowledged need to include women working in peripheral occupations such as street trading and rural farming (Ally, 2005).

This does not mean that women cannot be organized, or indeed that those jobs that women tend to undertake cannot be organized. It might, however, suggest that different strategies need to be undertaken—strategies that address the policy and political concerns of women and that promote their leadership role (Isaacs, 2006). The need for organizational reform is not unique to South African unions, and indeed, within both the developing and developed world, unions are struggling to meet the needs of a diverse membership, and at the same time ensure that they are adequately represented. Inequalities related to discrimination on the grounds of gender are not yet resolved (Orr, 2000; Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Healy, Bradley and Mukherjee, 2004), and nor are racial and economic concerns (Seidman, 2007). A legacy of different union traditions has meant that non African members of COSATU affiliates have seemed less willing to participate in internal union affairs; although there are apparently high overall levels of internal democracy, this does not necessarily make for tolerance, or for an acceptance of the legitimate concerns of minorities (von Holdt, 2002).

In summary, while unions have gained protection from operating within a democratic and open society, and have been in a strong position to press for the extension of the more progressive components of South African labour legislation to cover areas such as the public sector and agriculture, they have generally proved powerless to check the ANC's conversion to free market macro-economic policies, and the subsequent opening up of the South African market. Hence, the effectiveness of unions remains contingent on the strength of shopfloor organization and on their willingness and ability to engage in collective organization. Whilst unions worldwide are united by the logic of employment-income protection, the manner in which they pursue common goals reflects not just context but real strategic choices (Frenkel and Kuruvilla, 2002); it is incorrect to see the mixed fortunes of unions as merely the product of changes in the external environment. In the South African context, key strategic choices centre on how to sustain grassroots democracy, engage with the ANC, and accommodate the interests of a diverse constituency.

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## **RÉSUMÉ**

### **Les défis pour le mouvement syndical en Afrique du Sud : la mobilisation d'affiliations dans un contexte changeant**

Il existe une littérature abondante et croissante sur le rôle et l'influence des syndicats dans les pays en voie de développement et sur leur habileté à mobiliser leurs membres dans un arrière-plan de réformes néolibérales et de restructuration industrielle (Barchiesi et Kenny, 2002 ; von Holdt et Webster, 2008). Le mouvement syndical sud-africain représente une source d'inspiration pour le monde du travail organisé à travers la planète, mais il a dû faire face à bien des défis au cours des ans. Les objectifs principaux de cet essai se veulent une évaluation des défis politiques et économiques auxquels fait face le mouvement syndical sud-africain, une analyse critique des débats actuels sur la solidarité et la démocratie, un questionnement des conclusions d'une enquête à l'échelle nationale auprès des membres du Congrès des syndicats sud-africains (COSATU), tout cela en vue de reconnaître les fondements d'une mobilisation effective, d'évaluer dans quelle mesure il y a eu une fragmentation selon le sexe, l'âge, le niveau d'habileté et l'ethnicité, en vue de procéder à une réflexion sur les implications pour les syndicats sud-africains et le mouvement ouvrier dans son ensemble.

Même dans l'environnement profondément hostile des années 1970, la décennie où les syndicats indépendants ont fait leur apparition, il a été possible d'infléchir les politiques publiques, en cheminant vers une démocratisation complète de la politique. On possède cependant une certaine preuve à l'effet qu'au début des années 2000, les syndicats ont connu un affaiblissement de leur position : l'effectif syndical du secteur manufacturier a diminué, alors qu'on connaissait des pertes d'emploi de grande envergure dans ce même secteur (voir Makgetla et Seidman, 2005 ; Barchiesi et Kenny, 2002) et les représentants syndicaux élus se sont progressivement éloignés des préoccupations réelles de la base ouvrière. De plus, la démocratie au sein même de la fédération est devenue moins efficace, ce qui se reflétait dans les débats internes et dans la prolifération des syndicats cherchant à se désaffilier (Rachleff, 2001).

En demeurant dans ce contexte, cet essai analyse les fondements de la mobilisation au sein du COSATU, en retenant les caractéristiques des travailleurs, telles que le sexe, l'âge, le niveau d'aptitudes et l'ethnie, puisqu'elles ont déjà été signalées comme causes éventuelles de clivages au sein du mouvement ouvrier (Berger, 1992 ; Hyman, 1992 ; Moody, 1997 ; Wood et Psoulis, 2001 ; Clarke, 2004 ; Isaacs, 2006). Les conclusions mettent en évidence la continuité d'une forte solidarité interne, un engagement soutenu de la part des membres et une volonté de s'engager

dans l'action collective ; ce sont là les signes d'un rebondissement et d'une mobilisation au sein de l'organisation. Au même moment, les conclusions de l'étude révèlent que les femmes sont un peu moins actives que les hommes dans les affaires syndicales, en dépit des efforts périodiques pour corriger ce déséquilibre. Par ailleurs, l'héritage des traditions de différents syndicats laissait croire que des membres non africains affiliés au COSATU semblaient moins intéressés à participer aux affaires internes du syndicat, quoique cette situation ne se traduise pas par une volonté moindre de s'engager dans l'action collective.

La situation vécue par le mouvement ouvrier sud-africain au cours des années 1980 montre dans quelle mesure les syndicats peuvent se développer et croître dans un environnement économique et politique contraignant. Cependant, leur aptitude à influencer le changement demeure intimement liée à la force de l'organisation à la base et à la volonté et l'habileté des membres à s'impliquer dans l'organisation collective. Tout comme les syndicats à l'échelle mondiale, leur continuité et leur croissance ne dépendent pas seulement de l'environnement, mais également de choix stratégiques réels, en se centrant sur un engagement continu envers la démocratie en milieu de travail ; à cela s'ajoute le défi de concilier les intérêts de différents commettants. Les dissensions entre les groupements de travailleurs peuvent devenir plus graves dans l'environnement d'une flexibilité accrue du marché du travail et d'une croissance du travail précaire ; en effet, la discrimination selon la race et le sexe s'est effectivement accrue chez les travailleurs marginalisés, qui n'ont pas fait l'objet d'une protection adéquate par la législation (Clarke, 2004). Dans le passé, les déséquilibres au plan des sexes tant au sein des syndicats que dans la société en général ont découragé les femmes d'accepter des positions de leadership au sein des syndicats en Afrique du Sud, une exception importante cependant est celle de l'industrie du vêtement, qui demeure le château fort des femmes (Berger, 1992). En retour, cela signifiait que dans bien des cas les femmes étaient moins impliquées dans la planification des campagnes syndicales, dans l'élaboration des programmes syndicaux et l'établissement des politiques ; ce qui minait à la fois la solidarité à l'interne et l'efficacité (Isaacs, 2006). Le fait que les positions de leadership au sein du COSATU soient occupées par les hommes fait en sorte de sous-estimer la persistance d'inégalités au plan des sexes au sein du mouvement syndical.