

State of the unions: Are South Africa's trade unions still relevant?

Trade unions played a key role in the struggle for democracy and worker rights in South Africa, but [only 23% of the country's economically active population now belong to a union](#), down from 34% in 2016.



Sibanye-Stillwater strike action. Source: Siphwe Sibeko/Reuters

With the younger, post-1994 generation of workers not convinced of the value of union membership, and older members losing trust in unions, Workers' Day on 1 May is an apt time to consider how trade unions can ensure they remain relevant and adapt to the changing future of work, says employment relations expert and lecturer at Stellenbosch Business School, Gawie Cillié.

“Just as the future of work is uncertain, so is the future of trade unions. In the context of political transition and serious economic challenges, South African trade unions must show great resilience and demonstrate their capability to revitalise themselves in innovative ways.”

“It is a case of adapt, or die,” Cillié said.

Declining membership, inter-union rivalry

South Africa's 225 registered trade unions represent approximately three million workers, but changing employment contracts, including outsourcing, informalisation of jobs and remote working, have led to diminishing membership numbers.

“Trade unions are recruiting members from the same pool and losing members to rival unions in the same sector. They need to look beyond the existing pool of workers and consider how to organise unorganised employees as well as looking to appeal to younger workers.

“The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the informal sector to the livelihoods of many South Africans – there is an organising opportunity there for trade unions to represent and protect these workers,” he said.

Cillié said that in addition to declining membership leading to reduced income for trade unions, the movement had also lost the support of international donors that supported trade unions during the struggle for democracy.

This impacted the unions’ ability to recruit and train competent officials, while many officials had also left the movement for more lucrative private sector roles.



SA Informal Traders Alliance partners CCMA to upskill sector, promote formalisation

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Loss of trust

At the same time, he said, workers had lost trust in unions and their officials due to perceptions of “business trade unionism”, that union leaders were more concerned with enriching themselves than with their members’ daily workplace challenges.

“The question that arises for ordinary workers is: why should they belong to a trade union and pay their subscriptions when they are failed by their union? Unions have become bureaucracies in which officials lack accountability to their members,” Cillié said.

The relationship of trade unions with the governing party and government since 1994 is now questioned by both analysts and workers, asking whether trade unions can effectively represent and serve workers while also in alliance with the country’s biggest employer.

Call for independence

“Workers and critics argue that trade unions should be independent of any political party so that they can fight effectively when workers’ interests are undermined by government policies, and that alliance with the ruling party is a conflict of interest that is no longer tenable,” Cillié said.

Cillié sketched four possible future scenarios facing trade unions – marginalisation, where unionisation continues to decline and ageing unions lose strength and credibility; or dualisation, with unions defending their current positions, focusing on servicing workers in sectors where they remain strong, mainly workers in permanent employment in large industries and the public sector.

In a replacement scenario, alternative forms of worker participation, led by management, [take the place of trade unions](#).



No collective bargaining, collective action without unions

While workers would still be protected by the country's comprehensive labour law system, Cillié said the power of collective bargaining and collective action would be lost.

"In the absence of union representation and collective bargaining, there will be no negotiations between unions and employers to improve the basic conditions provided in labour legislation. Employers will be the sole decision-maker on working conditions, wages, health and safety and so on, irrespective of the level of worker participation and representation that is allowed in various types of participation forums that could be set up," he said.

In a revitalisation scenario, trade unions would play a key role in strengthening inclusive and effective social dialogue.

Changing nature of work

Cillié proposes that trade unions "urgently embark on the path to revitalisation" by listening to the needs of a new generation of workers, embracing technology and considering new forms of organising and collective action.

They need to take into account the changing nature of work and how to represent workers in new forms of work such as remote working as well as the informal economy.

"Unions need to be debating how the movement can act collectively – across sectors, at regional and national level – and how to improve the mandating, management and elections of trade unions be improved.

"It can be argued that trade unions are indispensable to a balanced economic environment, but they need to find innovative ways to revitalise themselves or continue to lose members and be pushed towards becoming irrelevant," Cillié said.

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