

The Politics of Solidarity

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The Politics of Solidarity

Privatisation, Precarious Work and Labour
in South Africa

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To the workers whose story this book tells

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1 Introduction

The two years during which I conducted research in South Africa, from 2012 to 2014, were a tumultuous time for the South African labour movement. Although there were signs of a crisis within the labour movement before that time, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was still regarded as a powerful force and one of the most influential political players. In 2012, with 2.2 million members, organised in 19 unions, COSATU represented the bulk of trade union members, the majority of them being labourers and skilled workers (COSATU 2012a, 8, 13–5).

In 2012 3.06 million union members were organised in 196 registered trade unions in South Africa, which matched a union density of slightly more than 30 per cent (DoL 2013, 27). At the time, the Federal Union of South Africa (FEDUSA) with a total membership of 450,000 and the National Congress of Trade Unions (NACTU) with about 300,000 members were the second and third largest labour federations in the country (NED-LAC 2012). The three trade union federations differed in many respects, particularly in their membership composition, their structure as well as their political trajectory and identity (see for a detailed comparison Ludwig 2017a; Macun 2014; Webster and Buhlungu 2004).

However, since 2012 the largest federation of the country has found itself on the brink of a split, and its affiliates have been confronted with the decision about how to define their role, particularly in relation to the ruling party, the ANC and the SACP, with whom COSATU has formed an alliance since 1990. The dilemma came to a head in December 2013 when COSATU's largest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), decided not to support the ruling party, the African National Congress, in the April 2014 elections. Instead, it announced that it would be forming a United Front, where unions would move beyond organising around traditional workplace concerns in order to address community struggles. This initiative triggered a debate on the future politi-

cal and organisational direction of the South African labour movement. In 2017, a new federation was launched, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), which with about 700,000 members is the second-largest federation at present.

A watershed moment that contributed to the dynamics within the labour movement was the Marikana massacre near Rustenburg on the 16th August 2012, in which 34 miners were killed by the police and 78 were injured. Rock drill operators went on an unprotected strike¹ in demand of a living wage of R12,500 that was about three times their salary. The strike, which was characterised by violence, as eight strikers, police and security personnel lost their lives, lasted more than six weeks and ended with mine workers achieving a wage increase of up to 22 per cent and a single payment of R2,000. In a nutshell, Marikana has brought the post-apartheid reality to the fore: the willingness of the state, led by the former liberation movement, to respond to labour disputes and community protests with violence, the endurance of the apartheid wage gap, an established trade union movement losing touch with their membership base, and the contested nature of the post-apartheid labour relations system (Chinguno 2013; Sinwell and Mbatha 2016). In South Africa, social conflicts, particularly in the form of community protests are on the rise, indicating that the ANC's slogan in the first democratic election in 1994 of "a better life for all" has not materialised for the majority of black South Africans.² The rise in popular protests is matched by a parallel increase in labour conflicts and, in particular, unprotected strikes.³

Many scholars agree that trade unions in South Africa are faced with a fundamental crisis of representation as they have largely failed to organise an increasingly precarious workforce. Less than one third of the economically active population are part of the core of formal sector workers with stable employment relationships, wages, benefits and access to democratic worker and trade union rights (von Holdt and Webster 2005). The majority

1 Strikes are unprotected when they do not comply with the terms of the Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995 (section 64) and may constitute a reason for dismissal.

2 The racial classifications of "African", "Coloured", "Asian" and "White" are a legacy of apartheid. Scholars opposed to apartheid have rightly rejected this terminology and referred to all racially oppressed people by using the term "black"; a tradition which I follow in this study. However, as the categories have remained relevant in statistics, I will refer to them where necessary for the purpose of clarity.

3 In 2013, the ratio of unprotected strikes actually exceeded the percentage of protected strikes (DoL 2014: 8).

is located outside of contracted work because they are informal workers or unemployed.

Although COSATU and its affiliates have repeatedly stressed the need to organise vulnerable workers outside comparatively stable employment relationships, little progress has been made. More than 90 percent of COSATU members have a permanent full-time position and are located in the core of the labour market (COSATU 2012a: 14). The fragmentation of employment relationships across sectors has consequences for trade union politics and organising as it undermines labour standards and unions gains, and erodes the basis of solidarity in the workplace. This makes organising a complex task and limits trade unions' ability to speak for the broad working class in South Africa (Buhlungu 2010: 96; von Holdt and Webster 2008; Webster and Buhlungu 2004; Kenny and Webster 1998). As Barchiesi argues, "unions often face a dilemma: casualization undermines them, but their organizational tools are inadequate to contest it" (Barchiesi 2011: 78).

This contradiction between problem awareness and practice triggered my interest in learning about the concrete strategies that unions apply when confronted with workplace fragmentation, their interactions with precarious and informal workers, and the reasons for their successes or failures. While there is a range of studies on the extent, causes and impact of precarious work in general, and in municipalities in particular (Barchiesi 2011; Lier 2009; Samson 2003), there has been limited research on the concrete strategies and practices of trade unions in responding to these challenges.

This study seeks to explain whether and how trade unions are able to build solidarity in a society that is characterised by a severe social crisis: persistently high levels of unemployment, increasing social inequalities and social conflicts as well as a highly fragmented labour market, in which the majority of the economically active population are located outside the standard employment relationship. In the face of workplace fragmentation, trade unions can either follow a strategy of exclusive solidarity, where they either defend the relative privileges of their membership in the core, or aim at building inclusive solidarity (Hyman 2001, 170) by including those at the margins of the workplace or in society. Whether trade unions will be able to find ways of reaching out to fragmented workforces is one of crucial questions for the future viability of trade unions, and not only in South Africa.

1.1 Central Research Question and Aims of Research

The municipal sector and its largest union, the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) was chosen as a case study. In South Africa, local government is the primary sphere responsible for many of the basic services such as water, waste management, electricity distribution, sanitation, roads, land use and planning (Pieterse et al. 2008, 3), and therefore plays a vital role in addressing the apartheid legacy of spatial and social inequalities. The impact of South Africa's social crisis is most drastically felt at the local level where the allocation and distribution of public services is contested and embattled. As Hart argues, local government has become the key site of contradictions in

“official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially inflected capitalist society marked by massive inequalities and increasingly precarious livelihoods for the large majority of the population.” (Hart 2013, 5)

At the time of research, SAMWU, a mainly blue-collar workers union, with a union density of nearly 55 per cent, was COSATU's sixth biggest affiliate. However, similar to COSATU's overall membership, about 146,000 of the total membership of 160,000 were permanent municipal employees, which equated to more than 90 per cent of SAMWU's membership (SAMWU 2012: 18). Therefore, the union's membership did not reflect the heterogeneity of employment relationships in the municipal sector, including private companies, public works programmes and the informal sector, despite a general commitment of the union to organise “all those employed directly or indirectly” (SAMWU 2010, n.pag.) in local authorities.

At the same time, SAMWU had demonstrated a greater openness towards building alliances with communities and social movements than other COSATU affiliates in the past (Barchiesi 2007, 52). According to a COSATU's (2012, 55) workers' survey the highest proportion of union members who participated in community protests were from SAMWU. As a union official explains, it is because of the overlapping of workers and community-based identities why municipal workers “do not draw that line between this is community, this is SAMWU, because it is service-based and service-based is our work” (46/SAMWU national official 1/2).

A peculiarity of municipal work is its location at the intersection of workers, citizens and the state (Barchiesi 2007, 52). Municipal workers are centrally involved in the production and provision of public services in communities on a daily basis. Since many municipal workers reside in poor

and disadvantaged communities, they are also directly affected by the lack of service delivery as users. In local government, the union not only interacts with the ANC as an alliance partner but also as an employer, and as a shaper of local policies which has led SAMWU to display a more ambivalent relationship towards the ANC than other COSATU affiliates (Lier 2009, 250). As Johnston (1994, 12) argues, public sector unions, especially in local government, are involved in contests concerning the public agenda and the public good. They are, inevitably, both economic and political actors (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010, 317).

Against this backdrop, the following analysis seeks to explain how trade unions in South Africa have responded to the fragmentation of work by comparing local union practices and strategies. It is based on a comparison of SAMWU's strategies in addressing the fragmentation of municipal employment in three metropolitan municipalities, namely Johannesburg, Cape Town and Ekurhuleni. Fragmentation refers to the way and form in which work is organised and splintered across sites and employers (Millstein and Jordhus-Lier 2012, 198). The focus is on local union structures because these are at the coalface of interacting with a fragmented workforce and responding to structural changes in the workplace. This study looks at the strategic choices of SAMWU in light of the power resources approach by addressing the following questions:

- To what extent and in which form has privatisation altered municipal employment relationships and labour relations in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Ekurhuleni?
- Which strategies does SAMWU apply in order to respond to the fragmentation of municipal employment relationships?
- Which factors enable or limit SAMWU's ability to build solidarity within and beyond the workplace? Which power resources are developed in the process of building inclusive solidarity?

By analysing the structures that shape the field of municipal employment relations and the union's local strategies, the study seeks to reconstruct the process through which the municipal workers' union re-builds solidarity in fragmented workforces. As my two formative central arguments it is assumed that, first, privatisation policies in South Africa have fundamentally altered municipal employment relationships and that the inability of SAMWU to organise workers at the margins has eroded its associational power in the workplace. Second, it is expected that strategies of inclusive

solidarity can be realised through a broader understanding of class interests, which addresses precarity, incorporates new types of employees and supports their active participation in the union.

1.2 Overview of the Book

In Chapters Two and Three the theoretical and methodological framework will be developed. The theoretical approach of power resources basically assumes that trade unions in capitalist societies are embedded in unequal societal power relations. The power resources approach provides an analytical lens that helps to analyse workers' power in a contested and changing field of power relations. Far from being a static concept, the power resources approach acknowledges the transformative character of working class power, both actual and potential (von Holdt and Webster 2008, 336). It is therefore grounded in an understanding that trade unions do have strategic choices as to how to respond to changing conditions and how to innovate practices that allow for the strengthening, rebuilding or invention of power resources. This provides the theoretical frame for the analysis of trade union strategies in their local settings. The case study of municipal workers' power resources is methodologically based on the ethnographic approach of the "extended case method", on participatory observation and on problem centred interviews with municipal workers, shop stewards and union leaders.

Chapter Four discusses the economic-political context in the transition period from apartheid to democracy and in the years of the first democratic government. The chapter starts with a brief history of the migrant labour system and of the democratic trade union movement in South Africa, paying particular attention to the different union traditions that came together to form COSATU in 1985 and SAMWU in 1987 and shaped its particular features of social movement unionism and worker control. In a second step, the government's contested macro-economic shift towards the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme (GEAR) in 1996 will be analysed, as it shaped to a significant degree the local government restructuring process. This section is followed by an overview of the subsequent national legislation with regard to privatisation. The impact of these policies on the South African labour market will be discussed in the light

of von Holdt's and Webster's (2005) model of the three zones of flexible work. The crisis of the South African labour movement, which also affected the local structures in SAMWU, will also be briefly examined.

Chapter Five analyses the restructuring process in Johannesburg and Cape Town towards a non-racial local government system after apartheid and the role that privatisation policies played at the local level. This cycle of the transformation of municipal work covers the shift to privatisation, from 1996 to 2000, which was characterised by an intense ideological contention and trade unions' opposition to privatisation. Particularly relevant was the conflict around iGoli 2002 in Johannesburg, as it was the most-far reaching plan of contracting out municipal departments and set a model for other municipalities.

The case studies, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Ekurhuleni, are the subject of Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, respectively. In each case study the impact of privatisation policies will be analysed by applying von Holdt and Webster's model of three zones of work to employment relationships in the municipal sector. The focus of the respective chapters, however, is on the union strategies in responding to increasing fragmentation at the workplace. Of particular interest are the concrete ways in which the union and its core membership of permanent workers interact with workers in the non-core and the periphery, if and how solidarity between the different types of workers is created by the union's regions and which factors facilitate or exacerbate this process.

Chapter Nine will offer a conclusion on the development of municipal work in South Africa, the factors that made a difference in SAMWU's organisational strategies and to the power resources that the union was able to mobilise in the process of building inclusive solidarity in an increasingly fragmented workforce.

