

## Regression of workers' unity in South Africa: Divisions postpone greater progress and ultimate victory Alex Mohubetswane Mashilo

In their classical work on the incessant class struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed, Marx and Engels (1848) discuss the necessity of workers' organisation and their political unity as a class. This unity, they found, was sometimes upset by competition between workers. While there has been much attention on the recent fracturing in South Africa's labour movement, I argue in this column that divisions have a long history in the country's trade unions. Trade unions were introduced exclusively for white workers. This racial divide and rule became part of capital's profit maximisation strategy, making black workers a cheap labour reserve for super-exploitation. They united and fought for the right to unionise. Recent divisions reflect the fragmentation of that unity because of competition.

### The old fault lines

Workers' unity is fragmented not only in South Africa but in many parts of the world. Trade union divisions in South Africa date back to the colonial establishment of capitalism in the country, to start with, as stated above, on the grounds of race. There is a massive literature about the problem. But studies examining its impact on the workplace in the context of South Africa's transition to democracy, particularly those employing the useful concept of the 'apartheid workplace regime', emerged only recently. The concept is useful in locating old labour divisions in production relations and distinguishing between old and new grounds of divisions. New divisions are occurring in a terrain of democratic workplace and national transformation.

Webster and Von Holdt (2005: 4) explain Von Holdt's concept: 'In South Africa specifically, the apartheid workplace regime constituted a racial structuring of workplace relations'. The study of the footwear sector by Mosoetsa (2005) found that organised workers in that sector belonged to two unions each affiliated to a different federation. One of the unions was founded in 1956. At that time black workers were not allowed to unionise.

Webster (1985) developed, in the 1980s, a profound analysis of the labour process covering the racial dualism of South Africa's labour market and the associated division of workers. At the workplace, this duality was based on what was to become known as the apartheid workplace regime, which articulated capitalist exploitation, divided workers racially and further enforced patriarchal relations at work. At first black workers were not allowed to unionise (Webster 1985; Godfrey et al, 2010). They were not even covered by the definition of an employee (Godfrey et al. 2010). They were super-exploited without labour rights.

Webster identifies three major thrusts for black unionisation before the 1970s: one in the 1920s, another during the Second World War, and a third in the 1950s and 1960s. Each was met with violence or repressive legislation from the oppressive state. A fourth thrust to unionise gained momentum after the 1979 amendments to the Labour Relations Act permitted black workers to form trade unions (Godfrey et al. 2010). Many unions that are today affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) were consequently formed during the 1980s.

Competition between workers should be understood to be a direct result, to a significant extent, of capital's strategy to maximise profit by pitting workers against each other in a race to the bottom for resources presented to them as scarce. In 1922, for instance, mine workers who enjoyed white privilege went on strike in reaction to the Chamber of Mines reducing the proportion of white to black workers and transferring some semi-skilled jobs to black workers at lower rates of pay ('Lerumo' (Harmel), 1971).

Racial divisions remain embedded in the labour movement. South Africa still has unions that have their roots in advancing racially articulated privileges engineered under colonial and apartheid oppression. Associated with this is racially structured labour-aristocratic conservatism which reacts negatively towards revolutionary politics. There are also unions that reflect a liberal worldview in reaction to the country's transition to democracy, including – as in the case of the above-mentioned labour conservatism – opposition to state intervention in the economy after 1994 such as affirmative action.

Another dimension of the pre-1994 divisions was alignment to different political currents that emerged in the struggle against apartheid. Most unions aligned with the alliance headed by the African National Congress (ANC).

South African unions have recently been hit by another wave of destructive competition, resulting in further fragmentation.

### Contemporary proliferation and competition

The contemporary labour movement in South Africa is characterised by increasing competition amongst unions proliferating in already organised sectors. According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2016), the country's labour force was approximately 21.2 million by the official definition, with just more than 15.5 million of these employed. The formal sector employed about 11 million, while 2.5 million were in the informal sector, 825 000 in agriculture and about 1.3 million in private households.

According to data I obtained from the Department of Labour (2016), by April 2016 South Africa had 187 registered unions. Four new unions were registered by September 2016, bringing the number to 191. The total number of workers organised under the 187 unions registered by April 2016 was just fewer than 3.6 million. This meant that only 33% of formal sector employees were organised while the unorganised constituted 67%.

The sad reality is that destructive competition is concentrated in areas already organising the 33%, while not paying sufficient attention if any on organising vulnerable workers. The net effect of the competition is fragmentation and weakening class unity, regardless of which union loses or wins.

The Department of Labour's data shows that there were at least 11 registered unions with a membership of less than 100. The smallest had 23 members. There were also unions or staff associations that were not nationally organised but were company-based or institutionally-based. Some unions existed only in one region. Others were based on a trade or profession.

New divisions include those emerging out of contests over leadership positions. What happens on the surface is not always a true reflection of its essence. Rather than reflecting worker democracy, at times these contests are, beneath the surface, essentially factional fights for control over workers' resources, or manifestations of competition between corporate interests for access to workers as a market for various financialised products.

In many instances this disruption of unity is presented as the result of ideological differences, including revolutionary sounding rhetoric and posturing as 'holier than thou' in 'us against them' factions. Some line-ups are sponsored by competing sections of capital in return for market access to workers and support in competition. There are therefore union shop stewards, appointed officials and elected leaders who serve those private interests. In 2012 the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) stated that Shiva Uranium allegedly sponsored a leadership contest at its congress and apologised (Business Day, 29 May 2012). The union further confirmed the allegation of the sponsorship (e.NCA, 18 November 2016). At the extreme, a failure to capture leadership positions leads to splits and the creation of new unions or federations. This is also to be found among others in cases of wilful refusals to abide by discipline.

In addition, corporate capture based on business unionism involving commercialised benefits and services has found its expression. Related to this is corruption and abuse of office or power.

Some splits involve personality cults, including some who are either known or have publicly admitted to have abused workers' resources or offices in pursuit of private affairs. COSATU admittedly experienced some of the flagrant abuse of office for private ends (The New Age, 31 Dec 2013).

## Conclusion

Divisions pose serious challenges to industry-wide organisation of workers, and to COSATU's principle of one country, one federation. Without unity and cohesion, workers will only be fragmented quantities. They will not be capable of overcoming economic exploitation, overthrowing its class forces and driving fundamental social change. Those furthering divisions or separatism are serving the interests not of workers' unity but of capital. Workers must rise up against their own weaknesses and defeat internal class divisions in order to reposition their struggle against economic exploitation towards victory. This requires organisational renewal based on deepening class politics, uprooting business unionism and corporate influence, and intensifying focus on uplifting workers conditions.

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