

After a difficult liberation, South Africa's largest trade union ponders the future

A Union In Transformation: An Assessment of NUMSA's Attempt to Develop its Political and Organisational Independence, 2012-2016

A Case Study by Miriam Di Paola

It has been a momentous few years for the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). Since 2014 it has survived the organizational break from the country's biggest trade union federation, faced dissent from within and without, and seen membership grow to the largest of any union in the history of the continent.

But it has struggled to find a niche in its new, more independent incarnation, on both institutional and societal levels. A bid to form a new trade union federation was launched in April 2017, after a number of delays. Attempts to create a united front of workers and grassroots organizations have stalled amid politicking and a lack of connection to communities. And the avowed objective to find a new, wider social relevance for the movement has not yet found a clear direction or voice.

The racial twist to South Africa's class struggle

South Africa's labour movement has a particular history, as the country's overwhelmingly black workers for decades laboured under the double oppression of apartheid and capitalist exploitation. The question of which to tackle first has long divided workers' rights movements.

In 1973, the question came to a head. The eastern coastal town of Durban was racked by a wave of strikes, which gave birth to the combative Metal and Allied Workers Union, marking the end of "Apartheid's golden age"

In the words of veteran sociology professor Eddie Webster, writing in 1985: "For the first time in South African history, a mass-based, non-racial, industrial union was created, giving birth to a working class politics."

Through the 1970s and 80s, the country's workers became increasingly organized, as the class struggle made better progress than the fight against apartheid. NUMSA was formed in

1987 out of the merger of four unions in the metal and automotive sectors, and quickly became a leading force within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

The unions needed political support, and COSATU found natural allies in the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. In 1990, as the negotiations that would dismantle apartheid got under way, the three organizations formed the Tripartite Alliance.

The alliance marked a shift away from NUMSA's class-based strategy, and put the political liberation of the country's black and coloured population at the heart of its Freedom Charter. But the partnership with the rising powers gave the unions a seat at the political table.

The Alliance years, and the “paradox of victory”

For the next two decades, under successive ANC governments from 1994, COSATU fought alongside the rest of the alliance to improve the lives of union members and the rest of the country's black and working class.

But already during the 90s, some unionists were uncomfortable with government policies. A 1996 programme to boost employment in fact ended up eroding job security among workers, according to activists and academic observers. The Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy liberalised trade and finance, privatised or corporatized basic services, and allowed for outsourcing of non-core operations by employers.

This deregulation was seized on by all employers, producing what labour lawyer Jan Theron called “informalization from above” in previously well-organized sectors including mining, nursing and the post office.

Pragmatic voices among NUMSA cadres saw these compromises as necessary. But others were increasingly frustrated with how much the unions had to concede in order to be kept on board: the “paradox of victory,” in the words of sociology professor Sakhela Buhlungu.

That frustration grew under Presidents Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008), and led to high hopes of his successor Jacob Zuma (from 2009). But these were quickly dashed as the government failed to significantly change the course of its economic policies.

The “NUMSA moment”

The union has always seen itself as fighting for more than just better working conditions. Its ultimate objective is a new, independent working-class politics to be pursued in all spheres: corporate negotiations, media narratives, party politics and grass-roots communities.

This ambition initially led NUMSA to support the unions’ political partnerships, but then led to its disenchantment with the Tripartite Alliance, which it said was incapable of championing a truly pro-workers and pro-poor agenda, whether measured by class or by race. “The government failed to secure economic power for the black majority,” NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim said.

At a special congress in 2013, NUMSA opted to withdraw from the governing alliance and withhold its dues from the SACP, a split that has been referred to as the “NUMSA moment” in South Africa’s labour relations.

"It is clear that the working class cannot any longer see the ANC or the SACP as its class allies in any meaningful sense," Jim was quoted as saying in news reports at the time.

Although the bulk of COSATU members remained on board with the alliance, in 2014 NUMSA was expelled from COSATU for officially for violating the COSATU principle of “one union, one sector” by organising throughout value chains.

A new voice for the future

NUMSA has been successful in striking out alone, further increasing its membership and securing recognition with the authorities and employers’ forums. But how far it has been able to achieve, or even define, its subsequent achievements is another matter.

Membership, a key metric of associational power, has gone from strength to strength, adding up to 340,000 members compared to 220,000 in 2009. Already the country’s largest-ever union before the split, NUMSA has recruited tens of thousands of new members in new sectors including transport and healthcare and was able to reach out to young workers.

Media coverage has portrayed the newly independent union as the voice of the workers for matters ranging beyond economic conditions to those of wider social concern. This improved societal power has in turn translated into further membership gains, for example in the transport sector.

By careful framing of its struggle, the union has also made some new allies. When Chinese dumping threatened the auto sector, for example, the union portrayed the issue in a nationalist light, prompting the government to support the whole sector, including the employer corporations, against the foreign threat.

The youth is another good example of improved societal impact. NUMSA's Youth Forum has provided a point of engagement with the nation's youth movement more widely, and union leaders have met with protesting students several times in recent months.

However, the union is still struggling on several fronts.

In its traditional role as representing workers' interests and dedicated to a socialist transformation project, it is launching a new Federation to rival COSATU, alongside 9 other unions who left and uniting 57 organisations in total, many of them newly found or independent unions organizing precarious workers. But many of these organisations have reported administrative difficulties in formal recognition. "It has taken more than two years only to register" with the Department of Labour, said Thobile Ntola, President of the South African Public Service Union. COSATU unions "were adducing all sorts of requirements to slow down the process," he said. Because of these and other artificial delays, his union was not part of the official bargaining forum with employers in its sector, he said.

The new union of unions was launched in April. Its main principles are independence from political parties, democracy, worker control, and cooperation. The new union will not be a member of any political party, but nor will it be apolitical, said Zwelinzima Vavi, the convenor of its steering committee, and the ousted former general secretary of COSATU.

But in the meantime, the union has also been working on deepening its political impact at grass-roots level through another initiative. The United Front (UF) was established – initially with COSATU backing in 2014 – to improve cooperation with community-based organizations.

The UF has run into its own problems, as most members of its committee turned out to be NGO directors or employees, with little direct experience of the working-class communities they were supposed to represent. This legitimacy problem and a lack of coherent strategy and common agenda have stalled the project for the time being.

Growth potential

Across South Africa, an estimated 74% of workers remain not unionised, a significant opportunity for a reinvigorated workers' movement. As difficult economic conditions prevail and disenchantment with the ruling political parties is high, this represents further potential support for the right movement, even beyond the traditional base of industrial workers.

The numbers are also there in terms of membership. But greater internal intermediation and learning are essential to give the workers' movement nationwide coherence, and external alliances and outreach is needed to improve its traction with new members, the media, and society more widely, including academia.

In particular, NUMSA needs to mend its bridges with the academic community. For decades it was considered the flagship of South African workers' movement by the country's social scientists. But recent tensions have led to open disputes, such as an unprecedented attack on academics at the NUMSA 2016 congress. More needs to be done on both sides to make room for more constructive engagement.

Paraphrasing the general secretary, it is the duty of the working class and its leaders to reach the hearts and minds of academics to support their project of emancipation.

This does not mean that the union should stifle all internal dissent. Factional dynamics can be a source of enriched debate, and of cooperative factionalism. But not if the strife becomes exclusionary or degenerative, as has recently been the case.

NUMSA is still the country's leading workers' organization, with more members than any other in the history of the continent, and who strongly see it as their political home due to the process of emancipation since the split from COSATU.

To turn this into real progress, it will need to reach deep into its own history of dialogue and consensus, as well as its radical political roots, to stay relevant and effective for the future.