



Public Servants Association
The Youth and the Future of Trade Unions in South Africa

June 2020

Historical accounts on South Africa's trade union development emphasise the significance of youth in transforming labour policy advocacy and politics. This youth-led influence was most impactful during two crucial periods in the country's labour movement history: the early 1970s and the mid-1980s. Young union members drove organisational renewal and transformation during these two crucial periods. This was also at the height of radicalisation on the back of the Durban strikes of 1973, the Soweto student uprising, and the resurgence of grassroots activism marked by the budding of civic organisations and the formation of the United Democratic Front. Many of the young people who would enter the labour force were drawn from the student movement, civic organisations and political formations. The link between shop floor and broader societal socio-economic injustices facilitated young peoples' desire to participate in trade union politics. Sakhela Buhlungu explains this well using the following words: 'Many of the workers who participated in the formation of the new unions in the 1970s had come through a period of turbulence in the education arena, where they had been thrust into positions of leadership' in anti-apartheid education struggles. ¹

This link between youth civic participation and transition into trade union activism has not been sustained to the same extent in the post-apartheid era. The findings from academic research publications, internal union reports and workers surveys indicate that 'younger workers are less likely than older workers to be members of a trade union' ². Reasons for low union density amongst young employees (in both private and public sectors) cut across economy-wide structural and internal trade union organisational factors. The primary structural dimension is the high-level of youth unemployment in South Africa. It currently stands at 60% and there are 3.3 million young people not in education, employment or training.

This challenge is compounded by the precarious employment undertaken by youths who are lucky to find jobs in this exclusionary labour market. Most young workers are in low-paying atypical employment, which makes it difficult for trade union organisers to recruit them. It is, therefore, essential that union sector organisers and coordinators accelerate efforts towards addressing structural youth unemployment in their sectors. This programme should also advocate for improved working contracts and conditions for younger employees. South Africa is a signatory and participant in the International Labour Organisation's Decent Work Country Programme. The programme does not exclude workers on the basis of age, sex or occupational category.

¹ Buhlungu, S. (2010). A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transition in South Africa.

² Naledi, 2015. The COSATU Worker Surveys of 2006 and 2012: what do they tell us?

Another structural impediment for increased youth employment is the inability to track the impact of youth employment policy incentives. Government has ring-fenced billions for the Youth Employment Tax Incentive (ETI) over the past years. Yet, there are contrasting reports from trade unions, government officials and researchers on the subsidy's policy outcomes. It is not clear whether the ETI has improved youth employment significantly, and if it translates to long-term labour market retention for young workers. Trade union organisers should focus on this subsidy because they operate within specific sectors. It is important to track the youth employment numbers and the nature or type of employment created. President Cyril Ramaphosa introduced an additional incentive in 2018: The Youth Employment Service (YES) under the policy framework of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE). Representatives of trade unions on sector specific B-BBEE transformation councils should actively monitor developments in the YES programme and assess its outcomes. This union policy oversight should not be limited to the new youth employment incentives or policy programmes. Long-standing interventions such as internships and graduate programmes deserve equal scrutiny and policy implementation evaluation.

All these interventions cannot succeed without transforming trade union organising culture and strategy. The main shift is rebuilding connections between trade unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the same sectors. For example, Equal Education (EE) is an NGO that pursues advocacy in the basic education sector, and it raises pertinent structural problems in our education system. These issues have a direct impact on working conditions for educators and other staff members employed in the sector. Young people lead the advocacy and most of them transition to the formal workplace after serving in the organisation. Trade unions can benefit in the long run from running joint campaigns with these organisations on specific policy issues. Young people participating in these structures will associate trade unions with social justice activism and this increases their political interest for joining trade unions when entering formal employment in later years.

Trade union organisers need to also appreciate the role of technology and social media in pursuing higher youth trade union membership. Young people in South Africa use social media and technological tools to express policy advocacy positions. These platforms are also essential for knowledge and information sharing.³ We observed the organisational power and influence of these platforms during the youth led *FeesMustFall* protests and recent *BlackLivesMatter* mobilisation. The labour movement needs to dedicate resources towards developing technologies, which support social media strategies and organising through technological platforms. Youth social justice advocacy is dynamic and constantly changing, especially in an era shaped by the transition towards a digital economy.

The final shift in organisational culture relates to leadership development and inclusion. It is very important to ensure that young workers are given the necessary capacity to lead at various levels of trade union structures. This sustains the quality of trade union leadership over time and ensures that young workers socio-economic challenges are not marginalised in union campaigns. Some unions have initiated young workers forums and structures to specifically train young workers for future leadership positions. This training includes part-time formal education using internal trade union bursary and skills development funds.

³ Labour Research Service. 2019. Organising young workers in South Africa: How are unions fairing in South Africa?