

A sunset over a savanna with animals in the foreground. The sky is filled with soft, golden light from the setting sun, with scattered clouds catching the light. In the foreground, several animals, including a gazelle and several horses, are silhouetted against the bright horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

Editorial

The best is yet to come

by Martin Nicol

Celebrating *New Agenda* 100

In a world upended by war, genocide, climate catastrophes, pandemics, and dangerously unpredictable and autocratic leaders, the challenge is to seek creative ways to a new world order. *New Agenda* is primed to do exactly that. Its mission is to promote alternative ideas for social, ecological, and economic transformation. We aim to provide high-quality pertinent information and analysis for government, academia and civil society and bring solid, policy-relevant research to the public in an accessible and intelligible form. We celebrate the 100th issue of the journal; the best is yet to come.



100 issues of *New Agenda* is an amazing achievement. And the best is yet to come. With the assistance of our partners at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), we now have 'a journal for our times'.

Our principles and ideals and mission statement – all online and regularly updated on the [New Agenda page](#) of the OJS web portal managed by the Digital Scholarship unit of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) Main Library – are tuned for experiment and innovation. This is what we need in a world upended by globalism, war, social media, climate change, pandemics, financial crises, corruption, and artificial intelligence.

The 100th edition marks a milestone of achievement for any journal. *New Agenda* almost came to grief – Ben Turok, the founding editor, died in late 2019 and the journal was then hit by COVID-19 disruptions and a harsh evaluation of its academic quality by a review panel appointed by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).

The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), as publishers of *New Agenda*, believed in the journal – and particularly in its character as both activist and academic. *New Agenda* seeks pathways between policy-making for development and the activism needed to defend South Africa's democratic Constitution and to promote African agendas.

The former acting director of IFAA, Zunaid Moolla, guided us towards a partnership with UWC and in particular with colleagues at the Institute for Social Development (ISD). In 2023, a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed. Amongst other features, this provided for UWC to serve as an 'academic home' for *New Agenda* as it strived to maintain the standards required for accreditation by the Department of Higher Education and Training. Two critical features of the MOU were the recruitment of a more representative editorial board and the migration to a digital journal management system. The MOU provided a platform to grow and to improve.

ASSAf has provided daunting, but clear and well-motivated, guidelines for journal improvement. The editorial collective has also benefitted from support in the form of funding and interaction with Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), an international non-profit organisation committed to providing free and open access to digital knowledge and information in the Global South. *New Agenda* is part of a three-year project to strengthen the quality and sustainability of African Diamond open access (OA) publishing. Diamond OA means that our authors and readers pay no fees to publish or read articles.



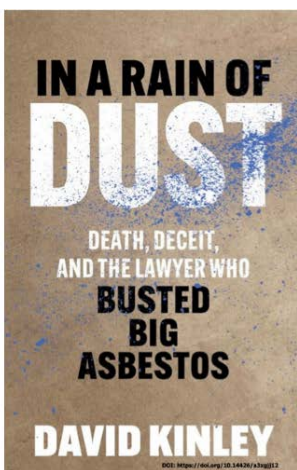
The patient and supportive EIFL staff balanced unrelenting criticism with frequent encouragement. *New Agenda* is grateful to EIFL for a 2025/26 [grant](#), and to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and UWC for their ongoing financial support.

New Agenda 100

New Agenda 100 contains two peer-reviewed academic research articles (on food safety and on the #FeesMustFall student movements), a substantial commentary on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – still the biggest trade union federation in South Africa – and contributions on national dialogues and international stresses. Paula Ensor introduces an oral and video history resource that recognises people who were banned and banished during the anti-apartheid struggles. Michal Singer reviews a new book on the successes and disappointments of a complex legal battle for worker compensation against toxic asbestos mining companies.

Peer reviewed articles

Consumers have a right to expect that the food they purchase and consume will be safe and of good quality. But that is often not the case in South Africa. The country has food safety standards in its law that are world class – but they can be difficult to implement in practice. Ntombizethu Mkhwanazi, Camilla Adelle, and Lise Korsten take a critical look at Regulation R638 which establishes compliance guidelines from farm to fork. They argue for proper stakeholder involvement in framing food safety rules that reflect the realities of South Africa. This all follows the tragic listeriosis outbreak in 2017/2018, which was described in [New Agenda 97](#) (Mkhwanazi et al., 2025).



See inside: From left, peer reviewed article on food safety regulation; book review by Michal Singer; commentary by Prof Ari Sitas on what is needed to deal with the decades ahead.



Their research shows that informal sector food suppliers (street vendors, spaza shops) generally operate outside formal regulation. But they are subject to inconsistent local bylaws and face discriminatory or erratic enforcement. Largely excluded from formal training and support, they are reliant on non-governmental organisations or rare municipal outreach for support in improving food safety. Their experience is of being penalised rather than supported into compliance. The results are unsafe foods and fewer jobs, in what should be a booming sector of the local economy (Jeffery, 2026).

The 2025 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), included a specially designed module on social movements. This was born from a youth-focused competition inviting young and emerging scholars to submit proposals for a survey focus in 2025. The winning entry suggested the #MustFall movements which had begun a decade before, in 2015. Nomkhosi Mbatha, Thierry Luescher, and Ben Roberts analyse the results of this opinion survey which interviewed a cross section of 3,119 South Africans. The survey findings showed that #FMF has been successful in achieving its goals. The legacy of the #MustFall movements emerges as significant because they have reshaped higher education policies and influenced fee increases. Half of the people surveyed believed that higher education in South Africa has been made free or more affordable (50% agreeing compared to 23% disagreeing).

The strongest agreement was found for the claim that universities now have more Black African and female students, lecturers, and professors (69% agreeing with 10% disagreeing). A majority also believed that the education system has been transformed to better reflect African identities, histories, and cultures (56% agreeing with 14% disagreeing).

The fact that the majority of South Africans support free higher education is, certainly in parts, due to #FMF. However, there is no sign from the university and education authorities – ten years later – of real solutions for the plight of the students in the ‘missing middle’. These are university students from households with annual incomes between R350,000 and R600,000, which makes them too wealthy to benefit from National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding, but who struggle to afford higher education (NSFAS, 2026; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021). Leaders of many #FMF initiatives were Black students who fell into the ‘missing middle’ category (Cherry, 2017).



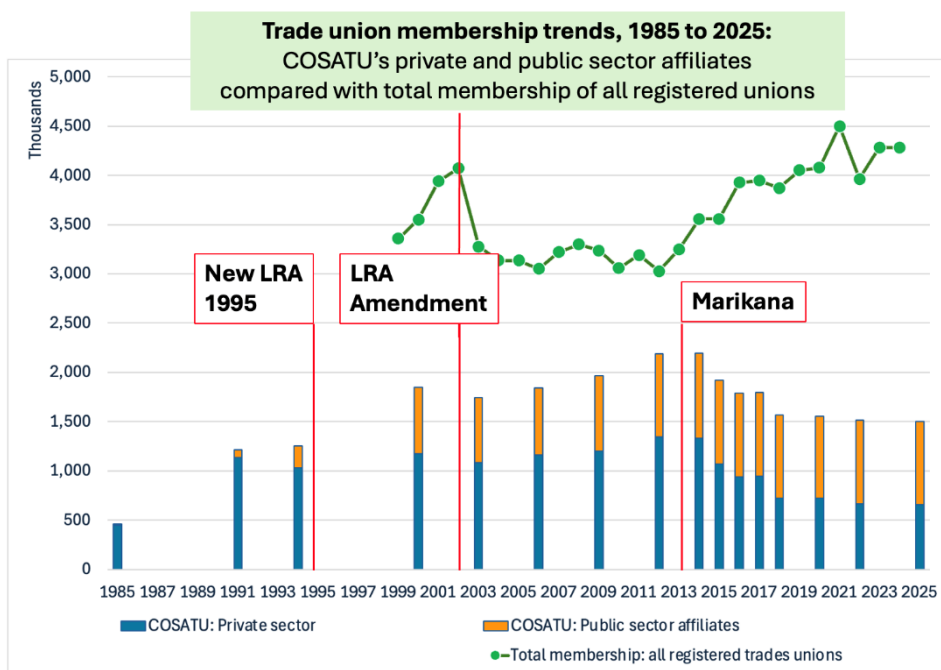
COSATU

The independent trade union movement was the backbone of the organised forces that toppled the apartheid regime. The unions also showed the people of South Africa that negotiation could be used as a powerful weapon to achieve the most ambitious goals.

Until 1995, COSATU grew rapidly. Ironically the new Labour Relations Act (LRA) – which was crafted by then-dominant union leaders in the forums of the National Economic Development and Labour Council [NEDLAC] and delivered to Parliament as a done deal – did not lead to a sustained expansion in COSATU organisation – except, and notably so, in the public sector.

In recent years COSATU’s total membership has shrunk. Its affiliates had 2,193,965 million paid up members at its peak in 2014 (Supporting Information Tables 1 and 5).¹ “Over 1.5 million” was claimed in 2025, just before the 40-year celebrations – but this was not supported by a listing of affiliate membership figures.

Figure 1: COSATU vs national union membership



Source: Supporting information Tables 1 and 5.



See inside: Three-part special feature on COSATU, looking back and what lies ahead.

There was a great increase in the number of trade unions after 1995. Numbers doubled to more than 500, until an amendment to the LRA allowed the department to de-register unions that did not submit the required annual returns. This accounts for the drop in recorded membership after 2002. The number of unions subsided to a ‘normal’ level (of around 200) by 2010 (Supporting Information Table 5). The next major rise in union membership occurred after 2013. Perhaps it was coincidental that the wide labour unrest following Marikana was associated with a boost of one million new union members. This did not, however, assist COSATU. The membership of the federation fell drastically because of internal turmoil.

Public sector membership was 7% of COSATU in 1991 and 39% in 2012. After the expulsion and splits involving private sector affiliates, public sector membership was soon over half the total. Today COSATU’s strength is in the organisation of employees in the public sector. In 2023, COSATU probably still represented half of all organised employees in the public sector (Supporting Information Tables 1 and 6). COSATU’s influence as an alliance partner with the ANC now lies here, placing pressure on the public treasury, rather than as the hammer of the working class.² Gwede Mantashe, a former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), told the NUM congress in 2015: “Once you have a federation dominated by the public sector, you are in trouble” (Quintal, 2015).

A hundred years ago, when the Industrial Conciliation Act held sway, the Department of Labour had a policy of never registering more than one union (or employer body) for an industry.³ This was to allow a new system to take root that would institutionalise the industrial conflict that had shaken the colonial state with the 1922 white miners’ strike.



Such a framework was impossible with the new LRA and its principle of freedom of association. Public sector dominance, multiple unions, and multi-sectoralism *within* unions have become dominant features of the organising environment.

Shane Godfrey, Mario Jacobs, and Ian Macun analyse this new world and develop proposals for COSATU to consider. Organisationally, they argue, there needs to be a return to solidarity within the federation, where well-organised and financially-flush unions (now all in the public sector) assist weaker affiliates and support organisational campaigns that focus on the un-unionised 70% of employees. Second, they motivate for a shift from an industrial to a sectoral structure, which needs to be matched with a strategy to consolidate sectoral bargaining.

The founding slogan of the federation was "*one union, one industry; one federation, one country*". It is still repeated within COSATU as an aspiration. It does not describe even a remote possibility.

What chances for the best?

History has always had its optimists. From the sublime vision of Martin Luther King⁴ to the ridiculous delusions represented by Voltaire in his character, Dr Pangloss.⁵

Dr King spoke at the march in Montgomery, US, on 25 March 1965.

*... I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.
How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.
How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.
How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*

The African philosopher, St Augustine of Hippo (350-430 CE), did not believe historical progress towards peace and good order is inevitable.⁶

Your editor, pummeled by the 21st Century so far, has to take the African view here. Which is surely that better things are possible, if people combine to arrange it so. I remember an initially successful, but then struggling community organisation in the 1980s that held a workshop and decided to restructure by the following June. Then the staff just waited for June. And so surprised were they when they lost their jobs. The best is yet to come. But we have to make it better.



ENDNOTES

¹ Supporting information, available on the *New Agenda* website for this contribution comprises: COSATU – assembly of membership data 1985 to 2025; National trends in labour organisation 1980 to 2025; Sources.

² “...the public service wage bill has ballooned as a share of the economy: from 5.6% of GDP in 1995 to 10.4% last year” (Strydom, 2024).

³ This policy was applied regionally, so there could be more than one union nationally, but their areas of operation could not overlap.

⁴ “...the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, 25 March 1965.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr/chapter-26-selma>

⁵ “...Everything is for the best” Voltaire (1947, p. 35 *passim*).

⁶ A year after the death of Augustine, his city of Hippo (Annaba in modern day Algeria) was sacked and burned by the Vandals, who ousted the Roman colonisers. (Ryan, 2012).

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Filename	Description
NA100 SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL Editorial.pdf	COSATU – assembly of membership data 1985 to 2025; National trends in labour organisation 1980 to 2025; Sources

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AI Declaration

Claude was asked to suggest references, but not used for any narrative content.



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