

**HOW TO CITE:**

Nicol, M. (2026) Editorial [supplementary material]. *New Agenda* 100.

---

# Supporting Information for the “COSATU” section of the Editorial

Compiled by Martin Nicol, March 2026

Please note: The publisher is not responsible for the content or functionality of any supporting information supplied by authors. Any queries (other than missing content) should be directed to the corresponding author for the article, in this case the editor at [NAeditor@gmail.com](mailto:NAeditor@gmail.com).

## Contents

COSATU – assembly of membership data 1985 to 2025 .....	2
Cosatu Affiliate Membership 1991 to 2022 from reliable or official sources .....	2
Union Acronyms, Names and Sectors .....	4
Analysis by sector: Membership size and sector rank, 1991 to 2025.....	6
Graphic of Membership trends in certain unions.....	7
Effect of the split for COSATU .....	9
National trends in labour organisation 1980 to 2025.....	14
The number of registered trade unions in South Africa 1980 to 2025 – November 2025 figure was 213.....	14
Trade union membership trends, 1985 to 2025: COSATU’s private and public sector affiliates compared with total membership of all registered unions.....	16
Total membership: all registered trades unions 2000 to 2023.....	17
Trends in trade union membership by Province and Industry, March 2015 and March 2023.....	21

## COSATU – assembly of membership data 1985 to 2025

Cosatu Affiliate Membership 1991 to 2022 from reliable or official sources

Table 1: Cosatu Affiliate Membership 1991 to 2022 from reliable or official sources - "Database"

Union Acronym	1991	1994	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2014	2015	2018	2020	2022
AFADWU										-		13,000	13,800
CEPPWAWU	88,000	78,000	94,000	74,000	65,000	62,000	64,182	80,658	80,331	84,279	48,000	48,000	47,388
CWU	21,000	23,000	40,000	35,000	32,000	25,000	29,699	18,666	22,007	21,243	13,898	13,898	10,859
CWUSA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	370						
DENOSA	n.a	n.a	73,000	70,000	71,000	64,000	68,450	74,883	81,319	80,647	80,647	80,647	82,574
FAWU	129,000	121,000	140,000	119,000	119,000	115,000	118,974	126,930	127,000	126,995			
LIMUSA										7,771	8,195	8,195	
NEHAWU	18,000	64,000	163,000	235,000	235,000	204,000	230,445	260,738	277,317	277,317	275,083	275,083	275,845
NUM	270,000	311,000	311,000	290,000	279,000	262,000	272,000	310,382	270,649	250,256	184,650	167,259	158,477
NUMSA	273,000	170,000	220,000	200,000	173,000	217,000	236,909	291,025	318,727				
PAWUSA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	17,000	16,169	17,146	13,745	12,619	8,637	8,637	6,481
POPCRU	n.a	n.a	45,000	71,000	67,000	96,000	125,732	149,339	149,339	156,505	157,754	157,754	143,536
SACCAWU	97,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	108,000	115,488	120,352	120,352	120,352	120,352	120,352	120,352
SACTWU	186,000	150,000	150,000	120,000	105,000	110,000	85,000	85,025	85,000	85,204	91,003	91,003	93,081
SADNU	n.a	n.a	n.a	8,000	8,000	9,000	9,093	8,655					
SADTU	n.a	59,000	146,000	219,000	215,000	224,000	236,843	251,276	253,039	248,969	251,202	250,882	260,404
SAEPU										-	2,103	2,103	1,929
SAFPU	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	1,000	472	593	592	592			
SAMA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	5,000	7,246	7,759	8,166	7,821	7,229	7,697	5,149
SAMATU							[SAMATU and SAMA trade union are the same organisation]						
SAMWU	60,000	100,000	117,000	120,000	120,000	118,000	135,906	153,487	161,490	150,923	148,215	136,700	161,076
SASAWU	n.a	n.a	n.a	18,000	18,000	9,000	7,804	7,074	6,099	7,162			
SASBO	n.a	n.a	70,000	63,000	63,000	61,000	66,093	67,402	66,539	66,767	68,458	71,961	65,663
SATAWU	70,000	74,000	91,000	103,000	74,000	133,000	140,392	159,626	152,254	218,014	101,458	101,458	70,422
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>1,212,000</b>	<b>1,252,000</b>	<b>1,791,000</b>	<b>1,869,000</b>	<b>1,768,000</b>	<b>1,841,400</b>	<b>1,974,084</b>	<b>2,191,016</b>	<b>2,193,965</b>	<b>1,923,436</b>	<b>1,566,882</b>	<b>1,554,629</b>	<b>1,517,036</b>
												1,603,829	
Sum of public sector	78,000	223,000	471,000	671,000	663,000	677,000	761,992	847,715	861,029	853,495	842,994	831,159	849,271
% public sector	6%	18%	26%	36%	38%	37%	39%	38.7%	39.2%	44.4%	53.8%	53.5%	56.0%
Summed totals used	1,212,000	1,252,000	1,762,000	1,847,000	1,746,000	1,840,000	1,967,267	2,191,016	2,193,965	1,923,436	1,566,884	1,554,629	1,517,036
7th National Congress Declaration 21 September 2000				1,806,157						1,796,441		50200	
variance			29,000	22,000	22,000	1,400	6,817	-	-	-	(2)	1,604,829	-
query				(40,843)								(1,000)	

### Sources used for the annual membership information, with comments

- 1985 Godfrey, S., Jacobs, M., & Macun, I. (2026) Industrial Unionism and the Congress of South African Trade Unions: Founding principles, present realities and future challenges. *New Agenda 100*. 1st Quarter 2026; citing Macun, I. & Frost A. (1994). Living like there's no tomorrow: Trade Union Growth in South Africa, 1979-1991. *Social Dynamics*, 20, p.7
- 1991 to 2012 COSATU. (2012). Extract from the Draft Organisational Report to COSATU's 11th Congress, August 24 2012. <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/cosatus-membership-all-the-facts> [The data for 1997 to 2009 sum less than the Grand Totals. The 2000 figure also differs from the still lower 1,806,157 recorded in the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress Declaration. Reasons for variation are not known.]
- 2014 Ashman, S. (2015). The Social Crisis of Labour and the Crisis of Labour Politics in South Africa. *Revue Tiers Monde*, 224(4), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rtm.224.0047> [Cosatu listed as the source for the membership data]
- 2015 Quintal, G. (2015, November 17). Cosatu membership down by thousands. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/cosatu-membership-down-by-thousands-20151117> "In the last three years the Cosatu membership has dropped by 324,835"
- 2015 COSATU. (2022b) ORGANISATIONAL REPORT in 14th COSATU National Congress. 26 – 29 September 2022. Book 2. p.80. <https://mediadon.co.za/14th-national-congress-books/> [1,796,441 is the Grand Total minus FAWU, which disaffiliated during 2015]
- 2017 Mr Mathew Parks, Parliamentary Coordinator, Cosatu. PMG. (2017, November 08). Labour Laws Amendment Bill: public comment. Report on a meeting of the PC on Labour. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/25441/Pmg>
- 2018 COSATU. (2022a) 14th COSATU National Congress. 26 – 29 September 2022. Book 1. pp.11-12. <https://mediadon.co.za/14th-national-congress-books/>
- 2020 COSATU. (2022b) 14th COSATU National Congress. 26 – 29 September 2022. Book 2. p.80. [50,200 membership of the National Transport Movement, listed in the reference table from 2020, has been excluded from the total used. NTM was never actually affiliated to COSATU]
- 2022 COSATU. (2022a) 14th COSATU National Congress. 26 – 29 September 2022. Book 1. p.#2.
- 2022 COSATU (2022, September 29) Declaration of the 14th National Congress of COSATU. <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DECLARATION-14th-National-Congress-of-COSATU-held-on-the-26th-29th-September-2022.pdf>
- 2025 COSATU (2025a, September 19) 8th Central Committee Declaration 15-18 September 2025. <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/COSATU-8th-CENTRAL-COMMITTEE-DECLARATION-FINAL-VERSION-AW.pdf> - no detailed membership presentation – “over 1.5 million members from across different sectors of the economy”

Membership information is often dodgy. When affiliates fail to update membership counts, COSATU may reprint the most recently-used previous figure. The worst offender is SACCAWU which has reported the same membership figure (120,352) for the last decade!

## Union Acronyms, Names and Sectors

Table 2: Union Acronyms, Names and Sectors

Sector	Union Acronym	Union Name	Sector(s) [see (Ashman, 2015)]	Federation after 2015
2	AFADWU <sup>#2</sup>	Agricultural Food and Allied Democratic Workers Union	Food, retail	COSATU
2	CEPPWAWU	Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union	Chemicals, energy and paper (major sectors of manufacturing)	COSATU
3	CWU	Communications Workers' Union	Post and telecommunications	COSATU
2	CWUSA <sup>#3</sup>	Creative Workers Union of South Africa	Performing arts, music, photography etc	COSATU
3	DENOSA	Democratic Nursing Union of South Africa	Nurses and midwives	COSATU
2	FAWU	Food and Allied Workers' Union	Food, retail	SAFTU
2	LIMUSA <sup>#4</sup>	Liberated Metalworkers' Union of South Africa	Steel, engineering, motors, autos, tyres, electronics	COSATU
1	NEHAWU	National Education Health and Allied Workers Union	Public sector	COSATU
4	NUM <sup>#5</sup>	National Union of Mineworkers	Mining	COSATU
2	NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa	Steel, engineering, motors, autos, tyres, electronics	SAFTU
1	PAWUSA	Public and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa	Public sector	COSATU
1	POPCRU	Police and Prison Civil Rights Union	Public sector	COSATU
3	SACCAWU	South African Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers' Union	Retail, hospitality, including Pick n Pay and Sun International	COSATU
2	SACTWU	South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union	Clothing, textiles, leather	COSATU
1	SADNU	South African Democratic Nurses Union	Public sector	COSATU
1	SADTU	South African Democratic Teachers' Union	Teachers	COSATU
1	SAEPU <sup>#6</sup>	South African Emergency Personnel's Union	EMS, paramedics, firefighters	COSATU
3	SAFPU	South African Football Players' Union	Football players	
1	SAMA, see SAMATU <sup>#7</sup>	South African Medical Association [for the trade union, see SAMATU]	Doctors	<i>never a COSATU affiliate</i>
1	SAMATU <sup>#7</sup>	South African Medical Association Trade Union	Registered medical practitioners	COSATU
1	SAMWU	South African Municipal Workers' Union	Municipal workers	COSATU
1	SASAWU	South African State and Allied Workers' Union	State and allied workers	SAFTU

Sector	Union Acronym	Union Name	Sector(s) [see (Ashman, 2015)]	Federation after 2015
2	SASBO	– The Finance Union, formerly the South African Society of Bank Officials	Bankers	COSATU
3	SATAWU	South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union	Transport and allied workers	COSATU

### Notes

- #1 The sectors indicated were more valid in 2014 than in 2026, when many unions accept anyone as a member.
- #2 AFADWU was registered on 17 April 2018 - <https://afadwu.org.za/about?tab=background>
- #3 CWUSA was affiliated to COSATU, but may never have been registered  
CWUSA - [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Creative\\_Workers\\_Union\\_of\\_South\\_Africa&oldid=1209442961](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Creative_Workers_Union_of_South_Africa&oldid=1209442961)
- #4 LIMUSA amalgamated with NUM in 2021 to form a new union, called NUM
- #5 NUM amalgamated with LIMUSA. A new union, NUM, with a wider scope, was registered on 22-Nov-2021  
NUM - LIMUSA amalgamation: <https://iol.co.za/news/politics/2021-11-24-cosatu-affiliates-limusa-num-merge/>
- #6 SAEPU registered in 2008, affiliated to COSATU in 2017 with 7000 members  
SAEPU - [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=South\\_African\\_Emergency\\_Personnel%27s\\_Union&oldid=1312836784](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=South_African_Emergency_Personnel%27s_Union&oldid=1312836784)
- #7 "South African Medical Association (SAMA)" confusingly, was registered as a Trade Union by the Department of Labour - this is actually SAMATU. SAMATU / "SAMA Trade Union" is often incorrectly named "SAMA" by COSATU  
SAMATU - <https://samatu.org.za/docs/constitution-samatu.pdf>  
South African Medical Association (SAMA) <https://samedical.org/about-us/> is the non-partisan organisation of doctors and medical professionals since 1927. It is registered as a non profit company [1927/000136/08] not as a trade union.
- #8 New Transport Movement (NTM) is listed as a COSATU affiliate in some documents in 2020 - 2022. It was never part of COSATU.

Sector number used above	Sector(s)	<b>Sectors</b> are as defined in <i>Cosatu (2001) Report of the Organisational Review Commission to the 1st Central Committee - November 19 to 22, 2001</i> . The sector identifications from 2000 to 2025 were calibrated from this 2001 Report, and used in the sector analysis below.
1	Public service and local government	
2	Manufacturing	
3	Transport, communication, retail, private services	
4	Mining	
5	Construction	
6	Agriculture	

## Analysis by sector: Membership size and sector rank, 1991 to 2025

Table 3: Membership of COSATU affiliates per sector, 1991 to 2022

Sector Code	Cosatu	MN analysis, based on COSATU (2001)													
		Cosatu (2001) analysis													
	Sector	1991	1994	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2014	2015	2016	2018	2020	2022
1	Public service and local government	78,000	223,000	471,000	671,000	663,000	682,000	769,238	855,474	869,195	861,316	854,154	850,223	838,856	854,420
2	Manufacturing	676,000	519,000	674,000	576,000	525,000	566,000	572,000	651,633	678,189	371,608	244,021	215,656	188,959	219,932
3	Transport, communication, retail, pvt ser	188,000	199,000	306,000	310,000	279,000	330,000	354,029	373,527	375,932	440,256	440,256	316,355	316,355	284,207
4	Mining	270,000	311,000	281,000	252,000	279,000	262,000	272,000	310,382	270,649	250,256	250,256	184,650	167,259	158,477
5	Construction	30,000	25,000	31,000	38,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	<b>Total membership</b>	<b>1,242,000</b>	<b>1,277,000</b>	<b>1,763,000</b>	<b>1,847,000</b>	<b>1,746,000</b>	<b>1,840,000</b>	<b>1,967,267</b>	<b>2,191,016</b>	<b>2,193,965</b>	<b>1,923,436</b>	<b>1,788,687</b>	<b>1,566,884</b>	<b>1,511,429</b>	<b>1,517,036</b>
	Public sector percent calculated	6.3%	17.5%	26.7%	36.3%	38.0%	37.1%	39.1%	39.0%	39.6%	44.8%	47.8%	54.3%	55.5%	56.3%
	Public sector percent from database	6.4%	17.8%	26.3%	35.9%	37.5%	36.8%	38.6%	38.7%	39.2%	44.4%	47.3%	53.8%	55.0%	56.0%
	ABS Discrepancy must be <0.51%	0.2%	0.3%	-0.4%	-0.4%	-0.5%	-0.3%	-0.502%	-0.4%	-0.4%	-0.4%	-0.4%	-0.5%	-0.509%	-0.3%

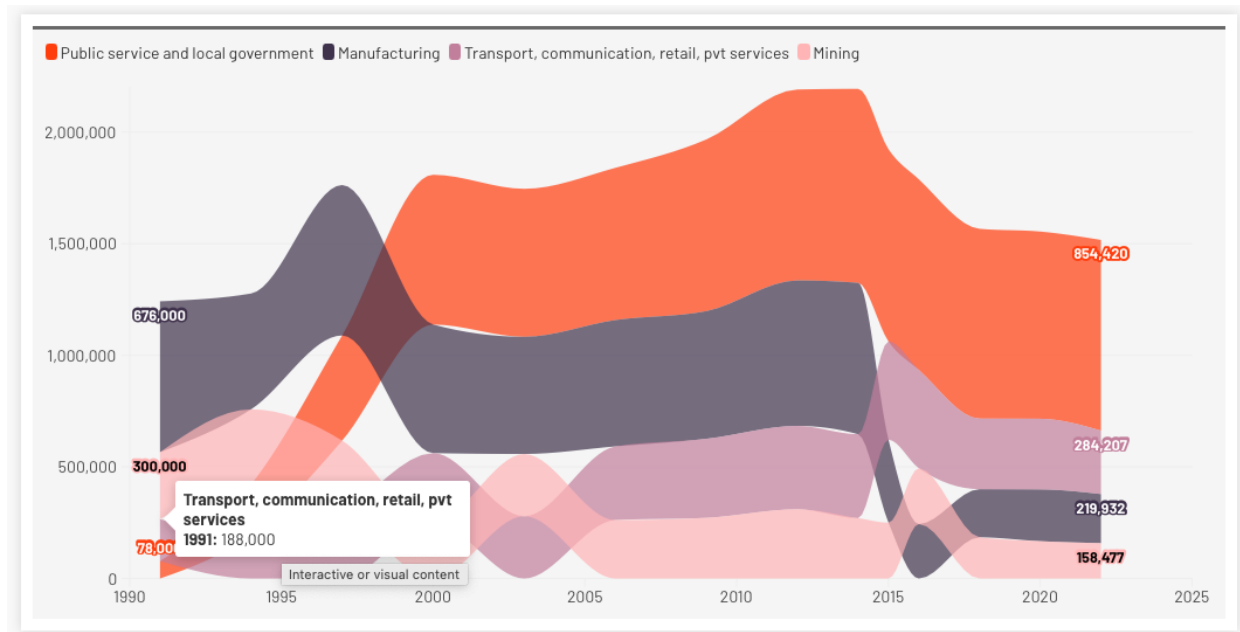


Figure 1: COSATU affiliate membership ranked by Sector 1991 to 2022

Source: Tables 1 and 3; Interactive graphic - <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/28281677/>

COSATU was formed in 1985, but initial affiliates were not all well defined by sectors. The sectoral classification of affiliates became less clear over time, with construction being absorbed into mining and major changes in the scope of unions being accepted by both COSATU and the registrar. Table 3 and Figure 1 above both mask the collapse of organisation in transport, once a critical strength in COSATU. This is evident, however from the affiliate membership graphic, Figure 2 below.

The list in Table 2: Union Acronyms, Names and Sectors draws on COSATU reports. The formal list of registered trade unions and their affiliations to federations is published annually as, for example in DEL (2025b) *List of Registered Trade Unions in South Africa as for November 2025*. <https://www.labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Publications/Labour%20Relations/Registered%20Trade%20Unions%20November%202025.pdf>. The information published, despite its official nature, is occasionally incorrect in its details. (see, for instance the entry for SAMATU – number 165 – which is substantially incorrect.)

#### Graphic of Membership trends in certain unions

The graph below, Figure 2, covers the trends for COSATU's nine biggest affiliates in 2022. Comparative data is given for NUMSA and FAWU, up to the dates of their respective expulsion and disaffiliation in 2015 and 2016. Data are sourced from Table 1, above.

- Numsa and FAWU are distinguished by unfilled white squares at each membership recording, when COSATU affiliates.
- The curves for the public sector unions affiliated to COSATU are marked with red dots.
- The remaining seven affiliates (which are not represented in the graph) had a 2022 membership of 150,000, with SASBO and CEPPWAWU making up 100,000 and the diminishing AFADWU, CWU, PAWUSA, SAMATU and SAEPU the balance.



## Effect of the split for COSATU

COSATU expelled its biggest affiliate, NUMSA, in 2015, and FAWU and two other unions disaffiliated the following year. The impact of the split is illustrated in Table 4, which looks at the effects on membership using 2014 membership data (from Ashman, 2015).

Table 4: Illustration of the impact of the 2015/16 split in COSATU

Union	Stayed in Cosatu	2014 membership	Exited Cosatu 2015/16	2014 membership	Cosatu affiliate membership 2014 (before split)	Sector
CEPPWAWU	CEPPWAWU	80,331			80,331	Chemicals, energy and paper (major sectors of manufacturing)
CWU	CWU	22,007			22,007	Post and telecommunications
CWUSA						
DENOSA	DENOSA	81,319			81,319	Nurses and midwives
FAWU			FAWU	127,000	127,000	Food, retail
NEHAWU	NEHAWU	277,317			277,317	Public sector
NUM	NUM	270,649			270,649	Mining
NUMSA			NUMSA	318,727	318,727	Steel, engineering, motors, autos, tyres, electronics
PAWUSA	PAWUSA	13,745			13,745	Public sector
POPCRU	POPCRU	149,339			149,339	Public sector
SACCAWU	SACCAWU	120,352			120,352	Retail, hospitality, including Pick n Pay and Sun International
SACTWU	SACTWU	85,000			85,000	Clothing, textiles, leather
SADNU			<i>(no longer affiliated due to non-payment of fees)</i>			
SADTU	SADTU	253,039			253,039	Teachers
SAFPU			SAFPU	592	592	Football players
SAMA	SAMA	8,166			8,166	Doctors
SAMWU	SAMWU	161,490			161,490	Municipal workers
SASAWU			SASAWU	6,099	6,099	State and allied workers
SASBO	SASBO	66,539			66,539	Bankers
SATAWU	SATAWU	152,254			152,254	Transport and allied workers
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>		<b>1,741,547</b>		<b>452,418</b>	<b>2,193,965</b>	

2014 marked the peak reported membership of COSATU's affiliates. The 2003 organising plan, when affiliates had about 1.7 million members, anticipated membership increasing to 2m by 2006, and reaching a 4 million target by 2009 (Cosatu, 2003) [actual 2009 membership was about 2m]. The target was postponed to 2015. But any prospect of reaching 4 million was dashed by the split in November 2015, as the Federation reached its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Since then, a new Medium Term Vision been adopted, "The key target is to have 2.5 million members by 2035" (Cosatu, 2022a).

The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of COSATU’s magazine *The Shopsteward*, published in December 2025, made no mention of membership numbers at all. Just before, the CEC had claimed membership of “over 1.5 million” (Cosatu, 2025a). This is credible, but membership data is hard to verify<sup>1</sup>. SACCAWU has been recorded as having the same membership of exactly 120,352 since 2012.

The proportion of public to private sector membership in Cosatu affiliates shifted from 7% public sector in 1991 to 39% in 2014. The split sharply intensified this trend. After the 2015 split, Cosatu affiliates had 49% of their members in the public sector.

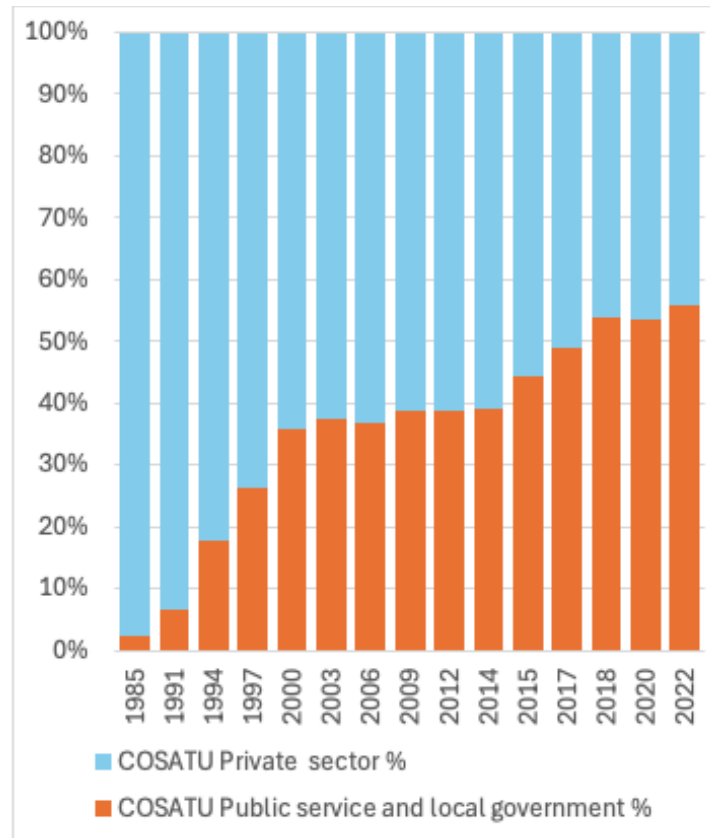


Figure 3: Cosatu is dominated by public service unions

<sup>1</sup> Verifying annual trade union membership figures should be a simple matter. Each registered labour organisation is required by law to lodge information “showing the number of members as at 31 December of the previous year” with the registrar of labour relations by 31 March each year (Labour Relations Act Section 100 a). This is public information, which the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) could choose to make easily available for public scrutiny. The department responsible for labour has, however, chosen not to make this administrative data easy to obtain.

Gwede Mantashe, then ANC secretary general (and a former leader of the mineworkers), told the NUM congress in June 2015: "Once you have a federation dominated by the public sector, you are in trouble" (Quintal, 2015). Since 2018, the proportion has been above 50%. In 2025, COSATU was dominated by public service unions.

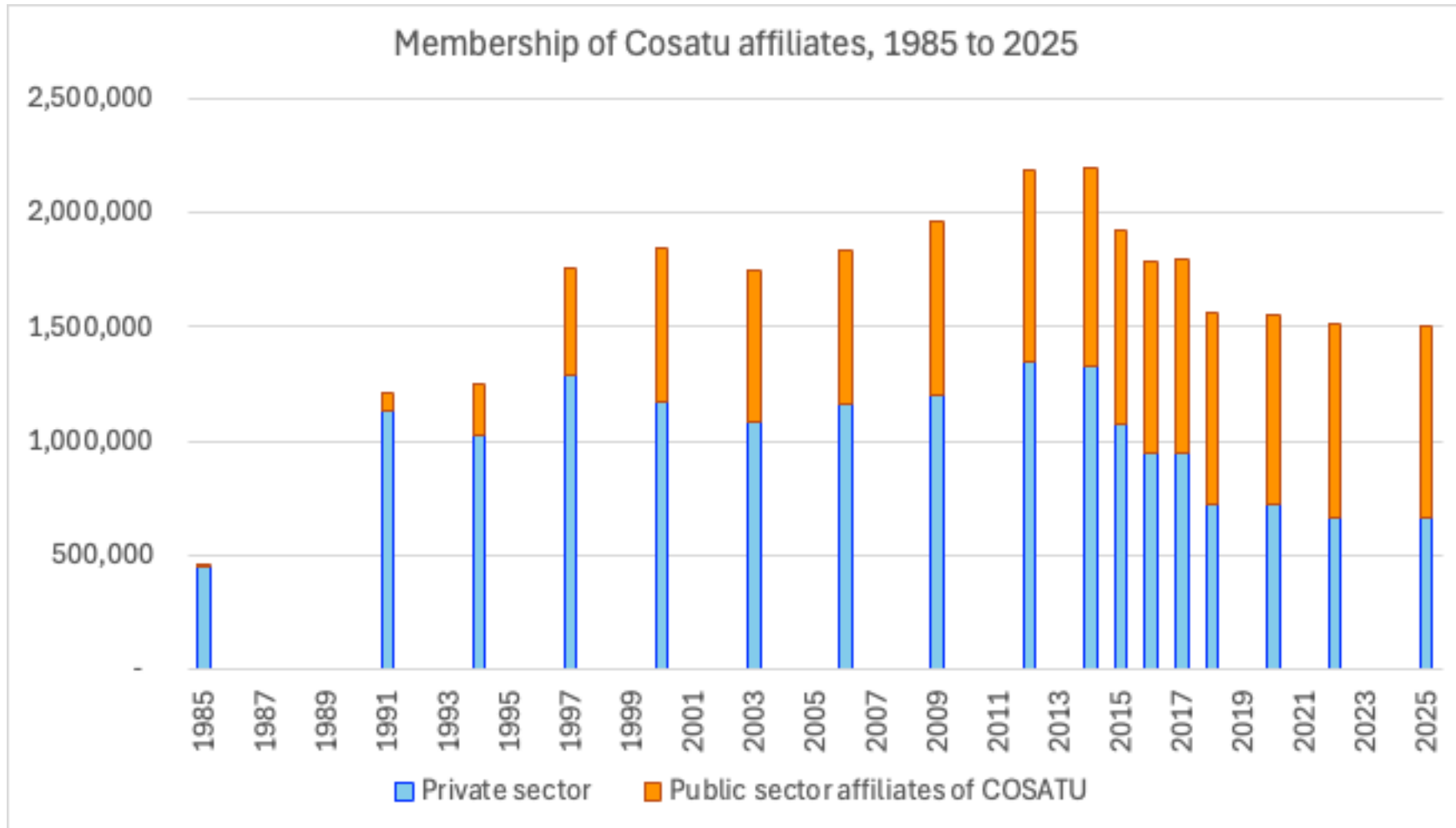


Figure 4: A very different federation to the one established in 1985

Membership growth of COSATU affiliates had slackened before the catastrophic splits in 2015/16.

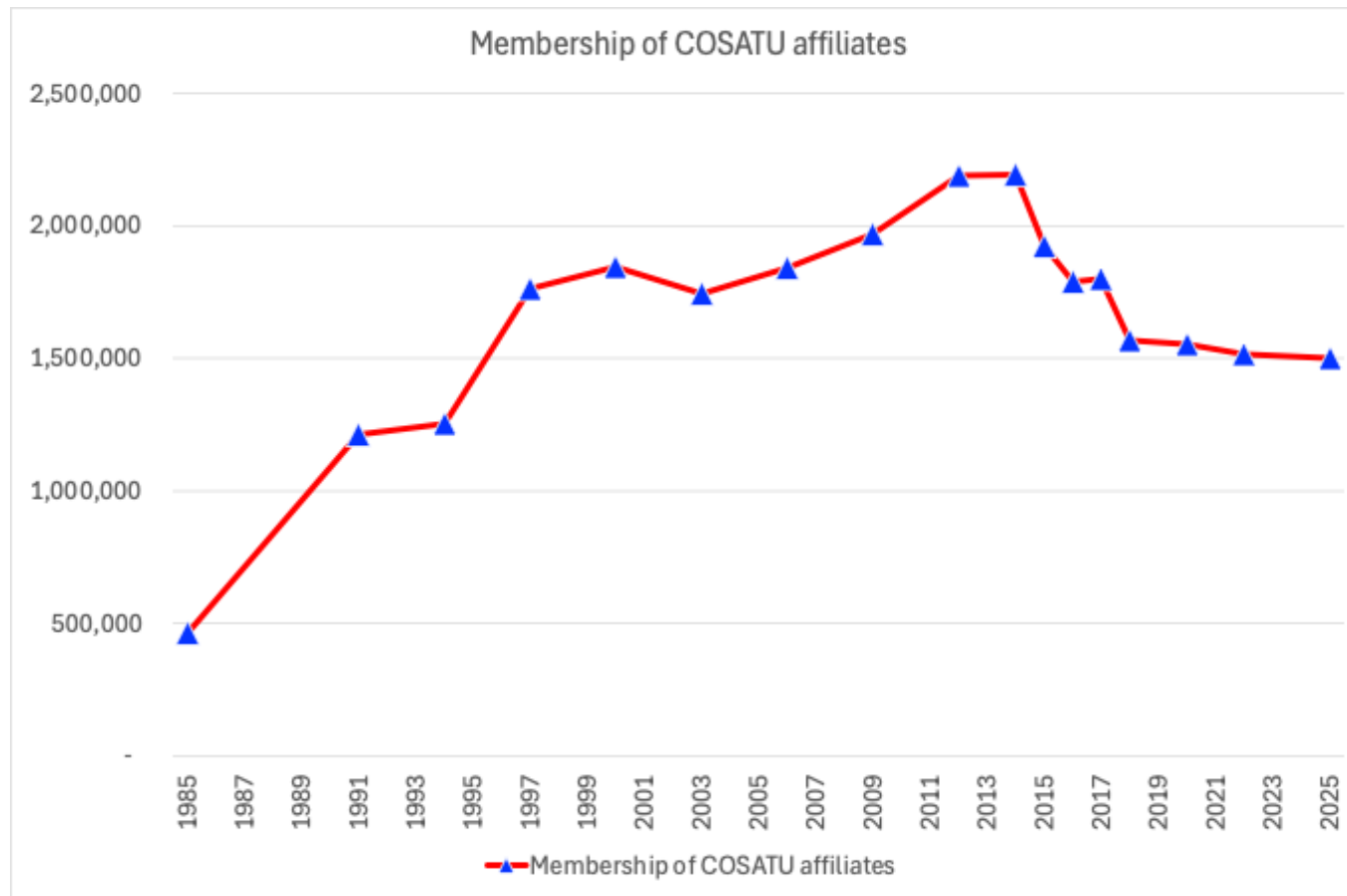


Figure 5: Trends in membership of COSATU affiliates, 1985-2025

COSATU’s founding slogan, still repeated, is : “one union, one industry; one federation, one country”. Godfrey, Jacobs and Macun, in their 2026 article in *New Agenda* 100, trace how this spirit, an aspiration from the start, has weakened. “In COSATU’s case the shift from industrial unions to multi-sectoralism has been accompanied by declining membership” (Godfrey et al, 2026).

## References

[Also see after Table 1 above, Sources used for the annual membership information]

Cosatu. (2003). “Longer Term Plan to 2015” in Consolidating Working Class Power for Quality Jobs - Towards 2015: Programme Arising from the COSATU 8th National Congress. 9 October 2003. <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Towards-2015.pdf>

Cosatu (2022) 2035 Medium Term Vision [Resource document for the 8th Central Committee/14th National Congress – 26th to 29th September 2022] <https://mediadon.co.za/mtv-2035/> - [included in Cosatu, 2022a]

COSATU (2025b) 40th Anniversary Special Edition *The Shopsteward: The official publication of the Congress of South African Trade Unions*. 33.6 December 2025 <https://theshopsteward.org.za/magazine-issues/>

Quintal, G. (2015, November 17). Cosatu membership down by thousands. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/cosatu-membership-down-by-thousands-20151117>

### Repairing the links:

The most important reason why the labour movement has weakened is the ‘social distance’ between members and leadership.

“If unions want to recover the power they once enjoyed, they will need to give priority to rebuilding strong worker democracy, repairing the links between leaders and members.”

– Steven Friedman in the 40th Anniversary Special Edition of *The Shopsteward: The official publication of the Congress of South African Trade Unions*. (December 2025) p.17



## National trends in labour organisation 1980 to 2025

The information below includes both administrative data published by the department responsible for labour issues and results from labour force surveys managed by Statistics South Africa, also published by the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL), as it has been renamed since 2020. It remains a mystery why the DEL, which collects exact annual data on the membership of labour organisations under statute, does not publish this information.

The number of registered trade unions in South Africa 1980 to 2025 – November 2025 figure was 213

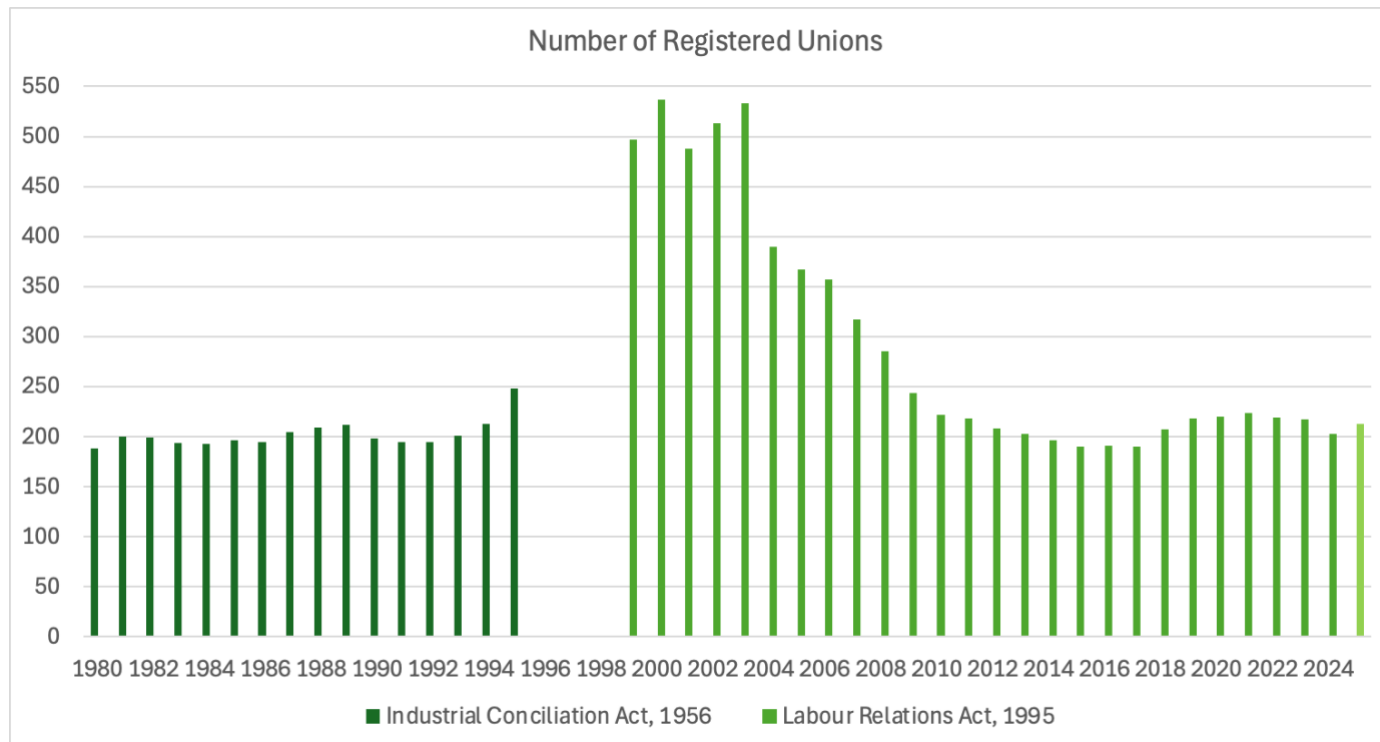


Figure 6: Total number of registered trade unions - data from reports of the Registrar

**Note:** 155 unions were deregistered in 2003/04 alone and more followed (DEL, 2025d). The Labour Relations Amendment Act 12 of 2002 introduced clause 2A into section 106. “Cancellation of registration of trade unions or employers’ organisations”. The new provisions allowed the registrar to cancel the registration of a trade union by removing its name from the appropriate register if the registrar is satisfied that the

trade union is not, or has ceased to function as, a genuine trade union or [if the union has not provided the registrar with the annual membership and other information per section 100]. Various time limits and warning measures are applied in all cases and appeals against deregistration are possible.

Sources:

Table 5, below

1980 to 1995 data from: Macun, I. (1997) Does size matter? The Labour Relations Act, majoritarianism and union structure. *Law, Democracy & Development Law Journal* 5. <https://www.saflii.org/za/journals/LDD>

Data from 1999-2000 to 2023-2024 provided by the Department of Labour and Employment – personal communication 20 March 2026. “Total number of active registered TU’s in RSA – financial year end” (31 March). Editions of departmental publications, such as the *Labour Market Review 2004* and the *Annual Labour Market Bulletins* issued from 2012 to 2023 were initially relied upon. Until 2015-2016, the information extracted records fewer unions each year than the new data set used. Totals are the same after this point.

2025 DEL (2025b) *List of Registered Trade Unions in South Africa as for November 2025*.

DEL (2025d) *Cancellation of registration of Trade Unions resulting from the 2002 LRA amendments from April 2003 to date* [November 2025].

Trade union membership trends, 1985 to 2025: COSATU's private and public sector affiliates compared with total membership of all registered unions

From at least 2000 until 2015, COSATU affiliates comprised a clear majority of the membership of South Africa's registered trade unions. By 2022, the percentage had fallen to 38%.

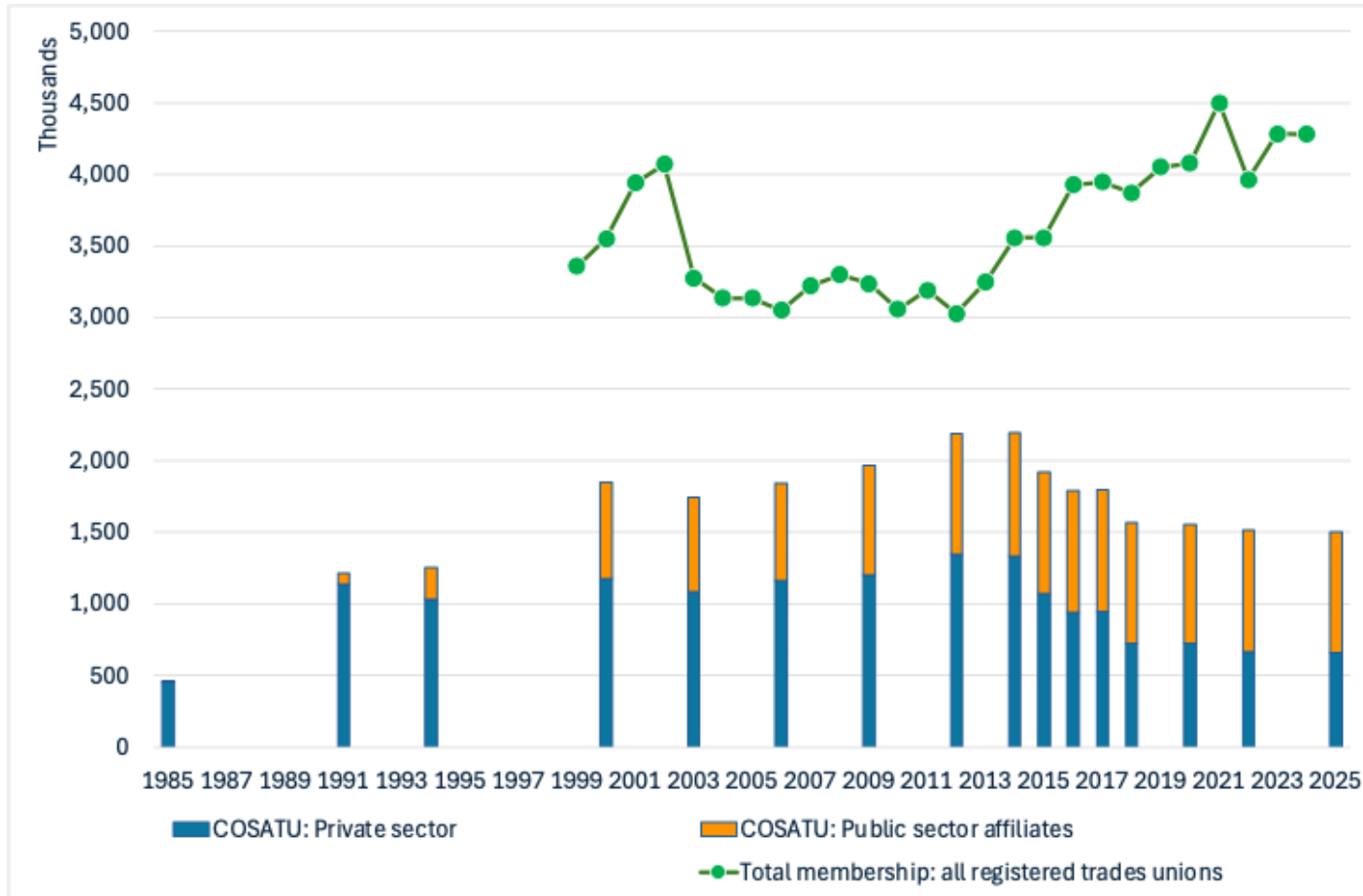


Figure 7: COSATU membership compared with national membership of all registered trade unions, 2000 to 2025

Total membership: all registered trades unions 2000 to 2023

Annual updates on union membership can be extracted from public reports of the department responsible for labour. However, there is no consolidated list published of union membership for the period since 1980. There are frequent inconsistencies in the tables of the *Annual Labour Market Bulletins*. This applies both to the format of the tables and to numbers, which sometimes vary for the same year between issues. The DEL kindly reviewed our initial research findings and provided a complete list of their records of total membership of registered trade unions for the period from 1999-2000 to 2023-2024. This information is finalised by the DEL at its 31 March financial year end. It is likely that this information has 31 December of the previous year as its effective date, as set out in Section 100 of the LRA. We are grateful for the team at the DEL for providing this data, making it possible to compile the first ever consolidated list of registered union membership for the period.

Table 5: Membership trends for registered trade unions in South Africa, 1999 to 2024; and annual recorded numbers of registered trade unions 1980 to 1995 and 1999 to 2025

DEL date	Year	Registrar of labour relations		from Table1	[Calculated]
		Number of Registered Unions #	Total membership: all registered trades unions @	COSATU affiliates	COSATU % of all union members
		As on 31 March of each year	31 December of year		
	1980	188			
	1981	200			
	1982	199			
	1983	194			
	1984	193			
	1985	196			
	1986	195			
	1987	205			
	1988	209			
	1989	212			
	1990	198			
	1991	195			
	1992	195			
	1993	201			
	1994	213			

DEL date	Year	<i>Registrar of labour relations</i>	
		Number of Registered Unions #	Total membership: all registered trades unions @
		<i>As on 31 March of each year</i>	31 December of year
	1995	248	
	1996		
	1997		
	1998		
	1999	497	3,359,497
1999-2000	2000	537	3,552,113
2000-2001	2001	488	3,939,075
2001-2002	2002	513	4,069,000
2002-2003	2003	533	3,277,685
2003-2004	2004	390	3,134,865
2004-2005	2005	367	3,134,865
2005-2006	2006	357	3,049,860
2006-2007	2007	317	3,220,245
2007-2008	2008	285	3,298,559
2008-2009	2009	244	3,238,519
2009-2010	2010	222	3,057,772
2010-2011	2011	218	3,192,530
2011-2012	2012	208	3,028,400
2012-2013	2013	203	3,250,100
2013-2014	2014	196	3,556,365
2014-2015	2015	190	3,556,914
2015-2016	2016	191	3,926,025
2016-2017	2017	190	3,945,518
2017-2018	2018	207	3,870,024
2018-2019	2019	218	4,051,529

§

\*

from Table1	[Calculated]
<b>COSATU affiliates</b>	<b>COSATU % of all union members</b>
1,847,000	52%
1,746,000	53%
1,840,000	
1,967,267	61%
2,191,016	72%
2,193,965	62%
1,923,436	54%
1,788,687	46%
1,800,000	46%
1,566,884	40%

DEL date	Year	Registrar of labour relations	
		Number of Registered Unions #	Total membership: all registered trades unions @
		As on 31 March of each year	31 December of year
2019-2020	2020	220	4,075,645
2020-2021	2021	224	4,499,593
2021-2022	2022	219	3,963,480
2022-2023	2023	217	4,284,365
2023-2024	2024	203	4,279,648
	2025	213	-

from Table1	[Calculated]
<b>COSATU affiliates</b>	<b>COSATU % of all union members</b>
1,554,629	38%
1,517,036	38%
1,500,000	

# DEL data is for "Total number of active registered TU's in RSA – financial year end" (31 March).

@ DEL data is for "Registered TU's Membership figures" – see Footnote 1 above for explanation referring to Section 100 of the LRA.

§ In 2013, the figure for 2010 was revised to a total membership of 3,028,400 in the Department of Labour (2013) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2012 - 31 March 2013*. p.27. This revision was incorrectly made, according to membership data provided by DEL on 20 March 2026.

\* In 2013, the total membership figure for 2012 was incorrectly given as 3,057,772 in Department of Labour (2013) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2012 - 31 March 2013*. p.27. The correct figure (as reflected above) is that given for this year in 2015 in Department of Labour (2015) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015*. p.22. This was confirmed by the membership data provided by DEL on 20 March 2026.

Black	Numbers from DEL sources listed below
Shaded	Numbers from DEL in 2026 email, which differ from other DEL reports consulted, 2026 figure used here
Green	Numbers from DEL in 2026 email, which align with other DEL reports consulted and are used here
Blue	Additional numbers from DEL in 2026 email, not previously found in DEL reports
Red	Numbers from other DEL reports, transposed in the record list in DEL 2026 email. Original <i>Labour Market Review 2004</i> numbers used
Purple bold	Numbers confirmed by DEL in 2026 email, following query about conflicts between DEL reports – see § and * above

## Notes on Sources:

Data from 1999-2000 to 2023-2024 were provided by the Department of Labour and Employment (DEL)– personal communication 20 March 2026. The DEL records show the same total membership for 2004-2005 as for 2005-2006 (3,134,865). This is most likely due to an error of transcription. The error is unlikely to be significant for analysis. In addition, the DEL email, we believe, transposed the membership figures for 2002/2003 and 2003/2004. These were previously published in the *Labour Market Review 2004*. We have made this one adjustment, using all the membership data provided by the DEL in all other cases, and noting the three instances where other DEL publications of these administrative data appear to have given different information.

Column headed “*Registrar of labour relations: Total membership: all registered trades unions*”.

The source given in the reference material is” “Department of Labour, Collective Bargaining Statistics”

2000 to 2003 data from Table 8 Registered organisations and trade union membership 2000-2003 in Department of Labour. (2004). *Labour Market Review 2004*.

2008	Department of Labour (2012) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2010 - 31 March 2011</i> . p.28
2009	Department of Labour (2012) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2010 - 31 March 2011</i> . p.28
2010	Department of Labour (2012) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2010 - 31 March 2011</i> . p.28
2011	3,192,530 is used, from the DEL 2026 email, replacing the 3,392,149 in Department of Labour (2012b) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2011 - 31 March 2012</i> . p.42. The difference between the two is -200,000.
2012	Department of Labour (2015) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015</i> . p.22
2013	3,250,100 is used, from the DEL 2026 email, replacing the 3,715,659 in Department of Labour (2014) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2013 - 31 March 2014</i> . p.34. The difference between the two is about -450,000.
2014	Department of Labour (2015) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015</i> . p.22
2015	Department of Labour (2017) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2016 - 31 March 2017</i> . p.26
2016	Department of Labour (2017) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2016 - 31 March 2017</i> . p.26
2017	Department of Labour (2020) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019</i> . p.40
2018	Department of Labour (2020) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019</i> . p.40
2019	Department of Labour (2022) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2020 - 2021</i> . p.34
2020	Department of Labour (2022) <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2020 - 2021</i> . p.34
2020/21	Labour Market Information and Statistics (LMIS). (2025). <i>Annual Labour Market Bulletin (ALMB) 2022/23 financial year</i> . Compiled by the Labour Market Information and Statistics Directorate, Department of Employment and Labour. <a href="https://www.labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Reports/Annual%20Reports/Labour%20Market%20Bulletin%20Report/2022/Annual%20Labour%20Market%20Bulletin%202022_2023.pdf">https://www.labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Reports/Annual%20Reports/Labour%20Market%20Bulletin%20Report/2022/Annual%20Labour%20Market%20Bulletin%202022_2023.pdf</a>

2021/22 4,499,593 is used, from the DEL 2026 email, replacing 4,011,752 in the *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2022/2023*. The difference between the two is about +500,000

2022/23 *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2022/2023*

2025 DEL (2025b) *List of Registered Trade Unions in South Africa as for November 2025*. [Figure for the number of unions was 213]

The DEL told Parliament in its 2024/2025 Annual Report that the 2023/2024 *ALMB* had been completed as per the Annual Performance Plan, but it was not available on the DEL website in March 2026.

#### Trends in trade union membership by Province and Industry, March 2015 and March 2023

The total number of union members nationally is best taken from the records of the DEL, where the registrar has clear rules for assessing union membership. Additional information on approximate numbers of union members by province and by industry comes from StatsSA surveys. This data is not, however, divided by union or federation.

As an off-shoot from the Stats SA quarterly labour force surveys, the department responsible for labour has republished data on trade union membership by industry and provinces since 2014/2015. [There is a similar analysis in *Labour Market Review 2004*, but this is not regarded as reliable. StatsSA took over a decade to produce broadly credible results from its labour force survey. The survey figures published for national mining employment, for instance, were totally incorrect and misleading for many years. (GroundUp, 2019)].

Two tables are given below, but they have limitations. Survey data records the responses of a sample of interviewees. The data on union membership derive from a question in the “Conditions of employment – South Africa” part of the survey for people who are employees. “Trade Union membership - YES/NO/Don’t know”. There is no check on whether these are registered trade unions, or on whether the survey respondent is paid up. And respondents could specify their industry incorrectly.

Union density properly refers to the number of employees who are union members. The calculations in Table 6 and Table 7 for ‘union density’ are rough-and-ready indicators. They use total employment as the denominator, which is more than the number of employees. For instance, in the first quarter of 2023, the union density is given as 24% of the employed population of 16.1 million. But only 13.4 million people were employees. The total included almost 1 million employers, 1.7 million “own account workers” and 114,000 “Unpaid household members”. The national figure for trade union density would be more correctly measured as 29% in 2023, a significant 5% above the rough-and-ready 24% figure. *The figures in the tables below therefore understate union density* – because we did not have the relevant provincial and industry employee figures to hand.

GroundUp. (2019, February 21) Stats SA’s confusing mining employment statistics. *GroundUp*. <https://groundup.org.za/article/stats-sas-confusing-mining-employment-statistics/>

Table 6: Survey data used to suggest “union density” per province and per industry, 2023

Trade union membership by industry and province, Q1 - 2023 - basic analysis											2023	
PROVINCE ->	EC	FS	GP	KZN	LP	MP	NC	NW	WC	TOTAL	Total national employment by industry, 2023	Union density by industry
Agriculture	4,023	-	420	4,106	23,174	10,354	-	-	4,994	47,071	888,000	5%
Community	174,233	122,141	474,529	280,613	185,541	102,314	53,506	105,696	204,511	1,703,084	3,902,000	44%
Construction	11,285	3,369	20,499	13,928	6,390	8,749	2,892	13,832	27,071	108,015	1,201,000	9%
Finance	31,198	21,336	193,274	82,090	22,632	39,792	6,433	28,380	110,687	535,822	2,667,000	20%
Manufacturing	37,959	17,255	121,912	115,828	9,315	34,105	1,655	14,776	97,441	450,246	1,654,000	27%
Mining	645	20,322	33,665	3,996	76,966	44,671	13,443	107,615	891	302,214	413,000	73%
Private households	630	547	2,578	822	-	-	-	-	-	4,577	1,056,000	0%
Trade	34,025	19,685	114,982	90,467	30,072	44,295	2,275	45,596	116,220	497,617	3,269,000	15%
Transport	10,556	7,834	81,701	30,967	8,861	9,966	3,457	6,663	41,525	201,530	992,000	20%
Utilities	2,418	3,209	24,653	7,191	6,715	24,487	-	3,847	8,599	81,119	135,000	60%
Other	-	-	2,952	-	-	-	472	-	-	3,424	15,000	
<b>Total Union membership</b>	<b>306,972</b>	<b>215,698</b>	<b>1,071,165</b>	<b>630,008</b>	<b>369,666</b>	<b>318,733</b>	<b>84,133</b>	<b>326,405</b>	<b>611,939</b>	<b>3,934,715</b>	<b>16,192,000</b>	<b>24%</b>
<i>Total employment by province, 2023</i>	<i>1,421,000</i>	<i>790,000</i>	<i>4,984,000</i>	<i>2,594,000</i>	<i>1,388,000</i>	<i>1,141,000</i>	<i>339,000</i>	<i>877,000</i>	<i>2,658,000</i>	<i>16,192,000</i>		
<i>Union density per province, 2023</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>21%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>28%</i>	<i>25%</i>	<i>37%</i>	<i>23%</i>	<i>24%</i>		
<b>Public sector organisation indicator</b>												
% of union members in 'community' industry, 2023	57%	57%	44%	45%	50%	32%	64%	32%	33%	43%		

Sources:

DEL (2025) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2022/2023*

Table 17: Trade Union Membership By Industry And Province, 2023

Table 7: Number Of Employed By Province (‘000) - Confirmed by *Quarterly Labour Force Survey P2011, Quarter 1: 2023* pp.59-63

Table 8: Number Of Employed By Industry (‘000) - Confirmed by *Quarterly Labour Force Survey P2011, Quarter 1: 2023* Table 3.3: Employed by Industry and Province. p.56

“Union density” figures by province and industry have been calculated for comparison – but see the caveat above (p. 21).

Table 7: Survey data used to suggest “union density” per province and per industry, 2015

<b>Trade union membership by industry and province, Q1 - 2015- basic analysis</b>											<i>[column and industry orders changed to be the same as in 2023]</i>		<b>2015</b>
<b>PROVINCE -&gt;</b>	<b>EC</b>	<b>FS</b>	<b>GP</b>	<b>KZN</b>	<b>LP</b>	<b>MP</b>	<b>NC</b>	<b>NW</b>	<b>WC</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>Total national employment by industry, 2015</i>	<i>Union density by industry</i>	
Agriculture	7,525	2,404	4,059	6,907	8,596	4,872	392	2,796	5,729	43,280	891,000	5%	
Community	208,364	110,549	379,116	313,462	143,212	112,757	37,097	96,616	207,480	1,608,653	3,450,000	47%	
Construction	7,962	6,257	32,897	14,025	6,779	11,411	2,392	8,837	18,445	109,007	1,322,000	8%	
Finance	22,794	19,270	135,914	56,730	12,496	26,911	4,311	15,939	54,379	348,745	2,195,000	16%	
Manufacturing	47,686	19,375	171,594	93,757	4,212	34,493	2,012	21,414	79,919	474,462	1,779,000	27%	
Mining	279	31,399	60,964	3,879	69,408	48,638	23,534	125,859	828	364,789	443,000	82%	
Private households	448	-	4,403	-	-	-	-	-	-	4,850	1,288,000	0%	
Trade	33,445	28,673	105,870	31,102	26,902	39,653	5,560	14,937	56,588	342,730	3,046,000	11%	
Transport	14,916	8,427	92,296	37,448	5,516	17,955	3,701	5,400	28,748	214,407	899,000	24%	
Utilities	-	9,927	12,702	8,957	7,334	19,119	3,662	3,555	8,323	73,579	143,000	51%	
Other													
<b>Total Union membership</b>	<b>343,420</b>	<b>236,281</b>	<b>999,815</b>	<b>566,267</b>	<b>284,455</b>	<b>315,809</b>	<b>82,662</b>	<b>295,353</b>	<b>460,439</b>	<b>3,584,501</b>	<b>15,459,000</b>	<b>23%</b>	
<i>Total employment by province, 2015</i>	<i>1,358,000</i>	<i>802,000</i>	<i>4,911,000</i>	<i>2,546,000</i>	<i>1,208,000</i>	<i>1,154,000</i>	<i>307,000</i>	<i>912,000</i>	<i>2,261,000</i>	<i>15,459,000</i>			
<i>Union density per province, 2015</i>	<i>25%</i>	<i>29%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>23%</i>			
<b>Public sector organisation indicator</b>													
% of union members in 'community' industry, 2015	61%	47%	38%	55%	50%	36%	45%	33%	45%	45%			

**Sources:**

Department of Labour (2015) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015*. p.22 [The original Table 14 incorrectly gives a number of 828 for union membership in manufacturing in the Western Cape. The correct figure is 79,919.]

Table 4: Number of employed by province (‘000)

Table 5: Number of employed by industry (‘000)

Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey 1st Quarter 2015 [P2011]* states that “Mining could also show a different trends if the Quarterly Employment Statistics was used.” The QES (more credible) mining employment figure is 480,000 [P0277].

“Union density” figures by province and industry have been calculated for comparison – but see the caveat above (p. 21).

StatsSA: Labour Market Surveys as reproduced by the Department of Labour: [only 2015 and 2023 are given above, as examples]

- 2003 Table 7 Trade Union Membership 2003. Department of Labour. (2004). *Labour Market Review 2004*. [The union membership figure given was 2,992,000, which is evidently not correct. Stats SA took over a decade to develop the labour force survey to a point where results were credible].
- 2014 Fig 1: 2014. Department of Labour (2015) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015*. p.23
- 2015 Table 14: Trade union membership by industry and province, 2015. Department of Labour (2015) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015*. p.22
- 2016 Table 12: Trade union membership by industry and province, 2016 . Department of Labour (2016) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2015 - 31 March 2016*. p.27
- 2017 Table 11: Trade union membership by industry and province, 2017 . Department of Labour (2017) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2016 - 31 March 2017*. p.27
- 2018 Figure 8: Year on year change in the trade union membership by industry, 2018-2019. Department of Labour (2020) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019*. p.42
- 2019 Figure 8: Year on year change in the trade union membership by industry, 2018-2019. Department of Labour (2020) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019*. p.42
- 2020/21 Table 13: Trade union membership by industry and province, 2020-2021. Department of Labour (2022) *Annual Labour Market Bulletin 2020 - 2021*. p.35
- 2021/22 Figure 5: Year on Year change in the trade union membership by industry, 2023. Labour Market Information and Statistics (LMIS). (2025). *Annual Labour Market Bulletin (ALMB) 2022/23 financial year*. p.32
- 2022/23 Figure 5: Year on Year change in the trade union membership by industry, 2023 [March]. Labour Market Information and Statistics (LMIS). (2025). *Annual Labour Market Bulletin (ALMB) 2022/23 financial year*. p.32



*This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License*