



Introduction

Industrial unionism and COSATU

**Founding principles,
present realities, and
future challenges**

By SHANE GODFREY, MARIO JACOBS and IAN MACUN

COSATU, South Africa's storied federation of trade unions, with its affiliates, played a critical role in the defeat of apartheid and in the construction of new modes of industrial relations – and politics – after 1994. Forty years old in 2025, COSATU's industrial unionism model is the focus of this fine-grained analysis by SHANE GODFREY, MARIO JACOBS, and IAN MACUN. This special focus provides a context for a discussion on the state of unions in South Africa today. It moves the debate beyond recognition of the impact of economic liberalisation, features of corruption and authoritarianism, and the changing social composition of the union membership to consider what the future could hold for the way COSATU and its affiliates are structured in a difficult new world.



Introduction

This special focus on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is divided into two articles. The first presents an historical perspective on the move towards industrial unionism among the independent unions that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s up to the formation of COSATU in 1985. Thereafter, the industrial union strategy slowed and then lost impetus. What followed during the 2000s was a gradual unravelling of industrial unionism and a shift towards multi-sectoralism.

Empirical evidence is provided of the extent of COSATU affiliates' retreat from the principle of 'one industry, one union' towards multi-sectoralism, as well as the shift of the centre of gravity in the federation from private to public sector.¹

We argue, based on the evidence, that organisation by affiliates across sectors constitutes 'restructuring', albeit in the absence of a revitalisation strategy, and that the 'one industry, one union' organisational strategy is no longer fit for purpose in either the private sector or the public sector. Without a new organising principle and strategy fit for the times, COSATU is unlikely to arrest the decline in its private sector membership or manage the tensions among its public sector affiliates, nor will it make inroads into new forms of work and the rising mass of vulnerable workers in the labour market.²

The second article deals with the implications of these shifts for sector level collective bargaining through the bargaining council system. It provides evidence that COSATU is a shrinking presence in the private sector bargaining council system and points to the potential for fragmentation of sectoral bargaining arrangements and a greater degree of decentralisation of collective bargaining. It also has an overarching conclusion to both parts.

ENDNOTES

¹ The articles are based on research conducted for COSATU and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in terms of a project titled 'Developments around the sectoral boundaries of COSATU's affiliates'. The research was conducted in two phases between June 2021 and August 2023, and besides examination of relevant documentation and a survey of secondary literature, the research comprised online and in-person interviews with past and present COSATU leaders as well as interviews with union leaders at a number of affiliates. A report was produced for each phase and provided to COSATU and the ILO. These reports are listed in the references at the end of the articles under the authors names.

² A challenge acknowledged by union interviewees who refer to it as "the 70 percent" of the labour market that seems beyond their capacity to organise.