

Meet new shop stewards

The 2012 survey of Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) shop stewards undertaken by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry for the Forum of Public Dialogue (FPD) established that the characteristics of shop stewards have changed over the the last two decades. The shop stewards are likely to have a tertiary education, be skilled and professional, support the African National Congress (ANC) and possibly a labour party, and be militant, writes **Elijah Chiwota** who attended a presentation on the findings by a member of the academic reference team, **Edward Webster**, at the Gordon Institute of Business Studies in Johannesburg.

In his opening remarks Webster, who did a similar survey in 1991, said surveys were important because they 'usually confirm but can also disturb common sense.'

He reiterated the importance of listening to shop stewards because they are an 'engine for unions' and a group from which the 'battle for ideas on alternatives' takes place. That being the case, other factors also had to be taken into account such as whether the shop stewards were able to navigate stalemates so as to reach concessions at the workplaces as well as have the ability to resolve personality conflicts.

He emphasised that the South African economy continued to face the legacy of apartheid such as structural unemployment, skills shortage and mismatch, race and gender discrimination of the labour force, adversarialism and inadequate protection of vulnerable workers.

According to Franco Barchiesi adversarialism is seen in high levels of conflict when militant working-class organisations oppose employers and the state. This has been a common tradition in South African industrial relations.

However, the post-1994 vision of labour market reform tried to move away from conflict by promoting engagement with the employers and the state. This can be seen in the Labour Relations Act (1995) which extended worker rights to all employees in the private and public sectors and allowed for collective bargaining to take place through bargaining councils.

The promotion of collective bargaining, although not compulsory, provided for organisational rights for unions in the workplace and also for the constitutional right to strike.

The establishment of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), based on USA and Australian models, allowed for speedy settling of labour disputes. The coming into being of the Labour Court also reduced instances in which labour cases were delayed. Before that labour cases were heard in general courts, which were congested with other cases.

The provision for the establishment of workplace forums, based on the German system of works councils, also provided platforms in which labour issues were discussed.

Shop stewards' ambiguous role: unpaid HR managers and/or "agitators"?

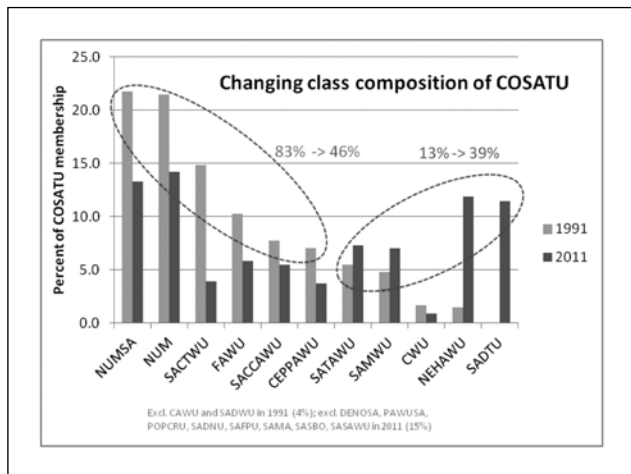
- There is a nuanced view of union/employer relations
 - 74% agree that they may find themselves in conflict with workers
 - 53% agree (59% in 1991) that they may find themselves in agreement with management
 - 33% agree that management and workers have basically the same objectives
- But a continuing commitment to industrial action as felt necessary
 - Only 40% agree that non-striking workers should be allowed to work
 - 56% feel strikes yield results
 - 83% feel non-striking workers "should be engaged with"

RADICAL DEMANDS

84% of surveyed shop stewards wanted workers to share company profits and 67% supported the nationalisation of the South African economy. Only 16% wanted government to regulate 'without necessarily taking control' and 17% supported privatisation.

CHANGING CLASS POSITION

The survey also noted the changing class composition of Cosatu members from blue collar (manual and labouring) to white collar (semi-skilled and professional). This meant a shift in the balance of power in favour of public service unions thus reversing the influence that industrial unions had enjoyed.



This shift is confirmed by the 2012 Cosatu Workers Survey carried out by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry and managed by the National Labour and Economic Development Institute and presented at the federation's 11th National Congress held in Johannesburg in 2012. 'The Cosatu survey found a different distribution of employment from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). In the Cosatu Survey, 40% of members said they are elementary workers or labourers, 27% skilled production workers, 13% clerical or sales workers and 21% management or professionals'.

By concluding that most of the shop stewards had at least Grade 8, the findings agreed with the QLFS on education, which says union members were 'more likely than other workers to have matric or a degree. In part, this is because union density is higher in the public sector, where teachers, nurses and police dominate'.

FEWER MEETINGS

As the shop stewards aged and became more educated, it seems also that they lost interest in meetings. This is seen in the decline in shop floor participation, as shown by fewer union and shop steward meetings. This is shown in comparisons between 1991 and 2012.

Decline in Shop Floor Participation

	1991	2012
Older than 40 years	22%	54%
Less or equal to Std 8	62%	25%
Union meetings several times per month, or more	55%	31%
Several shop-stewards' meetings per week	46%	15%

These findings are confirmed by the Workers Survey 2012 which made the following conclusions: 'Around two-thirds of Cosatu members said that their union held a general meeting in their workplace at least once a quarter. One in five, however said they did not remember any general meetings or did not know how often they took place. Amongst affiliates, the share of members saying general meetings were held at least once every three months ranged from four-fifths to just over half'.

STRIKES

There were more strikes and community protests in post-democracy South Africa than under apartheid.

Dramatic increase in workplace violence and community unrest, culminating in Marikana

Year	Number
1994	3 900 000
1995	1 600 000
1996	1 700 000
1997	650 000
1998	2 300 000
1999	3 100 000
2000	500 000
2001	1 250 000
2002	945 000
2003	700 000
2004	1 100 000
2005	2 300 000
2006	2 900 000
2007	12 900 000
2008	990 000
2009	2 900 000
2010	14 600 000
2011	30 000 000

Work days lost as a result of strikes, 1994 - 2011

Source: SAIRR 2010-11: 417, Khuzwayo 2011 in Southall, R. (2012), p.2.

It was important to note that strikes had power logic, and in some instances fragmented unions. Some strikes were marred by violence.

The study shows the resurgence of violence which involved the police. Violence also took place amongst workers and worker organisations. However, the shop stewards seemed to give unspoken acceptance of the violence. One of the issues with violence is that it has not been measured.

Webster also attributed the violence to weak unions as 'unorganisation led to violence'.

MANAGERS OR AGITATORS

There were instances in which shop stewards played an ambiguous role as unpaid human resources managers and by doing this they were in conflict with their traditional role as advocates of workers' rights at the workplace. Therefore, when they appeared to be on the employer's side they were accused by fellow workers of having jumped ship and dining with the capitalist devil. The notion of the 'social distance' has also been brought in between the shop stewards and their comrades.

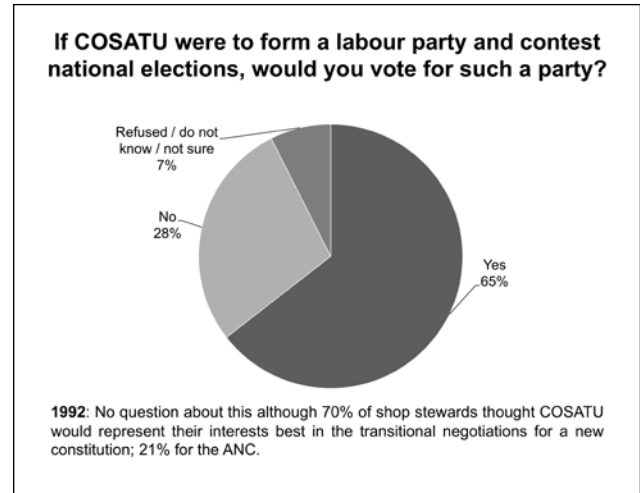
Therefore, there is a 'nuanced view' of union and employer relations of which the shop stewards agree. According to the survey:

- 74% agree that they may find themselves in conflict with workers
- 53% agree (59% in 1991) that they may find themselves in agreement with management
- 33% agree that management and workers have basically the same objectives.

However, the shop stewards were committed to industrial action which they felt was necessary, and only 40% agreed that non-striking workers should be allowed to work, 56% felt strikes yielded results, whilst 83% agreed that non-striking workers 'should be engaged with' – another way of saying agreeing to violence against scabs.

POLITICS

About 90% of shop stewards said they would vote for the African National Congress (ANC) and 65% would support a labour party if Cosatu formed one.



This showed that the shop stewards favoured the Alliance that Cosatu had with the ANC and the South African Communist Party. If one were to use marriage as an example, then the position of the shop stewards was to remain in a marriage despite the existence of 'domestic violence,' said Webster.

The survey was carried out on 2,052 shops stewards from the Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union, Communication Workers Union, Food and Allied Workers Union, National Health and Allied Workers Union, National Union of Mineworkers, National Unions of Metalworkers of South Africa, South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union, Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, South African Democratic Teachers Union, South African Municipal Workers Union and South African Transport Workers Union. ^{LB}

The FPD/CASE and the Workers Survey are available from FPD and Cosatu.

Rob Rees



Shop stewards feel strike breakers must be dealt with as seen by this marcher's poster.