

# Workers Survey

## A glimpse into Cosatu membership

One of the many documents presented at the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) 11th Congress in Johannesburg was the *Workers Survey* which captured important information on the federation's membership, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

**A**mong other things, the survey explained who the federation's members are, what work they do, how much they earn, and their race, age and gender. Also surveyed were the 'perceptions of union members and potential members on issues facing the labour movement' and their views on trade unions and South African politics in general.

The purpose of the survey was to 'help union members, shop stewards, activists and leaders to enrich their views on workers' needs, desires and hopes.'

The survey was also aimed at strengthening internal democracy within unions, and exploring ways to service members better. Also included were matters to do with finding better ways to organise workers that were not members of Cosatu.

The survey asked a number of pertinent questions such as what workers expected from their employers and unions. Why are some workers not joining unions? Was their racial and gender discrimination or harassment at the workplace? What were the workers views on strike action, union services and internal democracy? Were workers active in politics?

Workers interviewed through a questionnaire included 753 non-union members and 2,293 union members. Of the union members, 1,746 or 76% belonged to 10 Cosatu affiliates.

The findings of the survey explained issues to do with 'members, union democracy and accountability, solidarity, gender and recruitment'.

### WORST PAID

The survey found that workers were better off as members of unions because non-members earned less than union members. The worst paid workers were found in 'retail (private services) including security and light industry'. However, 'the best paid are in the public services, where the majority of members are in the big public-service professions, education, health and policing'.

Most Cosatu members who were professionals were from public sector unions that made up 15% of the federation's membership. About seven out of 10 professionals were from the public service unions while 'over half of the members in private sector unions classified themselves as labourers.'

Union members were more likely to have matric or degrees than non-union members and half of the workers with higher educational qualifications were in the public sector unions. 'Members in the private sector and local government were much less likely to have continued schooling after matric.' The survey explains that this high level of education in the public sector is most likely the case because of 'high union density in the public sector, where teachers, nurses and police dominate.'

Cosatu members were more likely to be African men (50%) and women (30%), with fewer white members. Other groups included coloured and Asian workers. Whilst this was the case, industry type was another factor. However, the survey gives a disclaimer throughout that it underrepresented its sample of white workers amongst both members and non-members.

### FORTIES UNION

According to the survey the average age for a member was 40, whilst the younger workers were underrepresented. Only one in seven Cosatu members is under 30 years old.



*Another day at Congress: Delegates follow the long debates.*

'Amongst the Cosatu affiliates, the share of young workers is highest in industries where employment has grown relatively fast in the past 10 years. These industries include retail, construction and security. The share of younger members is lowest in sectors that, like the public service, have grown slowly or not at all.'

This means that the industries where young people are employed are mainly those that provide precarious forms of employment that are casual and temporary in nature, with the wages being low. So it will make sense for Cosatu to intensify its campaign against labour brokers.

Members wanted permanent and well-paying jobs and for younger workers benefits and job security from permanent instead

of temporary contracts were also priorities. Some workers also complained of discrimination. The survey comments that some of the workers' perceptions were a result of 'South Africa's extraordinarily sharp income inequalities, history of oppressive and hierarchical work organisation and the associated social divisions...'

Some black women workers suffered more discrimination and sexual harassment or abuse. Consultative workplace forums existed, and more so, in the public than private sectors.

Over 80% of Cosatu members had gone on strike mostly for higher wages. 'The most common reason given for strikes by far was wage negotiations. Between 85% and 90% of workers said the latest strike in their workplace was linked to pay.'

Strike violence was seen by the workers as necessary against scabs. 'Around half of Cosatu members involved in a strike thought the violence by workers was necessary.' There was also violence or intimidation against strikers from the police and management. The police sometimes used rubber bullets and teargas.

#### **WHY JOIN UNIONS**

Unions would help them get better pay and fight for improved working conditions, said the members. They would also get support against dismissals and work conflicts. Although satisfied with union services (50 to 60%) they wanted better communication and union response.

'Workers with lower incomes

were most likely to say they belonged to the union to improve pay, benefits and conditions. Higher income members tended to stress protection from disciplinary challenges and dismissals and were somewhat more likely to mention solidarity and social change.'

Considering the number of meetings that unions organise, the survey came up with surprises when it found out that workers had little knowledge of their unions. 'Workers often do not know much about their union national structures. When asked about national leadership, just 6% of the members of Cosatu affiliates knew who their president or general secretary was. Another 8% gave the name of a Cosatu national office bearer, and the rest either named a local official or no one at all.'

Most workplaces, especially those of big companies, where Cosatu affiliates were organising had shop stewards, some of them full-time. Most of the members thought they exercised influence over the shop stewards.

In terms of communication, Cosatu members still relied on traditional forms of communication such as sending someone to the workplace to report back. Sometimes written notices were also used. 'Relatively very few (members) were informed by email or text messages, and almost none by Facebook or Twitter. Unions that were not affiliated to Cosatu were more likely to use email, text messages or a union newsletter.'

Their media of choice are television services provided by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) rather than social media.

Participation in union education attracted more men than women even in affiliates where the majority of members were women. However, the topics

covered included negotiations, labour law, and employment equity and skills development. Other courses were on political economy, gender and HIV and AIDS.

### CORRUPTION

Although union members said there was corruption in the union there was no evidence. There were allegations of shop stewards selling out to management or the misuse of union funds.

Women participation as union leaders was hampered by lack of capability and confidence to carry out the tasks. Other reasons given included family responsibilities.

However, the non-members said the reason they were not in a union was the absence of union organising at their workplace. They also said they did not know how to contact a union, whilst others wanted nothing to do with unions or were too scared of their employer to join one. Others had left a union earlier citing poor service.

Precarious workers especially those 'in temporary, casual or seasonal positions or who worked for smaller employers were less likely to be in a union,' says the survey.

The majority of Cosatu members (two-thirds) said they would vote for the African National Congress (ANC). Under a tenth said they would vote for the Democratic Alliance (DA). Over 70% favoured Cosatu remaining in the Alliance while 2% of those against the Alliance wanted the federation to align to the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The *Workers Survey* confirms what a number of studies, including by Eddie Webster and Sakhela Buhlungu, have said about Cosatu, that its members are blue-collar and African.

Adam Habib and Imram Valodia write that the character of the trade union federation, as well as

its representation, is changing. Its members are 'a somewhat more established and institutionalised segment of the waged workers, while the majority of the unemployed and those surviving in the informal economy remain outside of the formal union movement.'

Hein Marais adds: 'Cosatu's failure to widen its base significantly beyond full-time, permanent workers fetters it politically and tactically. Gaining access to these workers is notoriously difficult; so too is convincing them that the potential benefits of formalised solidarity outweigh the immediate risks of harassment and lay-offs. In addition, these workers are unstable; they migrate between employment, self-employment and unemployment.'

In agreement with the studies the survey concludes: 'there are good reasons to extend the organisation beyond the traditional strongholds of permanent workers in large companies. Workers in smaller enterprises and non-standard employment are often most in need of union support. Moreover, given the fall in the share of union membership in the private sector in the last 10 years mostly as a result in the decline in mine employment finding new areas for organisation is important for the labour movement as a whole. But reaching these kinds of members requires innovative approaches to organisation and to services as well as more vigorous recruitment campaigns.'<sup>18</sup>

*The survey was managed by a Naledi team led by Liesl Orr, with assistance from Debbie Budlender and Neva Makgetla. Also from Naledi were Rudi Dicks, Musa Malabela and Sian Byrne. Jane Barrett and Theo Steele represented Cosatu. The Community Agency for Social Enquiry carried out the survey.*