

What is the future of craft unions? Will they remain a significant force outside COSATU, or will the industrial unions broaden their base and recruit more artisans? KARL VON HOLDT discusses the options.

COSATU *and* *the* craft unions



White workers,
black workers.
Indians, coloureds,
Africans.
Monthly-paid,
weekly-paid.
White-collar
workers in collars
and ties, blue-collar
workers in overalls.
Artisans, operators

and labourers. In SA the divisions of colour and skill and occupation are many and complex. These are reflected in divisions in the labour movement.

COSATU has emerged as the dominant labour centre, but it cannot claim to represent all layers of the working class. COSATU is organised as a mass movement of black workers, mostly African. Its membership consists almost entirely of blue-collar workers below the level of artisan. NACTU has a similar profile.

In most sectors the majority of artisans are white, and they are organised into predominantly white craft unions or into industrial-craft unions dominated by white, coloured and Indian workers, such as the SA Typographical Union

(SATU) and the National Union of Furniture and Allied workers (NUFAW). The majority of white-collar workers in the private sector are either unorganised or are members of unions affiliated to the Federation of South African Labour Unions (FEDSAL). In the public sector most are members of conservative staff associations.

What is the future of the craft unions and white-collar unions? As more black workers move into these occupations, will craft and white-collar unions remain a significant force outside the major industrial affiliates of COSATU and NACTU? Or will the industrial unions manage to broaden their base and recruit more highly skilled blue-collar and white-collar workers?

In this article I will discuss the relation between the craft unions and COSATU's affiliates.*

Apartheid ensured that the great majority of artisans are white. By 1989, 68% of SA's 234 000 artisans were still white. Only in the building and furniture industries were black artisans in the majority. African artisans were in a tiny minority – 6% of the total compared to 17% coloured and 4% Indian**.

* The next issue of SA LABOUR BULLETIN will focus on white-collar unions.

RACIAL DIVISIONS, SKILL DIVISIONS

Confederation of Metal & Building Unions: Paid-up membership	1987	1990
Amalgamated Engineering Union of SA	31 000	30 000
Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers of SA	18 000	23 000
Engineering, Industrial and Mining Workers' Union of SA	21 000	25 000
Iron Moulders' Society of SA	1 863	2 000
Radio, Television, Electronics and Allied Workers' of SA	2 150	2 400
SA Boilermakers', Iron and Steel Workers', Shipbuilders' and Welders' Society	55 000	30 000
SA Electrical Workers' Association	22 000	22 000
Total	151 013	134 400

Council of Mining Unions: Paid-up membership	1987	1990
Amalgamated Engineering Union of SA	31 000	30 000
Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers of SA	758	4 500
Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers of SA	18 000	23 000
Iron Moulders' Society of SA	1 863	2 000
Mynwerkers Unie	30 000	27 985
SA Boilermakers', Iron and Steel Workers', Shipbuilders' and Welders' Society	55 000	30 000
SA Electrical Workers' Association	22 000	22 000
Total	158 621	139 485

Tables showing the membership of craft unions

Directory of South African Trade Unions (SALDRU, Cape Town)

Craft unions have a long history in SA. Many reserved themselves for white workers only. As more black workers become artisans, some became non-racial, for example the SA Boilermakers Society, the SA Electrical Workers Association and the Artisan Staff Association. Others are still reserved for white members only – for example the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Motor Industry Employers Union.

Several craft unions have transformed themselves into industrial-craft unions by opening themselves up to all workers on a non-racial basis. NUF AW (now affiliated to NACTU) did this in 1980 by opening up the previously white, coloured and Indian (mostly skilled) union to African members. It now has a closed shop for all workers in the furniture industry. SATU opened itself to all grades and all 'races' of workers in 1981, and established a closed shop in the printing industry*. But until recently it still had separate racial branches, and workers on lower grades than

artisans were only entitled to a 1/2 or 1/4 vote each! This entrenched the control of skilled, mostly white artisans.

Generally, even when the craft and industrial-craft unions are not openly racist and sexist, they tend to be dominated by white male artisans, or in some cases skilled coloured and Indian workers. Their privileged relation to the state and employers in industrial councils has made them into conservative 'sweetheart unions', averse to industrial action. Many of them are wealthy, owning buildings, controlling large pension and benefit funds, and staffed by well-entrenched bureaucracies.

Obstacles to recruiting artisans

Where COSATU affiliates have tried to recruit members of craft and industrial-craft unions, they have encountered the following problems:

- Racist attitudes, fear of African dominated unions, conservatism and aversion to

** see Paul Lundall and Zaid Kimmie, SA LABOUR BULLETIN Vol 16 No 6 1992

* The closed shop ended with the collapse of the Printing Industrial Council in 1990.

militant mass struggle. These attitudes are not confined to whites or to artisans.

- The 'craft consciousness' of artisans – they are set apart from other workers by their special training and higher rates of pay, by their position in the production process, by the fact that they are often monthly-paid rather than weekly-paid. The craft unions promise to protect this position.
- Most artisans hold supervisory positions, and most identify more with management than with the rest of the workers.
- Members of craft and industrial-craft unions are reluctant to forfeit the range of benefits they receive as members of these unions – medical aid, pension funds, legal assistance, etc.
- They are often prevented by a closed shop agreement from joining other unions. In addition, recognition agreements often exclude skilled workers on higher grades from the bargaining units represented by COSATU and NACTU affiliates. So even if artisans join, they cannot be represented.

Generally, COSATU affiliates and craft and industrial-craft unions have a history of conflict, but in some sectors where the COSATU union has become the dominant force, a limited degree of co-operation has emerged. For example, until NUMSA became the major force in the engineering industrial council, the craft unions and employers used to sideline NUMSA (previously MAWU) by signing the agreement while NUMSA was still in dispute.

"They had no sense of solidarity," recalls NUMSA's collective bargaining secretary Les Kettledas. "In fact they would actually *increase* pressure on the employers to settle, rather than to resolve the dispute with NUMSA." Even now sometimes they support the employers and negotiate against NUMSA. For example, last year the Council of Metal and Building Unions opposed NUMSA's demand for a moratorium on retrenchments. "How can a trade union argue against another trade union on job security?" asks Kettledas.

NUM has co-operated with the white craft unions in negotiating retrenchment packages and procedures, profit-sharing agreements, and

in mining summit meetings. NUM experiences conflict with these unions at workplace level, rather than industry level – over racism, over their different relations with management, over the different interests of their members.

PPWAWU has had a long history of conflict with SATU and NUF AW in the printing and furniture industries. This is a much more direct conflict than that between NUMSA and NUM and the craft unions, because SATU and NUF AW are industrial-craft unions which have tried to use the closed shop to block PPWAWU's entry into the industry.

The printing and furniture sectors are characterised by large numbers of Indian and coloured workers, and the closed shop has enabled the industrial-craft unions to recruit all levels of workers. PPWAWU has made progress in organising African workers but has failed to make inroads into the non-African majority. It has 5 000 members in the furniture industry (out of 25 000) and 11 000 in printing (SATU has 26 000). Large numbers of NUF AW and SATU members have in fact come out in support of strikes called by PPWAWU (Indian members of NUF AW in last year's Afcol strike, SATU members during the 1990 Nampak strike), yet the same workers are reluctant to join PPWAWU because of the benefits they will lose and because COSATU is seen as 'radical'.

SATU rejected PPWAWU's attempts to discuss the pending collapse of the printing industrial council in 1990. However, last year SATU agreed to support the PPWAWU-initiated campaign for centralised bargaining in the sector – probably because it feared being left out.

Changes in industry

There are a number of new developments in industry that will confront both COSATU affiliates and craft unions with new challenges.

- The end of white political power will mean the end of the privileged position of white worker organisations.
- COSATU affiliates have launched a drive for representation on industry training boards (ITBs). This will break the

monopoly control that craft unions have had over access to skills and training. COSATU affiliates are using these forums to put forward proposals for radical new training, grading and wage policies (*see Adrienne Bird, SA LABOUR BULLETIN Vol 16 No 6 and Snuki Zikalala ibid; see also page 6 of this issue*). These proposals would give all workers access to training and career paths, breaking down the rigid distinction between artisans, operators and labourers. They also intend turning supervisors from "cops" into "coaches".

- The above proposals correspond to changing technology in many sectors. New technology undermines many of the craft skills controlled by the craft unions. For example, the demarcation between electrician and mechanic is becoming blurred. Technology in the printing industry has changed so much that SATU has been called a "pseudo-craft" union (*see Godfrey, p254*). Many employers are engaged in a drive to fragment artisans' jobs.
- There is an increasing number of black artisans. As South Africa moves towards democracy, and affirmative action programmes are developed, this number will grow.
- COSATU affiliates are becoming involved in industry restructuring forums. COSATU is becoming aware of how important skilled workers are in any process of restructuring.

These changes are likely to undermine the position of the craft unions. They have remained relatively strong because of the racial division of labour, their monopoly of high-level skills, and their privileged relation to employers and the state. As these conditions change, they will have to change or be marginalised.

COSATU strategies

Different COSATU affiliates are responding to these changes with different strategies, depending on conditions in their sector.

NUMSA, for example, is seeking to avoid confrontation with the craft unions in its sector around its proposals for industry training and

grading. "We have to understand where the artisans are coming from and try to accommodate their concerns," says NUMSA's Adrienne Bird.

The union argues that the craft unions cannot hold onto their skills and job demarcations forever. Changing technology and work organisation, and job fragmentation, reinforce the loss of white political power.

According to Bird, NUMSA is asking the craft unions to let go some of their lower-level skills and support the NUMSA training-and-grading proposals. In return, NUMSA will fight for two new grades *above* the artisan level, thus providing a career path from artisan to technician and eventually to engineer. This should accommodate the two major grievances artisans have – recognition for skills they may have over and above those scheduled in the apprenticeship training contract, and the opportunity to upgrade their skills to keep pace with technological change. It is not yet clear how the craft unions will respond, but Bird believes it may be possible to avoid antagonising them (*see the interview with Ben Nicholson, page 24*).

PPWAWU faces quite different problems in the furniture and printing sectors. While SATU and NUFAW are dominated by skilled workers, they are open to all grades, and have used the closed shop to protect themselves from PPWAWU. According to PPWAWU's Rob Rees the "amandla approach" has not been very successful in the struggle to win a majority in these sectors. In an effort to provide a package of benefits similar to those of NUFAW and SATU, PPWAWU has developed its own provident fund and medical aid scheme. But a weakness has been that organisers and worker activists are not well versed in PPWAWU's benefits, and often fail to out-argue their rivals in front of the workers.

"We need to equip the unions for a different kind of organising," comments Rees. "COSATU as a federation should also consider developing benefit schemes such as a union controlled health scheme. It is big enough to provide better and cheaper benefits."

PPWAWU may also have to reconsider its



Benoni Training Centre: will African artisans join COSATU or craft unions?

Photo: William Matlala

strategy of trying to out-organise NUFAW and SATU, and rather try to support groupings inside those unions which seek to reform and democratise them. In the long run, this could open up possibilities of a merger.

NUM's collective bargaining agreements cover the unskilled and semi-skilled sectors of the workforce, and the union concentrates its organising almost exclusively on them, according to assistant general secretary Marcel Golding. However, it has now recruited close to 2 000 white skilled workers (*see page 48*) and also has black members who have been promoted out of its bargaining unit. This year NUM is likely to put forward a demand for its recognition agreement to be amended to include these members.

Employers in the mining industry are keen to end the closed shop arrangements with the predominantly white craft and white-collar unions. While there are different views on this in NUM, Golding believes the union should support the closed shop, but amend it to a multi-party shop. This would allow NUM to compete with other unions in the closed shop,

and it would allow workers to decide which union to join. NUM (or any other union) could then represent its members wherever it has recruited more than a certain percentage.

Organising monthly paid workers

COSATU affiliates have generally established themselves among weekly-paid workers, but have very little base among monthly-pays. Unionists often complain that their best and most able worker leaders are promoted out of their bargaining unit and so out of the union.

Now some COSATU unions are beginning to target monthly-paid workers for recruitment. The increasing number of black workers in these jobs makes this more feasible. Unionists hope this 'second wave' of unionisation will increase their membership and increase their influence in the workplace. Indeed, if COSATU affiliates are going to make serious attempts to drive restructuring at company level, they will need these more skilled workers on their side.

The SACTWU strike at Frame shows how successful these efforts can be (*see page 35*).

And Frame is not an isolated example – SACTWU is currently negotiating recognition in the monthly-paid bargaining unit at Romatex. But as the Frame example shows, if unions want to succeed in this second wave of unionisation they will have to equip themselves to deal with the grievances of this layer of workers, and provide them with consistent, quality service.

This will not be easy. Organisers are over-stretched. More significantly, most have been recruited from the ranks of weekly-paid workers and so have little understanding of the working conditions and grievances of monthly-paid artisans, clerical workers and technicians. Employers and craft unions will also resist attempts to extend bargaining units or break into closed shops.

Many changes

COSATU affiliates are exploring new frontiers. It is difficult to predict how successful their attempts to move beyond their traditional base among weekly-paid workers will be.

Whether black artisans are attracted towards COSATU affiliates or towards the craft unions will depend on the extent to which either meet their needs. Black artisans may well feel their position is compromised by COSATU affiliates which put forward demands to close the wage gap and increase the skills of all workers. However, the craft unions will have to shed their history of paternalism and racism if they wish to attract increasing numbers of black artisans.

NUMSA's Kettleidas doubts whether many of the craft unions are capable of becoming truly non-racial. Even those that do will not be able to attract black workers, he believes, because they are not fighting organisations: "They have no track record of struggle, they always settle."

On the other hand, NUMSA's Adrienne Bird reckons some black artisans may seek to protect their positions by joining craft unions. She notes that the right-wing unions that organise white production workers rather than artisans (Yster en Staal, MWU), support

NUMSA's training proposals because it is in their interests. NUM's Golding agrees, arguing that, while it was easy to unite all black workers in the apartheid era, in a democratic SA things become more complex. "Artisans often have a supervisory role, and you cannot collapse supervisory workers and the workers they supervise. They have different interests, and specialist unions may be necessary for a long time."

There are signs that some of the craft unions are also rethinking their strategy.

Confederation of Metal and Building Union's director Ben Nicholson believes the craft unions should consider merging to form one giant craft union, in order to counter the strength of COSATU (*see page 26*). If Bird and Golding are right and the craft unions do succeed in attracting black workers, then as craft unions lose the privileged position they were guaranteed by apartheid, they may become less conservative, less opposed to industrial action and less hostile to COSATU.

Ultimately COSATU's proposals for restructuring training and grading would mean ending the privileged status of the artisan. If COSATU's proposals are implemented, changing technology and the restructuring of work will combine to undermine the position of craft unions.

"Craft unions will have to exist until we have restructured the entire production process and grading system," comments Golding. "The current system on the mines works strictly according to supervision. But if we transform work organisation so the supervisor is no longer part of management, but part of a team, there will no longer be a need for a separate craft union."

This will take a long time. In the medium term, the craft unions are likely to survive and retain their influence. ☆

Sources:

Najwah Allie, *Directory of SA Trade Unions* (SALDRU, Cape Town, 1991)
Shane Godfrey, *Industrial Council Digest* (IRP, Dept of Sociology, UCT, 1992)