

# COSATU members' views

## *joining unions and union democracy*

**W**hy did you join a union? What support do unions enjoy from civil society organisations?

These are some of the questions put to workers by researchers from Naledi and the universities of Cape Town, Rhodes, Port Elizabeth, Natal, and Witwatersrand. The survey was conducted in 1998 amongst 646 COSATU members at various workplaces in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, and Eastern Cape. The survey included all COSATU affiliates except SADTU, POPCRU and SASBO.

### **Joining unions**

Researchers asked COSATU members why they belonged to their current unions. The respondents provided a variety of answers. The overwhelming majority of respondents (83%) indicated that they joined unions so that 'worker interests and rights can be protected'. In other words, their union membership was a way of ensuring that worker interests at the workplace were promoted and defended.

Eight percent reported that they were interested in wages and related benefits. Seven percent said they became union members simply because there was already a union in the workplace so they joined 'automatically'. Other respondents mentioned socialism, political reasons, working conditions and so on, as reasons why they joined their current unions.

The findings, therefore, suggest that

*by Thobile Yanta*

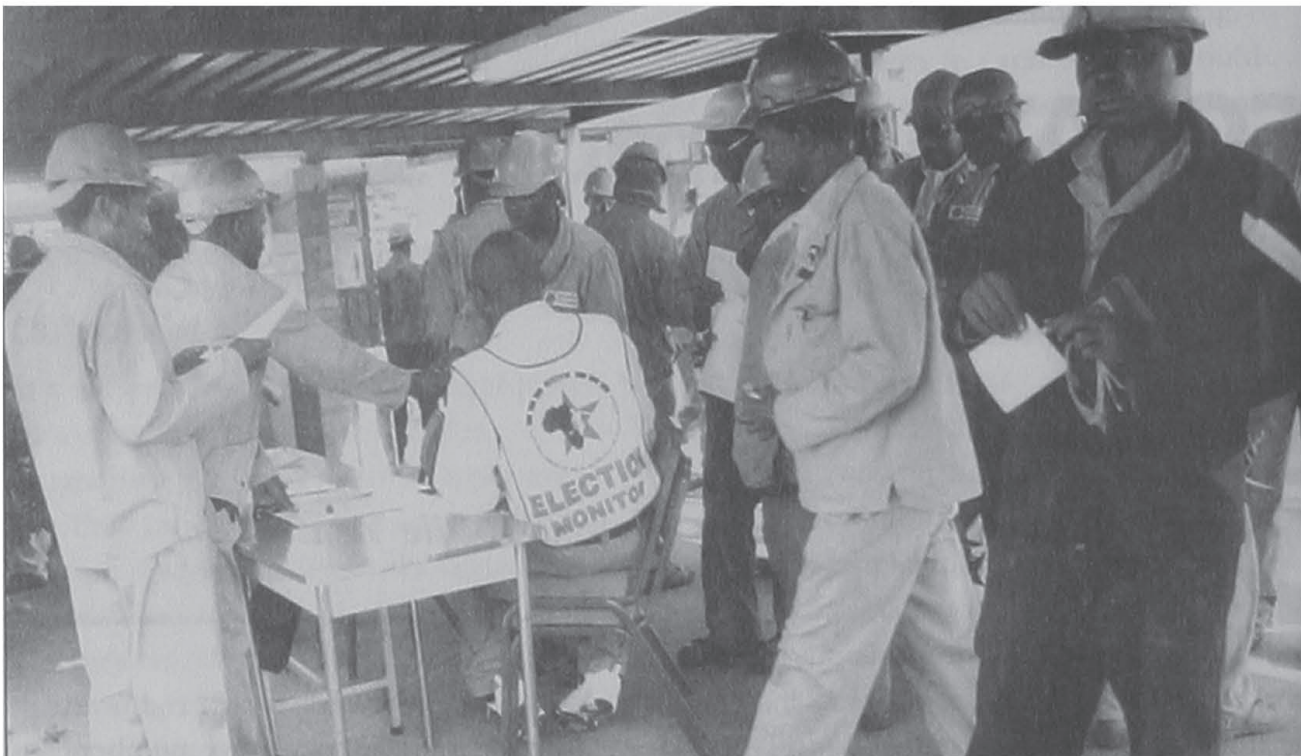
worker solidarity and worker rights are most important in recruiting members and unions need to consider these patterns of 'interests' in their organising activities.

### **Solidarity**

The importance of the unions receiving solidarity from other civil society bodies such as community-based organisations (CBOs), NGOs, civics, political organisations and so on cannot be taken for granted. This is because in recent times, unions' capacity to mobilise and organise members has been put under a severe test. Action, such as the public sector strikes last year, show the importance of gaining broader public support, if workers' struggles are to be successful.

Unions are often portrayed as 'labour elites', concerned only with their own members' interests. On the other hand, COSATU's September Commission categorised COSATU as falling under the concept of social movement unionism, which stresses the unions' role in promoting wider social interests.

One of the questions posed to the respondents during the study was whether union members received solidarity from the social and political forces during their recent strikes. Judging



*Fifty percent of respondents used a secret ballot to vote.*

by the respondents' answers, it is clear that the union members did receive solidarity. Workers indicated that solidarity came from:

- other unions (31%);
- the community (21%);
- political parties (15%);
- other sources (6%).

These findings show that unions are challenged to mobilise other sectors of the society in order to increase their bargaining power and accelerate the process of socio-economic transformation.

### **Union democracy**

In order to test issues of union democracy in the workplace, researchers asked respondents questions in relation to their participation in electing shopstewards.

An overwhelming majority of workers (83%) indicated that they participated in the election of a shopsteward. Twenty-seven percent of respondents participated in the elections within one month to two years before the survey.

Democratically elected shopstewards are the backbone of worker control and

democracy in unions. It is therefore worrying that about 79 respondents (12%) said that they either did not know when they last participated in the elections or had never participated in such elections. Furthermore, the fact that 12% of the respondents last participated in the election of shopstewards more than two years ago, may cause problems for accountability within the unions in the long run. COSATU's current proposal for the 'standardisation' of shopstewards' elections might therefore help avoid some of these problems.

In terms of the method used in the election of shopstewards:

- 50% of the respondents said that a secret ballot was used;
- 42% indicated that a show of hands was used;
- 6,7% of the respondents did not know or could not remember the procedure.

The use of a secret ballot during the process should be encouraged in order to ensure that the elections are fair and free. Such a process might ensure that ordinary members of the union elect quality

leadership that will take the organisation to new heights.

Respondents also had particular expectations regarding the role of elected leaders. Most of them expected shopstewards to behave in a manner that is accountable, transparent, and democratic. Three quarters (76%) of the respondents felt strongly about the issue of report-backs. These respondents expected shopstewards to provide a regular report-back to workers. One quarter of the respondents (23%) felt that elected leadership should give report-backs to workers only on important issues. Only 0.3% indicated that it was not important for elected leadership to provide report-backs.

Another question, linked to the issue of democracy in the workplace, tried to find out about the existence of a forum in the workplace. Just over half (53%) the respondents indicated that there was/were no forum/s in their respective workplaces. Forty-one percent of respondents confirmed the existence of forums in their workplaces. When these

respondents were asked to describe the nature of such forum/s, the majority of them (48%) cited management and shopstewards' forums. Twelve percent said that management, supervisors' and workers' forums existed. Only 4% of respondents referred to the presence of workplace forums in their workplaces.

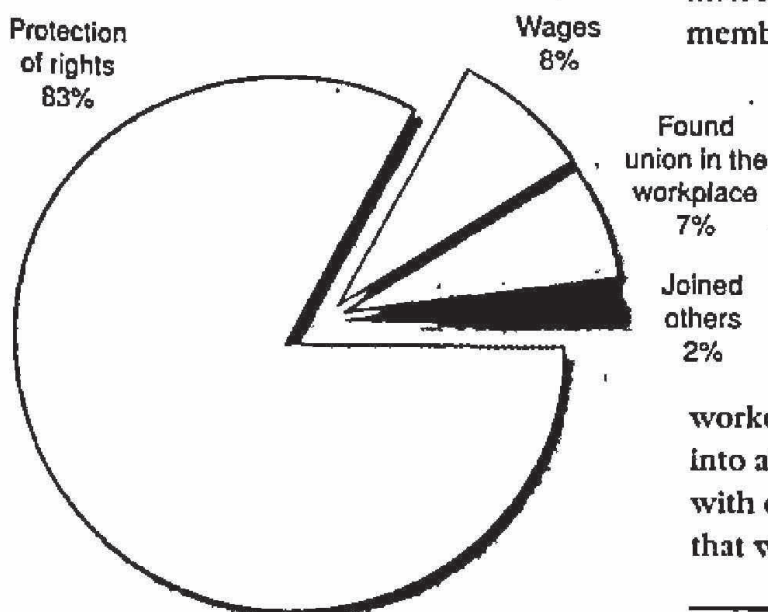
The fact that the majority of respondents referred to the existence of management and shopstewards' forums signals the strong presence of organised labour at the workplace.

Workers were also asked if these existing forums in the workplace were promoting the ideals of worker control. The majority of respondents (65%) who mentioned the existence of forums at the workplace believed that the forums did not hinder unions' programmes of advancing worker control. This is a signal for unions to look into developing strategies to utilise workplace structures and forums.

## Conclusion

The research has shown that workers have particular reasons why they belonged to unions. Most of them regarded the defence and protection of worker rights and interests as a primary reason being a member of a union. Many workers also felt very strongly about the advancement of union democracy. The challenge facing the trade union movement is to defend and consolidate the gains obtained through worker struggles over the years whilst venturing into new arenas of worker interests. Secondly, it must enter into alliances and solidarity campaigns with other social forces. This will ensure that workers' voices are heard. ★

## Why did you join your current trade union?



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