

# Confronting the crisis *labour in the Eastern Cape*

**T**hose of us who live in the Eastern Cape - the second poorest province in the country - are glad to take this opportunity to explain to a wider audience some of the difficulties which face ordinary people in this part of the country.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Eastern Cape was famous for the leading role taken by its militant trade unions in confronting apartheid. These days, when local labour hits the headlines, it is usually because some more workers are about to be retrenched! We hope that our collection of articles goes some way towards explaining the depth and dimensions of the crisis which confronts labour in this province.

It is not a pretty picture. Unemployment is high, manufacturing is in relative decline, the public sector is fragile, and the rural economy cannot adequately sustain the number of people dependant on it. Farmworkers face particular problems. People are on the move. The small towns are beginning to grow, but without much economic base to sustain them.

Despite all the difficulties, a strong commitment to trade unionism lives on! While some of the older unions in the province are beginning to struggle as industry 'downsizes', the public sector unions are growing. This does not necessarily make life easier for the new government and newly democratic municipalities, but it does show that the labour movement is managing to adjust to the changing economic situation.

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*Special focus edited by Roger Southall.*

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Understanding the lives of ordinary people in the Eastern Cape is not easy. In fact, it is very complicated! There are no easy answers to the economic problems faced by the province. A powerful business lobby is pushing hard for government to help fund the development of a deep water harbour and industrial zone in Port Elizabeth. This will cost at least R1,5-billion. They seem in a terrible rush to spend taxpayers money, and reluctant to allow time for a proper study of the economic prospects of the scheme and its environmental impact. Trade unionists are wary: of course they want to see the jobs that Coega would supposedly create, but they also want proper consultation and research. The Eastern Cape wants elephants for tourists, not white elephants for taxpayers!

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