

Directory of South African Trade Unions:

A complete guide to all South Africa's trade unions

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South Africans may not have invented trade unionism. They have not even perfected it - judging by the enormous array of trade unions in the country. They have, however, taken to trade unionism like a duck to water. There cannot be many peoples in the world that love - and hate - trade unions as much as South Africans do.

According to the *Directory of South African Trade Unions* which was recently published by SALDRU, a unit of the University of Cape Town, there were 209 registered trade unions in South Africa at the end of 1990 with a membership of 2,4 million. Approximately 1 in 5 of the economically active population in this country belong to a trade union of one description or another.

South African trade unions come in all shapes and sizes, from probably the smallest in the world to amongst the largest. The smallest union is the Johannesburg-based Laundering, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers' Union of South Africa, LCDWUSA, which boasts a membership of a mere 12. This union describes its areas of organising as being amongst "white persons in the Laundry, Cleaning and Dyeing Trade."

At the other end of the spectrum are the giants of South African trade unionism, the COSATU-affiliated, non-racial but mainly black National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), both of which are now approaching the 300 000 membership mark.

South African workers are of course organised along racial lines reflecting a legacy of over a

century of racial division. White craft unions were among the chief architects of apartheid as it came to be known. The slogan of the 1922 white miners strike: "Workers of the World Unite and fight for a white South Africa" crystallised the long history of racism of the white workers in South Africa.

The changing circumstances in the country, however, appear gradually to be having their effect on the enlightenment of white workers. The *Directory* notes a "steady" decrease in the racial division in the union movement since 1980 with the number of racially exclusive unions having declined from 96 in 1985 to 62 in 1990.

A striking phenomenon that the *Directory* points out is that union membership continues to grow in South Africa despite a stagnant and shrinking economy. Between 1980 and 1990 the membership of registered unions increased from 808 054 to 2,4 million. This will not bring much comfort to those sections of management and government who hope to slash workers' living standards in order to solve the uncompetitiveness of South African producers internationally.

The *Directory* attributes the dramatic growth in union membership to heightened political consciousness of workers coupled with the organisational efforts of union organisers.

"Over and above that, however, the tangible gains made by unions in terms of wages and conditions of service for their members has clearly demonstrated to workers the benefits of unionisation. In 1990, unions negotiated pay increases that averaged 17,4%."

This should put a stop to the claim that unions intimidate workers to strike. Workers go on strike because of the importance of defending the gains they have won through being members of unions.

The *Directory of South African Trade Unions* provides valuable information about the broad trends in labour relations and in the economy in general. It also provides detailed information on the names of leaders, phone numbers, membership and policies of the country's registered trade unions. For employers, universities, researchers, government departments and trade unions themselves, this *Directory* is a must. Let us hope SALDRU staff will not tire. ☆