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South Africa's largest union tackles threat of globalization to workers' rights

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Towards A Powerful Value Chains Trade Union: NUMSA's Expanded Scope

A Case Study by Chere Monaisa

South Africa's workers are seeing their rights threatened by globalization. As supply chains spread and capital flows more easily across borders, employers have more opportunities to outmanoeuvre traditional industrial action, undermining the bargaining power of unions.

The country's largest trade union is rising to meet the challenge. After years of political turmoil, metalworkers' trade union NUMSA has made the strategic decision to expand along value chains and into new sectors. The move has caused tensions with the establishment and other unions, but is essential to arm the workers' struggle with the right resources to preserve their rights in the 21st century.

Expanding the union's membership along and across value chains "will give us both bargaining power and political power," said Hlokoza Motau, Head of Organising, Campaigns and Collective Bargaining (OCCB). "When we strike it means we can almost bring the country to a standstill."

Value chains: a loophole to be closed

The effectiveness of industrial action - or the threat of it - depends on its ability to block the flow of capital and create unacceptable cost to the employer. If the employer can reroute production, through for example non-union staff, outsourced services, or overseas facilities, then the bargaining power of organized labour is correspondingly weakened.

Historically, unions organized by sector and geography. Workers' solidarity across, for example, all the car manufacturing plants in a given country was enough to bring corporations to the negotiating table. But globalization has increased opportunities to circumnavigate those bargaining pressures, if the employer "hives off activities, for instance by outsourcing or privatisation," in the words of a 2014 presentation by NUMSA officials.

How can a union possibly negotiate wages for a given factory's workers, if the employer can respond by taking its work away and giving it instead to a supplier whose workers are not represented in those negotiations?

To close this loophole and preserve its bargaining power, NUMSA has changed its membership structure and is expanding across sectors and up and down value chains.

Experience of consolidation

NUMSA has experience of successfully expanding to adapt to changing needs. It was formed in 1987 out of the merger of four unions, two in the metalworking sector and two in automotive production. In 1989, it secured negotiating rights at the National Bargaining Forum, covering seven of the eight major employers in the motor assembly sector. By 2014, it was able to mobilize 220,000 metals workers in strikes that made global headlines. As of January 2015, it was the largest union in the history of the continent, with more than 360,000 members.

Leveraging associational power into real bargaining power

But the union has long been aware that the weight of numbers - a key element of its associational power - is not enough to keep pace with the evolving threats to its members' rights. At a special congress in 2013 it considered its options, and decided to break with the sectoral boundaries of unions and to expand across value chains.

Anyone objecting to this new order "can go to hell," said Irvin Jim NUMSA general secretary at the time, aware of the potential upset to other unions. "We will recruit workers that come to us and want to belong to the organisation."

In the case of an automotive production plant, for example, this would mean welcoming new members from other roles within the facility, such as canteen or security workers, as well as those involved in suppliers' production, for example tyre manufacturers, and even those employed downstream, in auto dealerships or car wash stations.

This expansion drive, approved by the 2013 resolution, has led to the recruitment of 27,760 new members from related sectors, including air and rail transport as well as road freight, as well as cross-sectoral industries such as catering, cleaning and construction, the union said in 2016.

"It is important that, in order to build our power, we exist in these sectors," Motau said. "Part of NUMSA's strategy is to have the same bargaining periods," allowing the union to threaten what would effectively amount to a general strike, he said.

The boost in recruit numbers is evidence of the success of the new strategy. And when it translates into improvements in NUMSA's bargaining power, that should in turn further increase the union's appeal to potential new members.

Breaking the mould

NUMSA's new direction put it on a collision course with the country's labour and political institutions. In particular, the expansion violated the "one industry, one union" policy of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which expelled NUMSA from its ranks in November 2015.

However, the union had obtained approval of its new constitution from the Department of Labour in January of that year, freeing it of many recruitment restrictions. Some of those had been imposed by employers, such as the distinction between core and non-core workers in a facility. But other restrictions were laid down by the unions to avoid conflicts that could undermine the effectiveness of collective action. NUMSA's new recruitment drive violated these, and drew flak from its former allies.

General Secretary Jim defended the new membership rules against such criticism. "If people want to take that as poaching, well, workers are not rhinos but human beings," he said in 2013. Even before the new recruitment rules, workers from all sectors had been approaching NUMSA of their own volition and requesting membership, he said, adding that this was a recognition of NUMSA's

activism and collective bargaining gains in its traditional sectors.

He also said that a level of cross-sectoral activity was unavoidable and already widespread. “Public sector unions are recruiting among themselves,” and NUMSA’s own member base had started to include drivers and other service providers even before 2013, he said. Furthermore, COSATU itself recognised as early as 2003, at its 8th national congress, that any demarcation of membership should respect the need for solidarity with other parts of the supply chain. NUMSA argues that its expansion is in the spirit of this requirement.

Politically, the expulsion from COSATU also ousted NUMSA from South Africa’s tripartite alliance, which unites COSATU, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the ruling African National Congress party (ANC). In fact, political disagreements may have contributed more to the rift than did the new recruitment practices. The union had formally called on COSATU to break its alliance with the ANC, and had withheld payment of affiliation fees to the group as well as its contributions to the SACP levy in protest. These actions were cited in the COSATU resolution to terminate NUMSA membership.

Securing workers’ rights for the globalized century

NUMSA’s new constitution and its emancipation from COSATU put the union in a strong position to go it alone and best defend its members’ interests against the shifting context of globalized capital and production.

The recent boost to its membership, in spite of the split with other unions, is a validation of the path that NUMSA has struck out on. But these new members are not just to make up the numbers – they must secure fair wage increases and feel the benefits of membership, as officials noted at the 2016 National Bargaining Conference.

Only if the improved associational power translates into workplace bargaining power – a key element of structural power – will the movement be able to remain appealing to new recruits and retain its ability to strike the best deal for them.

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