



\*Paul Weinberg – Africa Media Online

# THE STATE OF THE UNION?

## Attitudes to South African trade unions

The South African organised labour movement is one of the most powerful and disciplined on the African continent. One of the central actors of the democratic struggle, South African trade unions, continue to play a key role in the post-apartheid period. *Steven Gordon, Benjamin Roberts and Jarè Struwig* examine attitudes to trade unions, investigating how much confidence South Africans have in this important element of our civil society.

Trade unions in South Africa, many established during the political struggle for democracy, have long claimed to represent the entire working class and not just their own members. The organised labour movement, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in particular, has participated in a number of campaigns that challenge the government over issues including economic inequality, inadequate social welfare and food and energy prices.

The labour movement has become one of the most important civil society institutions in post-apartheid South Africa, with the largest modern trade unions - Cosatu, the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) and the Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) - representing millions of workers across the country. In our democracy, the voice of trade-union federations can be loud, and when it comes to the political arena even louder than that

of political opposition parties. It is therefore essential that we monitor and understand the dynamics of trust in the nation's trade unions.

Events in the past year have led political commentators to ask whether trust in South African trade unions is dwindling, signalling a decline of the traditional post-apartheid trade-union movement. During illegal strikes in the mining sector last year, many workers

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voiced dissatisfaction with their trade union leaders, accusing them of being too close to management and too willing to compromise on workers' demands. Recent violent strike action by farm workers in the Western Cape was also seen to bypass trade union structures

### Data

In order to measure whether there has been a decline in public confidence in trade unions, attitudinal data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) was analysed for the period 2011 to 2012. Nationally representative samples (3 057 in 2011, 2 520 in 2012) of the nation's adult population were surveyed in November/December of each year. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they trusted or distrusted 13 of the nation's institutions, including national and local government, churches or religious organisations, the national broadcaster (South African Broadcasting Corporation) and trade unions.

### In trade unions we distrust?

Levels of trust in South African trade unions must be placed in context with other key institutions. Figure 1 shows trust in seven key institutions between 2011 and 2012. The majority of our adult population expressed great confidence in religious institutions

(such as churches), which is a typical pattern found across sub-Saharan Africa, but a lower level of trust in other institutions including traditional leaders, local government, politicians and trade unions.

Between 2011 and 2012, public confidence in certain key institutions declined slightly, with trust in national government dropping from 51% to 46%, for instance. Trade unions, however, stood out among the other institutions, showing a far more significant fall in confidence. In 2011 43% of South Africans indicated that they trusted trade unions, falling to 29% in 2012, with 40% reporting that they distrusted trade unions and 31% remaining neutral.

### Race, class associations and trust in trade unions

The ideological foundation of the South African trade union movement is an adherence to non-racialism and a commitment to defending the interests of the entire working class. The reality, however, is that racial differences exist when analysing trust in South African trade unions.

Figure 2 reveals that distrust is significantly lower among black Africans than among the coloured, Indian or white population groups. At the same time, the results of SASAS 2012 show that distrust of trade unions has grown from 21% to 35% among black Africans and to 53% among the coloured population.

Figure 1: Public trust in select South African institutions

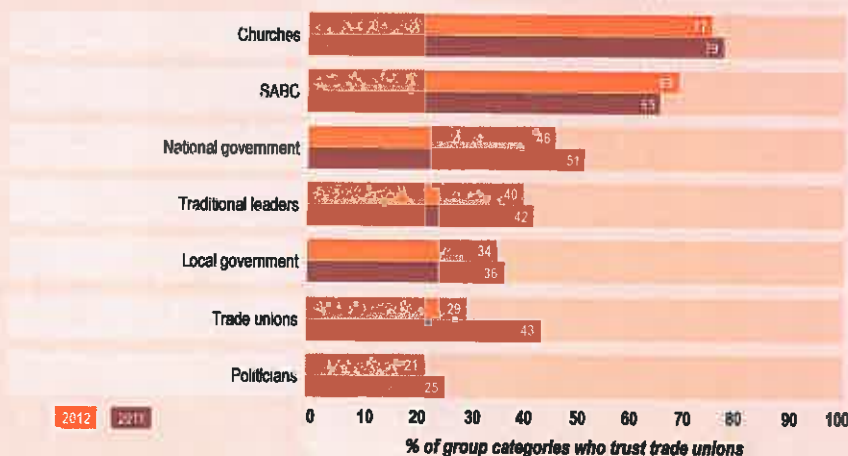
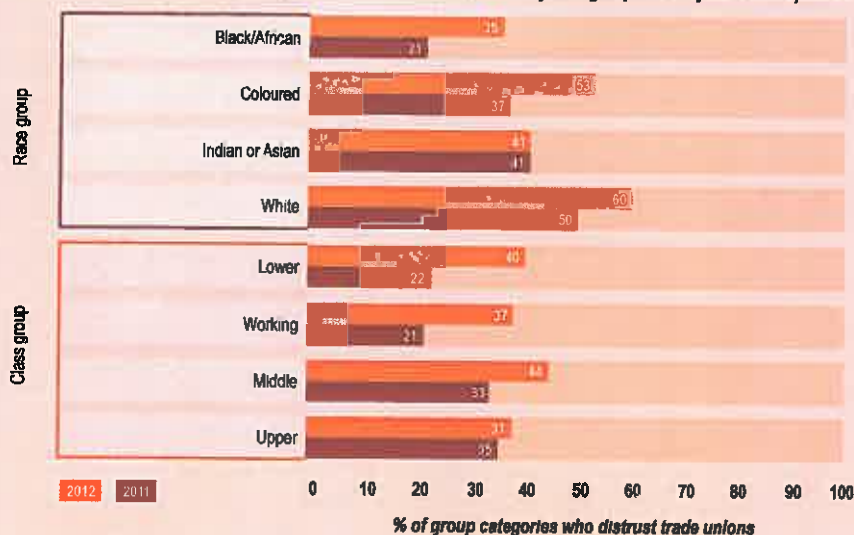


Figure 2: Public distrust in trade unions by race group and subjective class position

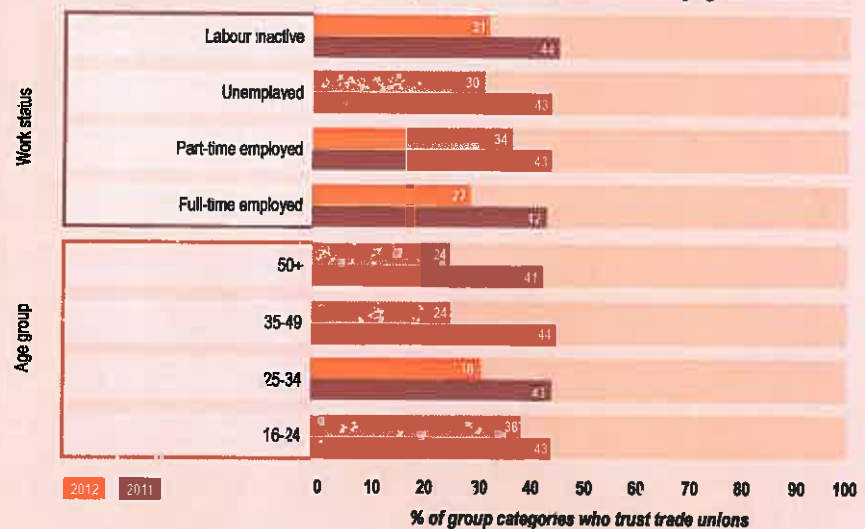


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Trust in trade unions has declined overall, also among those groups historically most supportive of the nation's organised labour movement.

Figure 3: Public confidence in trade unions by age and work status



Racial disparities noted above may reflect socio-economic divides in a nation where race and class associations converge. In the SASAS 2011 and 2012 rounds respondents were asked whether they identified themselves with the lower, the working, the middle, or the upper class. Previous SASAS studies have found that such subjective class scales largely align with other indicators of economic status, such as income and education. Worryingly, there are clear indications that distrust among the lower class has expanded significantly, from 22% in 2011 to 40% in 2012, as well as among the working class, with distrust increasing from 21% in 2011 to 37% in 2012.

### The young and the restless

Young workers are more likely to be in informal, contract and part-time employment and therefore outside of traditional trade union structures. Despite this trend, our results reveal that the youth are not less trusting of the trade union movement than other South Africans.

Those aged 16-24 years, in fact, displayed slightly more trust on average than those who were 50 years and older. In addition, although the trade union movement may have failed

to bring significant numbers of contract and part-time workers inside union organisations, these groups compared favourably with full-time workers in terms of trust.

Confidence in trade unions among the unemployed was also not appreciably lower when compared to full-time workers. All groups experienced a decline in trust between 2011 and 2012, particularly older South Africans and those in full-time employment.

### Conclusion

The results of our analysis clearly show that trust in trade unions has declined overall, also among those groups historically most supportive of the nation's organised labour movement - full-time workers, the working and lower classes, and black and coloured South Africans. Given that building a working class consciousness was one of the central themes of the South African trade union movement, the growth of active distrust among these groups should be a cause of deep concern for the labour movement.

Do our results reflect a temporary loss of faith or a more long-term decline? What

drives the waning of public confidence in post-apartheid trade unions? These questions are important and need to be addressed.

The findings presented in this article show that trade unions need to intensify their engagement with working class communities in order to build greater levels of public confidence. Without such confidence it is unlikely that the organised labour movement will be able to achieve its mandate of working class prosperity and greater economic equality.

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Figure 1: Public trust in select South African institutions. Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2011, 2012

Figure 2: Public distrust in trade unions by race group and subjective class position. Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2011, 2012

Figure 3: Public confidence in trade unions by age and work status. Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2011, 2012

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