This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

- This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.
- A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.
- This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.
- The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.
- When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.
COMRADES STILL STRUGGLING: CLASS, NATIONALISM AND THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Alexander Beresford

Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Edinburgh
2011
The thesis has been composed by myself from the results of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged. It has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree.

Signed

(ALEXANDER ROY BERESFORD)

Date
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the trajectories of class politics in post-apartheid South Africa. It investigates whether we can witness South African politics entering into a post-nationalist era characterised by the increasing salience of class struggles rooted in the country’s glaring socioeconomic inequalities. In particular, the thesis explores the political role of the organised working class with a focus on the Tripartite Alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Alliance politics has traditionally been studied with a focus on policy analysis and elite-level exchanges played out in the public domain (Bassett 2005; Buhlungu 2005; Lodge 1999; Webster 2001), or with a focus on workers’ political attitudes that uses statistical survey data (Buhlungu et al 2006a; Pillay 2006). The unique contribution made by the thesis is that it offers a detailed ethnographic focus into class politics ‘from below’, with a focus on the political attitudes and activism of members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), South Africa’s largest and most politically influential trade union. The thesis explores how rank and file members of NUM have adapted to the radically altered social, political and institutional environment heralded by the transition to democracy in 1994. In particular, it analyses how and why union members are engaging in their trade union in changing ways, and what implications this has for those who advocate the trade unions becoming the driving force behind a radical class-based, post-nationalist political agenda (Bond 2000; 2010; Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001). The thesis also explores workers’ relationships with the post-apartheid state and their experience of economic transformation under the ANC government. The case study evidence offers an important insight into how workers understand post-liberation politics and how they construct their political identities in relation to both their class and also the nationalist movement. In doing so, the thesis does not attempt to offer normative prescriptions as to what COSATU ‘should’ (or ‘should not’) do. Instead, it challenges mechanical, deterministic analyses of the relationship between class and nationalist politics, particularly those that stress that underlying class divisions in South African society will inevitably, in some form or another, produce a new class-based politics that will not only challenge, but potentially supersede, nationalist politics.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ACRONYMS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 The research problematic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 An overview of the core themes of the thesis</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Literature Review: The ANC’s nationalist project and the contours</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of class politics in post-apartheid South Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Methodology: outlining my approach to Alliance politics</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Setting the scene</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: ‘A VICTIM OF OUR VICTORY?: HOW AN ASPIRATIONS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULTURE IS CHALLENGING THE FOUNDATIONS OF WORKING CLASS SOLIDARITY IN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 The new opportunity structures of deracialised capitalism</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 The ‘generational’ divide in the Union and the changing culture of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union participation</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Competing class interests within Union structures</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 ‘WE ARE PARALYSED, TOTALLY PARALYSED’: UNION</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POWER IN THE POWER STATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Democratic organisation in NUM</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Powering the nation while disempowering the workers: Eskom, ‘essential services’ and the ‘slow death’ of the ‘Union of toyi-toyi’</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF NUM</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Alliance politics at the national level: little room for manoeuvre</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Current 1: workers in support of the ANC-led alliance</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The second current: ‘gumboots and overalls’ unionism from below?</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 NUM and Jacob Zuma</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: ‘THEY BROUGHT US THE LIGHT’:</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESKOM WORKERS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ANC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 The symbolic/ideological dimension of workers’ support for the ANC</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 The material/tangible dimension of workers support for the ANC</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The interplay between the ‘two dimensions’ of workers’ support for the ANC</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 6: ‘BUILDING SOUTH AFRICA’: HOW ESKOM WORKERS RATIONALISED THEIR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE POST-APARTHEID PERIOD 193
Introduction 193
6.1 The state, civil society and organised working class agency 195
6.2 Eskom workers’ proactive engagement with the ANC 200
Conclusion 216

CHAPTER 7: ‘WE ARE NOT ASKING FOR A MESSIAH’: ANC LEADERSHIP CHANGE AND ESKOM WORKERS ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ANC 219
Introduction 219
7.1 What is a populist rupture? 222
7.2 Eskom Workers’ conceptualisation of democracy and representation in the post-apartheid era 226
7.3 Awuleth Umshini wami (bring me my machine gun): the ANC succession battle as a metaphorical call to arms 231
7.4 The ANC as a regenerating party 241
Conclusion 249

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF CLASS AND POST-LIBERATION POLITICS 252

BIBLIOGRAPHY 273

APPENDIX 1
Interview list 284

APPENDIX 2
Summary of interview questions 289
LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANC African National Congress
ANCYL African National Congress Youth League
BEC Branch Executive Committee
COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
FOSATU Federation of South African Trade Unions
NUM National Union of Mineworkers
NUMSA National Union of Metalworkers South Africa
ZANU PF Zimbabwean African National Union (Patriotic Front)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

South Africa

There are many people in South Africa to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude. Firstly, the help and support I received from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) made my research possible. In the first place, I would like to thank all the union members who agreed to take part in the research. I would like to thank Lesiba Seshoka, NUM's spokesperson, who kindly agreed to meet with me and put me in touch with all the people I needed to speak to. Also at head office, my thanks to Frans Baleni and Oupa Komane for kindly allowing me to interview them and for offering their support for the research. In the Witbank regional office I would like to thank Paris Mashego and Piet Matosa. I am extremely grateful to Job Matsepe for allowing me to attend so many NUM meetings and for his support and insightful observations about my research project. My thanks also to Thembelani, Ernest and Nathi who helped organise the interviews themselves, and for helping me gain access to the power stations and local ANC structures. I would especially like to thank Joe Skosana, to whom I am greatly indebted. Without Joe’s help none of the research in the power stations would have been possible. I am honoured to hold him and my comrades at NUM as my friends. I hope this thesis is in worthy of the warmth and generosity the have shown me.

To all my South African friends I would like to say a big thank you for helping me to settle into the country and for making my time over there so unforgettable. In particular I would like to thank Becks for harbouring me during my time in Jo’burg and for her unrelenting friendship and support. Nat, Kate, Sinwell, Norton, Pops, Waynand, Wildy, Claire and Shaun, I love you all. Special thanks must go to Teresa Dirsuweit, a dear friend of mine from Wits Geography department, for her stimulating conversation and general friendship. To the Abrahams family, and in particular Caryn, Uncle Russell,
Auntie Shanu, Claire, Ralph and Jaiden, my heartfelt thanks for extending such a warm welcome to me in Lenasia for Auntie Shanu’s fantastic Sunday afternoon curries; Hummingbird Avenue will always be a home from home.

**UK**

First I must acknowledge the financial support of the ESRC who funded both my M.Sc. and later my Ph.D. Without their funding, this research would not have been possible. I would like to offer special thanks to my supervisors, Sara Rich Dorman and James Smith, for providing such insightful and stimulating intellectual support, even in the face of chapters of *War and Peace* proportions. My thanks to all the staff in the Centre of African Studies, including Tom Molony, Paul Nugent, Joost Fontein, Andrew Lawrence and Laura Jeffery. A special thank you to my fellow students, Annalisa Urbano, Setri Dzvenu, Paul Swanepoel, Tom Fisher, Emilie Venables, Marc Fletcher, Laura Mann, James Pattison, Sabine Hoehn, Shishu Pradhan, Lara De Klerk and Julie Grant. I am extremely grateful for the help and encouragement which you have all, in your different ways, offered me during my time in Edinburgh. My thanks also to Vic Allen for his kind support and his help establishing contacts within NUM.

I would also like to thank my flat mates, both past and present, including Emily, Lina, Helen, Hannah and Abhi. To my wonderful girlfriend Charlie, a special thank you for the love and support you have given me throughout this last year. My family also deserves a special mention for the support they have given me along my chosen path: I could not have done this without you. I also want to thank all my friends in my hometown, Scarborough. Perhaps now I will finally follow their advice and ‘get a real job’.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 The research problematic

The title of Mark Gevisser’s biography of Thabo Mbeki, ‘A Dream Deferred’, refers to a Langston Hughes poem Mbeki quoted before the South African Parliament in 1998: ‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ he asked, to which he offered the answer, ‘it explodes’ (Gevisser 2007: xxxi). The question reflected the former president’s angst about the future of South African society if dreams of a better life held by the newly enfranchised black majority were deferred, rather than realised.

Mbeki posed perhaps the most poignant question concerning the future direction of South African politics. According to some authors, the neo-liberal thrust of the African National Congress’ (ANC) macroeconomic development strategy has ruled out the radical socioeconomic redress expected by South Africa’s black majority (see Bond 2000; 2003; Marais 1998; 2011). In the last five years, the country has witnessed levels of industrial action and township unrest that are unprecedented in the post-apartheid era, as frustrations over the slow pace of economic transformation have spilled over into a popular, and sometimes violent, backlash against the government (Ballard et al 2006; Barchiesi 2006; Bond 2003; Death 2010; Desai 2002; Legassick 2007). Is this the ‘explosion’ Mbeki feared? Are we now seeing what Neville Alexander predicted when he wrote of the ‘nightmare’ facing the ANC government as the ‘great expectations’ of the newly enfranchised black majority were dashed and the ‘ineluctable logic of class struggle’ emerged to determine the future contours of South African politics and society (2002: 182)? Can we now witness the beginnings of a post-nationalist political era, as authors
such as Patrick Bond (2000: 250; 2003: 45; 2010) and John Saul (2005: 239) have suggested?

These questions form the core problematic which the thesis will address. In particular, it will focus on the current dynamics of trade union politics in South Africa. It is widely argued that the trade unions, and in particular the largest trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), represent the only force capable of galvanizing a new class-based political agenda capable of drawing together the fragmented forces of the South African Left and providing a viable class-based alternative to the ANC’s nationalist project (Bond 2010; Gumede 2005; Habib and Taylor 1999b; 2001; Harvey 2002). The debates concerning the future of the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC and its allies, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP), are thus a central element of the broader debates pertaining to the longevity of the ANC’s single party dominance and the relationship between class and post-liberation politics.

The subject of Alliance politics has, however, traditionally been approached with a focus on policy analysis and elite-level exchanges played out in the public domain (Bassett 2005; Buhlungu 2005; Lodge 1999; Webster 2001), or through an examination of statistical representations of COSATU members’ political attitudes (Buhlungu et al 2006b; Maree 1998; Pillay 2006). The unique contribution made by this thesis is that it offers a detailed ethnographic focus on class politics ‘from below’, providing an understanding of ordinary union members’ experiences of class formation, economic transformation and the changing dynamics of their relationship with the state in the post-apartheid era. It explores how these in turn shape their conceptualisations of citizenship and their political identities in relation to both their social class and the nationalist movement. The purpose of this thesis is not to offer normative prescriptions as to what COSATU ‘should’ (or ‘should not’) do, nor will it attempt to prophesise as to what the
future holds for South African politics. Instead, drawing upon the work of scholars such as Krista Johnson (2005), it challenges the underlying assumptions informing mechanical, deterministic analyses of the relationship between class and post-liberation politics, particularly those that stress that the deeply entrenched class divisions in South African society will inevitably, in some form or another, produce a new class politics that will not only challenge, but potentially supersede, nationalist politics.

To do so, the thesis draws upon a qualitative case study of the political attitudes and activism of rank-and-file members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) working for Eskom. The thesis examines the attitudes members have towards their union, as well as the dynamics of union organisation at a grassroots level. It explores workers’ relationships with the ANC itself and investigates the roots of their political identities and partisan loyalties. The central problematic of the thesis is to explore why these workers remain so loyal to the ANC and why they are not, at this stage, advocating the formation of a new working class politics. At the heart of this thesis, therefore, lies an analysis of the broader issues pertaining to the relationship between national liberation, class politics, citizenship and political identity formation.

1.2 An overview of the core themes of the thesis

1.2.1 Post-apartheid class formation

The study of class politics in South Africa has a long history, including a rich body of literature which examined the relationship between class and racial oppression during the apartheid era (for example Crankshaw 1997; Johnstone 1970; 1976; Posel 1983; Wolpe 1972). This thesis, however, will focus on how class politics has evolved in the post-
apartheid era, examining the dynamics of post-apartheid capitalism and the contemporary relationship between the trade unions and the ANC.¹

Patrick Bond (2000) argues that the political transition in 1994 was merely an ‘elite transition’, replacing the old racial order with a new ‘class apartheid’, a view shared, in some way or another, by other prominent scholars (Alexander 2002; Marais 1998; 2011; Saul 2005). As such, authors have predicted that the Alliance will not withstand the political fallout of the ANC’s embrace of neo-liberalism (Bond 2010; Buhlungu 2005). However, we have not, as yet, witnessed the anticipated fermentation of a new class-based politics capable of posing a genuine threat to the ANC’s nationalist politics. This is mainly because the dominant trade union federation, COSATU, has remained in alliance with the ANC, despite the ‘right turn’ of the ANC government since it assumed office in 1994.

Speculations abound as to why this might be. According to one view, it is only the conservative strategic outlook of COSATU’s leadership that is preventing the unions forging organic linkages with the growing mass movement of organisations resisting the ANC’s neo-liberal policies (Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; 2010; Ceruti 2008a; Gall 1997) or forming a workers’ party to contest elections against the ANC (Habib and Taylor 1999b; 2001). A second perspective is offered by scholars connected to the Society Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand. From their statistical analysis of workers’ political attitudes, they conclude that workers’ support for the ANC and their aversion to the idea of an independent working class politics places considerable restrictions on the COSATU leadership’s room for manoeuvre (Buhlungu et al 2006b). They infer from the statistical data that workers continue to associate their class interests with the party and see the Alliance as the best means of ensuring that workers’ voices are heard in government (see Buhlungu et al 2006b; Cherry 2006; Cherry

¹ A brief history of this relationship will be given below.
and Southall 2006; Pillay 2006; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b). Seekings (2004) takes this argument further, postulating that this ongoing support reflects the fact that the trade unions represent a relatively privileged section of the working class that has noticeably benefited from the transition to democracy and thus aligns its class interests with protecting the existing political status quo.

This thesis examines these arguments through a qualitative insight into a case study of workers’ political attitudes. It will argue that support of both the Alliance and the ANC among workers, and also their aversion to the prospect of their union forging a new working class politics, are rooted within their everyday experiences of post-apartheid capitalism and the complex manner in which they understand their position in the radically altered social and political context of the post-apartheid era.

To develop this analysis, chapters 2, 3 and 4 explore why there is no great ‘pull’ for NUM and COSATU to become the driving force behind a new working class politics either from ‘above’, among union leaders, or ‘below’, among its membership. There are two main reasons for this.

First, while many studies have focused on the formation of the so-called ‘black diamonds’ bourgeois class as the most apparent example of post-apartheid class formation, in this study I have sought to offer a window into the important processes of class formation occurring within the organised working class. An emerging mobility divide within the working class itself, it is argued, is contributing to the increasing stratification of the black working class as a whole (Crankshaw 1997; Seekings and Nattrass 2005). It will be demonstrated that the deracialisation of capitalism has augmented an aspirations culture among many workers by removing racial restrictions on their social mobility. The ability to grasp these opportunities is extremely varied and, as a consequence, NUM’s membership base has become increasingly stratified. This has obfuscated any singular class identity of the Union and has led to division among its
members, which has severely compromised the ability of NUM to organise in the workplace, let alone its (hypothetical) capacity to unite its members around a single, coherent ‘working class’ political platform.

Second, the thesis draws attention to the organisational difficulties which exist in NUM. The Union has experienced the increasing demobilisation of its membership, in terms of falling rates of participation within its structures, something that COSATU affiliates across several industries have experienced (see for example Bramble 2003; Buhlungu 2010; Kenny 2004). Chapters 2 and 3 will explore the underlying reasons behind this demobilisation in NUM which, it will be argued, are multifaceted and cannot be attributed simply to the oligarchic tendencies of NUM’s leadership. The plethora of reasons behind this demobilisation instead reflect how both NUM as an organisation, and also its individual members, are adjusting to the social, political and institutional environment of the democratic era. Once again, these dynamics within the Union itself, which are by no means limited to NUM in Eskom, challenge the assumption that the trade union movement is necessarily in a position to galvanize a new working class politics.

Third, I will analyse why workers are not agitating for their union to take on a political role in opposition to the ANC. Chapter 4 will explore workers’ sophisticated understandings of interest representation that lead them to support the Alliance in its current format, rather than seeing a hypothetical workers’ party as the best means of pursuing their interests in the political domain. Such attitudes are informed by workers’ understandings of political accountability, and how it can be maintained, in the post-apartheid era. These attitudes are therefore rooted in workers’ understandings of the post-apartheid state as a whole. The predominant view of these workers is that their relationship with the state is no longer inherently antagonistic – as it had been during the apartheid era - and therefore the best way of defending and pursuing their class interests
is through mediation with the post-apartheid government, via the Alliance structures, and also through direct intervention within ‘their’ party, the ANC.

These issues offer a new perspective that challenges dominant readings of the relationship between class and nationalism in the post-colonial setting. It is argued that the acute class inequalities in South African society have not crystallised into a new class politics; the political fault lines of class have not simply revealed themselves as the ‘deceptive fog’ of nationalist politics lifts. Instead, post-apartheid capitalism has augmented unprecedented processes of class formation which have led to emergent class divisions within the organised working class and have contributed to the demobilisation of the trade unions.

1.2.2 Political identity, citizenship and partisan loyalties

The other central themes of the thesis – political identity formation and the roots of partisan loyalties – are investigated in chapters 5, 6 and 7, and the analysis can be divided up into four overlapping themes. First, Chapter 5 will engage in the literature discussing voting trends and partisan loyalties in the post-apartheid era (for example Friedman 2004; 2008; Schulz Herzenberg 2009; Seekings 1997). It is argued that workers’ support for the ANC is grounded in their historical affinities with the party but also the manner in which they continue to identify the party as the champion of their class interests in the post-apartheid period. This identification is rooted in how they experience the post-apartheid state in their everyday lives through local service delivery and state welfare payments. This leads them to frame the post-apartheid state and, by extension, the ANC government, as a benevolent, albeit dysfunctional force in their lives. In short, it is not perceived as a neo-liberal, elitist incarnation of the former apartheid state responsible for a new form of ‘class apartheid’ (Bond 2000; 2010); instead, it is framed as a force that is ‘striving’ for them, their families and communities, however incremental and uneven.
actual improvements to their lives have been. It is argued that this has important implications for how scholars should analyse the state in South Africa. Rather than seeing the state as an instrument of one particular social group or class, we should look upon the state in the Gramscian sense, as having ‘relative autonomy’ from any dominant social grouping or the structural power of capital (Gramsci 1971: 182 see also Lodge 2002: 25-29). We should not think of the post-apartheid state, in its current format, as simply being the object of a bourgeois nationalist elite, as some analysts would have us do (Alexander 2002; Bond 2010), because this is neither accurate nor, more importantly, how working class South Africans experience it. The ANC’s ‘Third Way’ developmentalism, and its extension of public welfare is ‘exceptional’ for a sub Saharan African country (Seekings 2002), allowing the ANC to bolster its nationalist ‘liberation discourses’ (Dorman 2006) through state redistribution, even if this is ultimately of a limited nature. An important theme of the analysis will be an exploration of how the developmentalist ‘liberation discourses’ of the liberation movement blur the distinctions between nationalist and class politics, thereby ‘crowding out’ the political space for a new class based politics to emerge (Raftopoulos 2004).

A second issue that will be explored is directly related to workers’ understandings of the post-apartheid state and their relationship to it. Workers frame their notions of citizenship in extremely complex ways which are at odds with both the ANC’s own attempts to augment a compliant, co-operational civil society (Johnson 2003), and also those scholars that present civil society in binary terms as either an uncritical developmental ‘partner’ of the state or as the progressive political space of resistance against the ‘neo-liberal’ ANC government (see for example Bond 2000; 2003; Desai 2002). Such binary conceptualisations of civil society do not do justice to the multiple methods of engagement with the state which South African civil society actors utilise (Habib 2005a; Oldfield and Stokke 2007). In the case examined here, they bear little or
no relation to how and why these workers frame their engagement with the post-apartheid state and the ANC itself, which is informed by instrumental calculations of how best to improve their livelihoods and their local communities, and also how best to hold ‘their’ party to account. Workers do not look upon post-apartheid citizenship in zero sum terms, as a choice between a renewed antagonism with the state or an uncritical cooperation with it. They frame certain forms of working class agency, such as ANC activism, as an ‘acceptable’ and ‘rational’ form of agency, geared at ‘building South Africa’ and keeping the nationalist project ‘on track’. This strategy of critical engagement with the ANC government involves the combination of a reflexive use of cooperation in local ANC structures with the use of protest and resistance as a means of holding their representatives to account, should they deviate from their mandate.

Third, workers appeal to the ANC to represent them on a broad range of issues that extend well beyond those relating to their socioeconomic class, such as cultural and social issues emanating from their home lives and communities. The importance of these issues to workers highlights that while questions of class are perhaps central to future political dynamics in South Africa, one must not look at these in separation from social and cultural issues. As such, the thesis argues, it is important to understand processes of political identity formation beyond the explanatory limitations of a rigid class based analysis (Glaser 2001: 110-131). It will be argued that workers hold a far broader understanding of what actually constitutes the nationalist project than left wing critics of the ANC allow for. This highlights the manner in which advocates of a post-nationalist politics are often out of tune with the understandings that people on the ground have of nationalist politics, and the expectations that they derive from these understandings (Johnson 2005).

Finally, it is important to understand workers’ ongoing support for the ANC within their complex and sophisticated understandings and expectations of political
representation and accountability in the post-apartheid era. Their support for the ANC is not uncritical, and they are acutely aware of the shortcomings of government, whether on the local or national level. However, these shortcomings are blamed on the failings of individuals, rather than on the ANC as an organisation, which they deem to be sacrosanct. These workers do not share the view of some analysts who posit that the Alliance has essentially failed and that they should seek political alternatives outside of the Alliance (Habib and Taylor 1999a; 1999b; 2001; Harvey 2003; Legassick 2007). For these workers in Eskom, democratic consolidation and the pursuit of their social and material aspirations can best be pursued within the ANC, a party which, as I will demonstrate, they continue to have a deep and complex affinity with.

The thesis poses broader questions about the stability and substance of South Africa’s transition to democracy and, in particular, the ANC’s ‘single party dominance’, its consequences, and how workers and their unions ‘should’ respond to it. On the one hand it highlights the obstacles confronting those who believe that democracy can only be considered to be consolidated once a viable opposition party is formed to the left of the ANC (Bond 2010; Gumede 2005; Habib and Taylor 1999a; 1999b; 2001; Harvey 2003; Legassick 2007). On the other hand, it challenges the very assumption that democratic transitions could, or even should, be measured simply by the presence of substantive uncertainty in elections and the fabled ‘turnover test’ (Huntington 1991). Workers’ everyday experiences, their identification with the ANC, and their understandings of citizenship and political representation inform an alternative understanding of post-liberation politics. To them, the ANC’s nationalist project is not ‘exhausted’—incapable of fulfilling their material, social and cultural aspirations—nor is the nationalist movement taking South Africa down the path towards ‘electoral authoritarianism’. Instead, a sophisticated understanding of their relationship with the post-apartheid state, and of accountability within the Alliance and the ANC, leads them
to the conclusion that their aspirations of a better future might be best pursued by
careful navigation of single party dominance, rather than its overhaul. The thesis
therefore concludes that our understanding of the relationship between class and
nationalist politics needs greater nuance, and that we must endeavour to illuminate how
South Africans themselves experience and adjust to social and political change in a post-
liberation society.

1.3 Literature Review: The ANC’s nationalist project and the contours of class politics in post-apartheid South Africa

1.3.1 Single party dominance

It is argued that South Africa’s fledgling multiparty democracy constitutes a ‘dominant
party system’ due to the inability of opposition parties to mount a genuine challenge to
the ANC in elections (Brooks 2004; Giliomee 1998; 2001; Giliomee and Simkins 1999;
Giliomee et al 2001; Jung and Shapiro 1995; Southall 2009). Such systems are
distinguished from other party systems due to their peculiarly low level of party
competition within a democratic, multiparty system (Pempel 1990; Sartori 1976; Smith
1989), with one party able to sustain consistently high levels of electoral support (Boucek
1998).

The spectre of authoritarian rule in Africa, and the preponderance of single party
regimes across the continent (see van de Walle 2003), provoke concerns among some
analysts that South Africa’s democratic future hangs in the balance in the absence of
genuinely competitive elections and electoral uncertainty (Gilliomee and Simkins 1999:
340). Samuel Huntington’s idea of the ‘turnover test’ proposes that democratic
consolidation is dependent on a competitive multiparty system capable of ensuring a
regular ‘circulation of elites’ (1991: 267). This resonates strongly among some analysts of
South African politics, who raise concerns that the ANC is increasingly attempting to
entrench itself within state power. It is argued this would lead to the centralisation of power within the ruling party and the blurring of the party-state division; the delegitimisation of opposition parties; the reduced possibility of a vibrant and autonomous civil society providing checks and balances on government; and the erosion of minority rights (Gilliomee 1998; 2001; Gilliomee and Simkins 1999: 340; Giliomme et al 2001; Jung and Shapiro 1995).

These fears are heightened by the ANC’s own pronouncements regarding its position in South African politics. Rather than one of many equally legitimate political parties competing for power within a multiparty system, ANC leaders regularly frame the organisation as a ‘movement’ engaged in a ‘National Democratic Revolution’ which it, as the figurehead of the national liberation struggle, is uniquely charged to administer (Lodge 2004; Darracq 2008). To this end, the ANC, like nationalist movements elsewhere in the southern African region, has regularly employed the ‘exclusionary language of liberation’ (Dorman 2006: 1092; see also Kriger 2005; Ranger 2004) as it has attempted to define ‘acceptable’ and ‘legitimate’ forms of civil society engagement with the state (Bompani 2006: 1147; Death 2010; Habib 2005a: 687; Johnson 2003: 217), citizenship (Ballard 2005: 80) and opposition politics (Southall 2009: 19; see also Southall and Daniel 2004; Giliomme and Simkins 1999).

However, the accounts of South Africa’s dominant party system offered by Gilliomee and Simkins et al offer an extremely deterministic picture of the consequences of the ANC’s continued dominance. As scholars of dominant party systems elsewhere have pointed out, there is no singular trajectory for such systems (Arian and Barnes 1974; Levite and Tarrow 1983) and recent studies suggest that such systems in other parts of the world have undergone significant transformations (Friedman and Wong 2008). Raymond Suttner has criticised the pathological characterisation of nationalist movements offered by Gilliomee and Simkins, claiming that they ascribe an unsuitable
teleological character to post-liberation politics by claiming that ANC dominance will inevitably lead to the party adopting undemocratic tendencies like other nationalist movements have in the region (Suttner 2004; 2006).

Attention has also been drawn to the considerable checks and balances which restrict the scope for the ANC to establish autocratic rule, thereby limiting the prospect of South Africa following the path of other nationalist movements in the region (Lodge 2002: 153-175). For example, the internal democratic functioning of the party offers an important, though clearly imperfect, means by which any authoritarian tendencies can be held in check (Lodge 2004: 216; Southall 2005: 66; see also Cherry 2001; Suttner 2004; 2006). In this respect, the 2007 ANC leadership contests have been identified as a positive demonstration of vibrant internal democracy within the Party (Butler 2009; Lodge 2009). In addition to this, the ANC’s leadership has, from the time of the ‘Government of National Unity’, sought to incorporate a wide range of civil society organisations and opposition parties within its ‘broad church’ (Lodge 2002: 153-175; see also Gumede 2005; Southall 2005). Furthermore, the work of numerous scholars suggests that South Africa’s independent civil society organisations have remained relatively strong and autonomous and are capable of putting important checks on the government (Ballard et al 2006).

The ANC’s electoral dominance has faced challenges in recent years from voter de-alignment (Schulz Herzenberg 2009), increasing signs of internal division and indiscipline (Lodge 2009; Suttner 2009), and the emergence of a rival party, the Congress of the People (Cope), from a factional split within the ANC itself (Booysen 2009; Butler 2009). In short, while the ANC faces no serious challenge to its power with the current configuration of the opposition, this dominance is not immutable and, at present, we should not ascribe an overly teleological character to the ANC as being ‘just another’ authoritarian nationalist movement in the making.
1.3.2 A class alternative to an ‘exhausted’ nationalism?

Despite these limits to ANC hegemony, left wing analysts have nonetheless warned about the dangers of the Party’s continued domination of elections. Adam Habib, for example, has argued that until ‘substantive uncertainty’ is introduced into elections, the goals of development, poverty alleviation and egalitarianism will elude South Africa’s democratic transition (Habib 2005b; 2009; Habib and Taylor 1999b; 2001; Habib and Valodia 2006). In a similar vein, William Gumede argues that:

[...]he voices of the poor are heard only on the streets and through the burgeoning civic movements. The masses cry out for opposition political parties with social and economic policies that will deliver them from their misery. A credible party to the left of the political spectrum might be more likely to bring an element of competition – so desperately needed – to South Africa’s politics. Only if there is a realistic chance of being voted out do ruling parties become more responsive to voters. Only then, it would seem, will South Africa’s politics shift irrevocably towards redistribution. (2005: 272)

While a new source of electoral competition has emerged in the form of Cope, the new party has been beset by infighting from the beginning, and it faces the very real threat of implosion. In any event, the general assumptions underlying the belief that the potential for opposition party growth and the prospect for a challenge to the ANC lies to the left, rather than the right, of the party, still hold true. Analysts argue from national survey data that it is ultimately disaffection with the ANC’s economic policies that will pose a threat to ANC dominance, and that such a seismic shift in South African politics can only be brought about by a credible left wing party with a coherent socioeconomic programme that better appeals to the growing ranks of voters who are disillusioned with the ANC’s track record in government (Habib and Taylor 1999b; 2001).

It is widely held that in the future the ANC will be unable to prevent the emergence of a new class-based politics. Some authors hold that nationalist politics in South Africa will follow the same path as Zimbabwe in this respect because, as Phimister argues:
The shared trajectory of national liberation goes a considerable way towards explaining why it is that erstwhile heroes of the fight against settler colonialism sooner or later squander their credibility…precisely because they depended on the support and invariably the leadership of black professionals and other better-off elements, they ended up entrenching social inequalities. (quoted in Alexander 2000: 401)

According to Bond, the ‘elite transition’ from ‘apartheid to neo-liberalism’ (2000) has failed to address the needs of the black majority, bringing them little material benefits which has ultimately resulted in a new form of ‘class apartheid’ (2000; 2003). This, he argues, is symptomatic of the ‘exhausted nationalism’ displayed elsewhere in southern Africa, as former liberation movements in government were confronted by growing class-based political movements motivated to achieve socioeconomic redress (2000; Bond and Manyana 2002). Bond argues that this could lead to a ‘post-nationalist’ politics emerging in South Africa and that:

One day not far off, South Africa might repeat a process unfolding in, for example, Zimbabwe at the turn of the century. There, a nationalist government with enormous social prestige began a project of redistribution after Independence (in 1980) but quite quickly fell under World Bank sectoral advice (by 1982 or so) and IMF macroeconomic policy influence (1984). The marginal social progress attained after independence was soon reversed. Organised labour, NGOs, human rights groups, social movements, environmentalists and other progressive forces began making links between their woes and government policy…. [A]fter a time, the contradictions had presented themselves in such stark terms that a new movement emerged in 1998 based not on opportunistic, petit-bourgeois, personality politics (although that was always a problem) but on a chance to contest the 2000 parliamentary election with enormous popular support and potentially a post-nationalist and post-neo-liberal programme. (Bond 2000: 250 see also 2003: 45)

Left wing analysts of South African politics predict the rise of ‘the next liberation struggle’ (Saul 2005), characterised by a struggle of ‘the poors’ (Desai 2002). Neville Alexander argues in this regard that:

South Africa is going the way of all industrial societies: overt class struggles are beginning to shape the political terrain which had previously been dominated by the apparent primacy of the struggle of black people against the ill-gotten power and wealth of the white minority… Today, black and white middle class, and even bourgeois groups and individuals, properly so called, have formed what in effect is an alliance against the labouring poor. The crudeness and brutal frankness of this unholy alliance are breathtaking but, in an unintended way, progressive, since thereby South Africans will eventually be forced away from race-centred politics of black (or African) nationalism to the centrality of class politics… (Alexander 2002: 182).

This class-based challenge, he contests, is already becoming visible in the widespread protests over the pace of service delivery and is abundantly obvious to ‘all who are not blind to the movement of history’ (Alexander 2002: 166). From the late 1990s onwards
South Africa witnessed the emergence of a plethora of ‘new social movements’ which, it is argued, symbolise a new political era of class-based resistance to the ‘neo-liberal’ policies of the ANC (Barchiesi 2004; Bond 2000; Desai 2002). According to the organisers of the ‘mega protests’ held in the early 2000s, for example, this wave of protests signalled ‘a new struggle’ which represents ‘a battle for control of South Africa’s revolutionary tradition’ (Malan quoted in Death 2010: 6). In this vein, Saul (2005: 239) notes that the ‘stark contradiction between the ANC leadership’s chosen socio-economic priorities and the felt needs of the masses is giving rise to real tensions that have begun to stoke the fires of a new mass resistance to neo-liberalism in South Africa’. He argues that as a result the country is entering:

novel and complex political terrain … terrain that is extremely dangerous but also marked with genuine promise. Certainly, it is far too early to say that “the tide is turning”, as one of the leaders of the August 31st march from Alex to Sandton enthusiastically shouted to me along the route. Nonetheless, it was difficult to be on that march and not sense that it served as a significant signpost on the road to a post-neo-liberal and post-nationalist politics in South Africa – and as an impressive rallying point for those forces from below that might yet get things back on track in their country. (2005: 239)

A common theme of this literature then, is that the defining feature of South African politics in the future will be the emergence of this new class-based politics which could one day challenge the ANC’s ‘exhausted’ nationalist project.

However, the majority of these struggles are not formally organised and arise in response to diverse local issues. Those formal movements which have emerged are extremely heterogeneous in terms of their organisation, aims and the forms of activism they employ, making it difficult for them to unite behind a common cause beyond occasional ‘mega protest’ events such as that against the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002 (Ballard et al 2005; Death 2010; Freund 2006). As such, although these struggles play an important role in holding the government to account, they remain divided over the issue of forming an opposition party and thus do not bear the potential to unseat the ANC (see Bassett 2005).
Bond argues that a prerequisite for a post-nationalist politics that could usurp the ANC would be COSATU leaving its Alliance with the ANC and drawing ‘the various now fragmented forces of South African socialism together’, possibly to form some kind of workers’ party (2010). According to Habib and Taylor, it is COSATU and the SACP alone that are capable of forming a successful electoral alternative to the ANC because:

A parliamentary opposition in South Africa would only be viable if its primary social base is the organized African working class. … because this is the only constituency with the will to serve as such an opposition. Minority racial groups cannot serve as that social constituency because they do not have the electoral numbers that would allow for an opposition to be perceived as an electoral threat. Neither are the new African elite or managerial and professional middle classes serious contenders for the role of opposition, if only because they are well taken care of by the ANC. Furthermore, the organized African working class is the only constituency with capacity to serve as a social base for opposition. It is the most organized sector within the African population. It has, through different union federations, a significant amount of infrastructural and financial resources at its disposal. Moreover Africans constitute the largest block within the independent voter category. (2001b: 217)

Although recognizing the difficulties such a party might face, analysts such as Gumede (2008), Martin Legassick (2007) and Daryl Glaser extol the positive impacts that such a party might bring to South African democracy because:

It could, in addition to countering the drift towards neo-liberalism, offer a form of politics that is non-ethnic and committedly democratic. It could provide an outlet for popular discontent on the terrain of high politics, moving beyond the necessarily limited vision of civil society as the principle source of radical opposition to the dominant party. (Glaser 2001: 235)

Unlike the SACP (see Thomas 2007a; 2007b), it could be argued that COSATU has the organisational muscle and the membership base to mount a serious challenge to the ANC. Peter Alexander (2000: 401) argues that South Africa could well follow the path of Zimbabwe in this respect, where the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) formed the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to challenge the Zimbabwe African national Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) in the polls because: ‘For countries with post-liberation, nationalist governments, unless opposition takes on a provincial or ethnic form, its core will consist of the labour movement’.

There is indeed a body of literature that highlights the significance of trade unions in political struggles across the African continent, including the important part they played at the forefront of struggle against colonialism (Berg and Butler 1964; Davies
1966; Freund 1988), their pivotal role in expanding political space in various countries through their resistance to post-colonial authoritarian rule (Kraus et al 2007), and their position at the forefront of popular resistance against neo-liberal economic reforms, particularly in their campaigns against Structural Adjustment Programmes (Beckman & Sachikonye 2001; Sibanda & Nyamukapa 2000). Furthermore, although their capacity to engage in national politics has varied markedly across the continent, in large parts of Africa unions possess an almost unrivalled potential to mobilise an organised section of society (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 7-8; Kraus 2007: 1-2). In this respect, Freund has argued:

… virtually all African governments have been uncomfortable with strong, radical, independent trade unions. Such organisations violate their own determination to dominate civil society and threaten to function as independent power bases for ambitious politicians and potentially for the emergence of class-based politics. (1988: 106-7)

Like unions elsewhere then, COSATU is thought to possess the potential to radically reconfigure South African politics if it were to mobilise support against the ANC in elections under the banner of a new workers’ party (see Habib and Taylor 1999a; 1999b; 2001). Whether or not such a prospect is being agitated for from ‘below’, within the rank-and file of the trade unions, is the central focus of this thesis as I seek to determine whether or not class politics is set to supersede nationalist politics in the manner expected by some of the authors mentioned above. I will outline my approach in the methodology section below, but first I will briefly discuss the recent history of the relationships between trade unions and the ANC, setting out the context within which current debates about the future of the Tripartite Alliance are being played out.

1.3.3 The historical background of the Alliance: strategic debates over the relationship between the unions and the national liberation struggle

It is important to understand current debates concerning the future of the Tripartite Alliance within the broader historical context of the relationship between South African
trade unions and the liberation movements in the late twentieth century. Attempts to organise African workers from the 1920s encountered severe difficulties, although these efforts – led largely by the Communist Party of South Africa (as it was then called) - eventually paved the way for the formation of the first non-racial union federation, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in 1955 (Luckhardt and Wall 1980). Rather than being restricted to factory-level organisation, SACTU was formally aligned with the ANC and in this sense it continued the ‘political tradition’ developed by the black trade unions organised by the Communist Party in earlier decades (Southall and Webster 2010: 135-7). However, while this political involvement raised the profile of the federation, helping to facilitate its rapid growth (Lambert 1985), Southall and Webster point out that this also brought SACTU into direct conflict with the apartheid state and that as a result of the repression it faced, the federation was forced into exile in 1964 (Southall and Webster 2010: 136).

With SACTU exiled, the trade unions were left debating the strategic merit of having alliances with the exiled liberation movements. In many ways this reflected longstanding debates within the trade union movement across the world about whether a union’s primary responsibility is to its members in the workplace, or whether it should be engaged in broader political struggles for social change (see Murray and Reshef 1988). Some analysts were critical of the manner in which SACTU’s alliance with the liberation movement subordinated the trade union struggles to the fight for national liberation (Feit 1975; Fine and Davis 1991) and during the 1970s an alternative political current emerged in the union movement, often labelled the ‘shopfloor’ or ‘workerist’ tradition (Webster 2001: 256-7). Advocates of this tradition – and in particular the unions affiliated with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) - believed that it was important to avoid the path taken by SACTU in the 1960s and argued that it was essential to eschew nationalist politics and instead concentrate on the formation of strong shop floor
organisation and factory level demands. This focus met with a great deal of initial success as the unions gained official recognition from employers, which would have been impossible to attain if the unions had been formally aligned to the liberation movement (see Adler et al 1992).

The strategic debate concerning the political orientation of the trade unions re-emerged in the face of growing unrest and resistance against the apartheid state during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Workerist leaders, such as Joe Foster, the General Secretary of FOSATU, were extremely wary of aligning with the national liberation movement because they feared it could threaten the hard-fought progress made by the unions and also because they were wary of the national liberation movement ‘hijacking’ the working class struggle and suppressing the struggle for socialism (Foster 1982). These concerns were most eloquently articulated by academic Martin Plaut, who warned against forming alliances with the liberation movement because ‘Post-colonial Africa is strewn with the bones of trade unions that allied themselves with nationalist movements to fight for the liberty of their people’ (Plaut 1987: 105). This caution was perhaps well justified, and many analysts have discussed the manner in which trade union movements across Africa were ultimately subordinated to nationalist movements in the post-independence period, with largely negative implications for the unions themselves (Cooper 1996; see also Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Buhlungu 2010; Freund 1988).

The re-emergence of the ‘populist’ or ‘national democratic tradition’ – advocating union involvement in the liberation struggle - clearly gathered momentum within the South African union movement in the early 1980s, leading to the formation of COSATU in 1985. Friedman and Baskin have argued that this shift was in part a response to grassroots pressures for the unions to take a political stance (Baskin 1991; Friedman 1987). COSATU’s leadership consistently reaffirmed the need for the unions to play a ‘leadership role’ within the struggle against both national and economic exploitation
(COSATU 1987). Prominent union leaders, such as Jay Naidoo, the first General Secretary of COSATU, argued that issues relating to workers’ oppression on the shopfloor could not be distinguished from oppression of the apartheid government and therefore the ‘workers’ struggle’ and the fight to overthrow apartheid were fundamentally inseparable (see Adler et al 1992: 328). COSATU began to play a leading role at the forefront of various township struggles and within umbrella organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) (Adler et al 1992: 309; Baskin 1991; Seekings 2000; Siedman 1994; Webster 1998; 2001).

COSATU entered into formal discussions with the exiled ANC in Lusaka in February 1986. After these meetings, a joint communiqué was released in which the federation committed itself to the liberation struggle, under the leadership of the ANC, while the ANC formally acknowledged the independence of COSATU. It stated:

[...]

Despite the persistence of calls from some quarters for COSATU to form its own political organisation (Foster 1982), Webster notes that these debates began to narrow from 1987 as the exiled liberation movements and COSATU continued to forge closer ties (2001: 258). When the ban on the ANC, PAC and SACP was lifted in February 1990, it paved the way for the formalisation of the Alliance between COSATU, the ANC and SACP later that year, an alliance that was to prove central to debates about South Africa’s political future.

1.3.4 The implicit ideological compromise of the Alliance

An implicit compromise made by the ‘populist’ tradition within the trade union movement was the postponement of the struggle for socialism for the sake of empowering
the broader liberation movement. Both SACP and COSATU leaders rationalised this with the concept of the two-stage National Democratic Revolution (NDR); the first entailing the seizure of state power by the national democratic movement and the second, brought about by the working class, would be a socialist revolution. As Joe Slovo put it:

[T]here is a distinction between the creation of the new state form and the building of a new socialist economic formation. The former is made possible by a revolutionary seizure of power; the latter, through the exercise of that political power by a class whose interests are unconditionally served by a socialist order. (quoted in McKinley 2001: 184)

A fully democratic society was therefore framed as the necessary precondition for the advance to socialism. This was effectively the get-out clause for advocates of the alliance with the ANC: they claimed that socialism could only be realised in the long-term through the unions joining the liberation movement and ensuring that the working class was the driver of this movement (Von Holdt 1987), an implicit ideological compromise that remains the cornerstone of COSATU’s continued alliance with the nationalist movement.

1.3.5 Rationales for breaking the Alliance

In the post-apartheid era it has been noted by several authors that the ideological divide between the ostensibly socialist COSATU and its nationalist ally has been increasing. Sparks, for example, notes how debates within the Alliance were becoming gradually more rancorous as members of the union movement realised the ‘betrayal’ that they were experiencing (Sparks 2003: 198-199). Webster also identifies an ‘alliance under stress’ (2001) and Habib and Taylor assert that ‘cracks’ are emerging in the Alliance which reflect the ‘ever-widening abyss’ between the aims of the ANC government and the ‘emancipatory politics’ of the trade unions which will ultimately lead the ANC and COSATU into an antagonistic political relationship (Habib and Taylor 1999b: 117; Gall
In his nuanced analysis of post-apartheid political economy, Ian Taylor argues that the often heated disputes over policy between the Alliance leadership are symptomatic of this fundamental contradiction in the tripartite alliance…. Indeed, they mark the fault-line between the outwardly-orientated components of the developing historic bloc (which includes large-scale capital), and the more inwardly orientated fractions of productive capital, labour and Leftist elements opposed to the neo-liberal counterrevolution. (Taylor 2001: 162)

Sakhela Buhlungu – one of the most distinguished South African labour analysts – argues that COSATU’s involvement in the Alliance is tantamount to ‘flogging a dying horse’ because, in the light of his review of other post-colonial union-party relationships in countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, 'no union has been able to maintain a strong alliance on the basis of equality with the ruling political party for any significant length of time’ and that ‘COSATU will be no exception in this regard’ (1997: 74). Buhlungu develops this argument in subsequent works in which he argues that ultimately COSATU will not feature as one of the social forces within the ANC’s ruling bloc in the democratic South Africa (Buhlungu 2001: 179). He points to the tensions that emerge in post-colonial societies once the nationalist movement in government embraces neo-liberal ‘market regulation’ of the economy (2005). This, he argues, makes it increasingly difficult for the ruling party to meet the social demands of its trade union allies. Although he introduces a caveat that ‘South Africa is unlikely to witness a dramatic break-up of the alliance’ in the short term, he is nonetheless very clear about what he predicts will happen in the future:

The significance of the COSATU–ANC alliance is that while it highlights the need to take account of the specificities of the South African case, it also shows that even a strong union-party alliance with “few parallels across the world” cannot escape what one author has termed the “political fall-out of globalization”. Recent developments seem to indicate that the alliance, like other alliances in developed as well as developing countries, will not survive this fall-out (2005: 716 see also Sparks 2003: 200).

In the light of what they perceive to be COSATU’s subordination to the ANC, several authors have argued that the Alliance has essentially ‘failed’, from a left wing perspective, in terms of the federation being able to steer the government towards a
progressive, redistributionist development programme (Habib and Taylor 1999a; 1999b; 2001; see also Bassett 2005; Lehulere 2003; McKinley 2001; Van Driel 2003). McKinley argues that the belligerence of COSATU’s leadership with respect to its political strategy has not only been a miscalculation, it has also undermined the potential for an emancipatory class-based politics emerging by muzzling dissenting voices within the union movement (McKinley 2000: 203). This concern is shared by other scholars who argue that the strict adherence to Alliance politics has actually entrenched the political and economic status quo (Lehulere 2003; Van Driel 2003). Bassett, for example, argues that COSATU’s Alliance strategy has served to ‘neutralize a potentially powerful opponent to the process of reconsolidating capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa’ by incorporating the federation into ‘the country’s new ruling bloc’ and has thereby served to legitimise and entrench neo-liberal hegemony in South Africa (2005: 64).

Other analysts draw the same conclusion that COSATU’s strategy has essentially ‘failed’, although they are much more radical than Bassett with their prescriptions for COSATU (Bond 2010; Habib and Taylor 1999a; 1999b; 2001; Habib 2005; 2009; Harvey 2002; Legassick 2007). Habib and Valodia argue that COSATU’s inability to steer the macroeconomic trajectory of government is rooted in South Africa’s dominant party system, because ‘these outcomes were systematically predictable and likely to continue so long as substantive uncertainty is not reintroduced into the political system’ (2006: 457). In this respect, Habib and Taylor argue that ‘[g]iven the fact that no other opposition party is capable of fulfilling this role, the responsibility therefore falls on the shoulders of COSATU and the SACP’ (2001: 220). Similarly, Harvey calls for the formation of a ‘mass workers’ party’ (MWP) because, he argues, the ANC’s neo-liberal agenda has made ‘the betrayal’ of the working class ‘clear beyond any doubt’ (2002: 15).

Although Bassett explicitly criticises COSATU’s political strategy with respect to the Alliance and its inability to imagine alternative strategies, she shies away from advocating an outright fracturing of the Alliance.
Not only would such a political rupture be desirable, according to some analysts it is a viable political strategy to pursue because of the potential support base that such a party would attract from workers. Some prominent analysts of South African politics offer vague anecdotal speculations that there is, for example, ‘disquiet in COSATU affiliates over the compromising tendencies of the COSATU leadership’ (Gumede 2005: 262 see also Gall 1997: 216) and ‘widespread grassroots antipathy’ towards the ANC’s policies among COSATU’s rank-and-file (Bond 2003: 46). In this vein, Gall predicts that the question of whether workers will do to the ANC what they did to apartheid (to quote Mandela) remains at the moment unanswered but it is assured that in the future, rank and file workers will clash with the ANC-led GNUR as a result of their embrace of the free market. (Gall 2003: 217)

According to the leaders of some of South Africa’s social movements, union members will join with them in their struggles against the ANC government (Ngwane 2003; interview with S’bu Zikode 05/05/06). More concretely, Habib and Taylor (1999b) argue that survey evidence provided by SWOP, detailing the attitudes of COSATU’s rank-and-file, demonstrates the potential support for a breakaway workers’ party. They point to the finding that 33 per cent of workers said that they would ‘form another party that will provide benefits to workers if the ANC was seen not to deliver with a further 37 per cent saying that they would “vote for another party in the next election”’ (Habib and Taylor 1999b: 117). They also highlight the growing number of non-aligned voters in the broader population as evidence of the potential support for a hypothetical workers’ party (Habib and Taylor 1999b: 2001). When confronted with counter-evidence of continuously high levels of support for the ANC among COSATU’s rank-and-file (Southall and Wood: 1999), Habib and Taylor dismiss this as being due to the ignorance of ordinary workers with regards to the economic policies of the ANC government because ‘COSATU members’ support of the tripartite alliance is based on the erroneous belief that the RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme] constitutes the core

3 Although their interpretation of the statistics is disputed (Southall and Wood 1999b).
of ANC economic policy, and takes ANC rhetoric at face-value’ (2001: 221 see also Harvey 2002: 16). While workers apparently do not ‘realise’ the need for a workers’ party at the present time, advocates of such a party believe that this negates neither the need nor the viability of such a party because, as Habib and Taylor controversially assert, ‘progressive scholars should not make a fetish of the majority viewpoint’ (2001: 221; see also Habib 2009: 173).

In short, the assumption that underpins these prescriptions for COSATU is that the ANC’s embrace of neo-liberalism has opened up the potential for a new class-based politics emerging and that it is only the narrow strategic outlook of COSATU’s current leadership that is preventing the growth of a new, post-nationalist politics in South Africa.

1.3.6 COSATU’s perseverance within the Alliance

COSATU entered the transition period in a strong position. The ideological compromises it made allowed it to play an important role in the liberation struggle and the ANC relied heavily on COSATU for keeping in touch with the struggle on the ground while it was in exile. COSATU’s recognition of the ANC as the leader of the national democratic struggle undoubtedly helped to consolidate the ANC’s position as the figurehead of popular resistance and the organisation also played an instrumental role in both setting up ANC branch structures after its unbanning and also in helping the ANC to its 1994 election victory (Lodge 1999: 8; see also Allen 2007). A crucial distinction must therefore be made at this point:

While COSATU committed itself to participation in the national democratic struggle under the leadership of the ANC, it joined the tripartite alliance not as a subordinate partner (as had SACTU) but, formally, as an equal player with an independent power base, strategy and leadership. (Southall and Webster 2010: 135)

Unlike SACTU in the 1960s, the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions in the 1980s or the National Union of Namibian Workers, COSATU was never made completely
NUMSA’s approach stands in contrast to the more cautious stand taken by NUM, for example, which has historically had a closer relationship with the ANC. 

subordinate to the nationalist movement and has managed to retain its autonomy. It emerged from the transition as a strong, independent federation with well-established traditions of democratic shop floor organisation (Baskin 1991; Buhlunlu 2004; Friedman 1987; Wood 2003) and the capacity to become a major player in national political debates (Adler et al 1992; Adler and Webster 1995; Cherry 2006: 149; Cherry and Southall 2006), most notably in the initial drafting of the RDP (Lodge 1999: 12; see also Adler et al 1992: 338). Because of this, COSATU has been able to secure some of the most labour-friendly legislation in the world in the form of the Labour Relations Act and has successfully utilised its influence over macroeconomic and labour policy to protect and advance the interests of its members in some instances (Adler and Webster 1995; Baskin 1993; Maree 1993; 1998; Schreiner 1994; von Holdt 1992; 1993; 1995; Webster and Adler 1999).

The benefits that the unions have enjoyed form part of the reason why COSATU remains within the Alliance. Although there have been sporadic calls within COSATU and its affiliates for the federation to reassess its relationship with the ANC, particularly from the National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA)\(^4\) (for details of these see Habib and Taylor 1997: 113; Harcourt and Wood 2003: 96; Lodge 1999: 7; Webster and Buhlunlu 2004: 50), there has been little in the way of a sustained groundswell of support within COSATU - and its affiliates - for an independent left wing politics emerging from the unions. COSATU’s strategy is premised on the assumption that the Alliance, and the ANC itself, are ‘contested terrains’ within which it can struggle to advance workers’ interests through ‘working class leadership’ of the movement (COSATU 2003). COSATU, and also the SACP, now frame abandoning the Alliance as the potential surrendering of the ANC to right wing forces within the party and the

\(^4\) NUMSA’s approach stands in contrast to the more cautious stand taken by NUM, for example, which has historically had a closer relationship with the ANC.
marginalisation of the labour movement (for example COSATU 1997). Southall and Wood defend this strategy of engagement within the Alliance, arguing that those advocating COSATU forming its own political party ‘are resorting to the crudest of simplicities to suggest that class struggles can only be fought out between rather than within political parties’ (1999b: 124).

1.3.7 Workers’ continued support for the ANC and the Alliance

The close links between the leaders of COSATU and their counterparts in the ANC, along with the career opportunities that these ties generate, are rightly cited as an important element of the ‘glue’ that holds the Alliance together (Gumede 2005: 268; Southall and Webster 2010: 143). However, it is not simply the case that COSATU’s leadership have, in some way or another, been ‘co-opted’ into the nationalist elite and are thus the only obstacle standing in the way of the federation breaking the Alliance and forging a new political path. Those advocating such a move have to take into account the deeply embedded support for the ANC and alliance formations amongst ordinary workers (Cherry and Southall 2005; Pillay 2006; Southall 2001; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b; Webster 2010).

Successive national surveys conducted by SWOP in 1994, 1998 and 2004 have demonstrated that the level of support for the Alliance among ordinary members remains strong, albeit decreasing: 66 per cent of the workers surveyed in 2004 felt that the Tripartite Alliance was the best way of protecting workers’ interests, down from 82 per cent in 1994 and 70 per cent in 1998 (Cherry and Southall 2006: 79). Workers have also demonstrated strong support for their union leaders being involved in the government (Buhlunugu et al 2006b; Cherry 2006), with 88 per cent of workers supporting COSATU’s strategy of sending representatives to parliament (Pillay 2006: 181). Furthermore, COSATU acknowledges the high degree of support that the ANC
itself enjoys among the union rank-and-file and union leaders are mindful that often the
further one moves down the union hierarchy, the stronger the connection is with the
ANC (COSATU 2003). The SWOP surveys of COSATU members conducted before the
previous three elections demonstrate a remarkable consistency in the voting preferences
of workers, with 75 per cent of workers intending to vote for the ANC in 1994, 75
percent in 1999 and 73 percent 2004 (Buhlunugu et al 2006b: 205). Although this support
varies slightly across COSATU’s affiliates, even members of NUMSA – arguably
COSATU’s most left-wing affiliate – display high levels of support for the ANC
(Brookes et al 2004: 781).

One reason behind this ongoing support is the historical symbolism associated
with the ANC as being the party of national liberation. Buhlunugu and Psoulis have
argued that the ‘enduring bonds of solidarity’ forged between unions and liberation
movements during the liberation struggle perhaps explain some of the reluctance the
unions have in turning their backs on the ANC at this time (Buhlunugu and Psoulis 1999).
As a result of this, one of the greatest difficulties that a union-sponsored workers’ party
would face would be the task of trying to ‘discredit the old national liberation movement
and inherit its mantle as a party of liberation’ (Buhlunugu 2010: 200).

Second, while Habib and Taylor posit that the ANC’s track record on bringing
about socioeconomic change in South Africa will ultimately serve as a major catalyst
behind the formation and subsequent popularity of a workers’ party, several analysts
have pointed out that COSATU workers are far more sympathetic when judging the
ANC’s record, not least because they have experienced tangible material improvements
to their lives in the post-apartheid period (Cherry 2006; Harcourt and Wood 2003; Pillay
2006; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b). As Buhlunugu et al conclude from the SWOP
survey data, this suggests that COSATU workers continue to identify their class interests
with the ANC ‘and that, in this regard, the ANC has no rival at the present time’ (2006:
205). Seekings has taken this argument further, claiming that a ‘class compromise’ has emerged in the post-apartheid era in which COSATU, and its relatively privileged membership, are now primarily concerned with protecting their own interests and what is effectively the political and economic status quo, which seriously challenges the ‘pro-poor’ credentials of the federation (Seekings 2004; 2006a).

From his analysis of the SWOP survey data, Pillay (2006) has argued that COSATU members are clearly averse to the idea of an independent workers’ party. Only 4 per cent of workers surveyed wanted an alliance with the SACP alone while only 7 per cent want a separate workers party to be formed, leading Pillay to conclude that workers clearly do not have the ‘stomach’ for an independent working class politics (179), a point shared by Cherry and Southall (2006).

From the SWOP survey evidence, therefore, there is little reason to suspect COSATU affiliates agitating for the formation of an independent political formation in the near future, especially considering the risks involved of doing so. The risks involved with COSATU forging an independent working class opposition politics to challenge the ANC are amplified by the zero-sum nature of South Africa’s dominant party system. Analysts have pointed to the danger that, if unsuccessful, COSATU could face being ‘condemned to the political wilderness’ (Eidelberg 2000: 157). By going into opposition, COSATU would face the wrath of an ANC whose political fortunes might perhaps be best served by weakening or repressing the trade union movement (Buhlunngu 2010: 201).

There is the distinct possibility that any radical break from the Alliance could serve to divide and weaken the union movement internally. As Southall and Wood have pointed out, considering the strong support for the ANC among members and the strong links between the ANC and COSATU’s affiliates, forming an independent party would be a ‘prescription for disaster’ as there is no guarantee that if COSATU or the
SACP were to go into opposition they would do so in a coherent fashion (1999a: 74) which could lead to

some combination of a split within COSATU and within its individual affiliates, bitter struggles for ownership of union assets in extremely expensive court room battles, formation by the ANC of a rival union federation, and so on. The very prospect makes one shudder, so much would be thrown away - as reactionary forces would meanwhile move in to exploit (and fund) divisions, reverse labour friendly legislation, and so on. (1999a 78-79; see also Pillay 2006; 181-182)

In many respects then, it could be said that COSATU leaders’ strategy of retaining close links with the ANC essentially reflects the will of their membership and that, in this sense, they ‘got it right’ because ‘COSATU’s leadership’s backing of the ANC was much more closely in touch with rank-and-file feelings than those who argued for breaking with the Alliance’ (Cherry and Southall 2006: 81). As Buhlunugu et al conclude from the SWOP survey data:

Whereas there has been some suggestion that the COSATU leadership has maintained their closeness to the ANC in order to further their own interests, it can be argued rather more forcefully that COSATU workers’ ultimate commitment to the ruling party imposes considerable limitations upon the scope for political action by the federation’s leaders. (Buhlunugu et al 2006b: 206)

While some analysts have consistently called for COSATU to seek political alternatives outside of the Alliance, its leadership have resisted such calls and recent events appear to have kicked such ideas into the political long grass. COSATU’s support for Jacob Zuma in the ANC’s leadership contest has reaffirmed the leadership’s commitment to ‘fighting for the soul of the ANC’ rather than seeking political alternatives elsewhere. COSATU’s successful ‘infiltration’ of the ANC, although criticised as a narrow, self-defeating strategy by some (Bassett and Clarke 2008; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a), demonstrates the political clout that COSATU can still wield within the Alliance (Southall and Webster 2010). In this respect, COSATU’s leadership can claim vindication for their strategy and can also argue that their success in this regard has set an important precedent; it can be seen to have laid a blueprint for ‘reclaiming’ the Alliance which the federation can follow again in the future. There is no reason to suspect that the COSATU leadership will advocate a radical shift from this strategy of
contesting power within the ANC and Alliance, a strategy that is supported of the rank-
and-file members of COSATU’s affiliates.

1.4 Methodology: outlining my approach to Alliance politics

1.4.1 Rationale

The core question of this thesis, something that my fieldwork has sought to cast new
light upon, is what role the South African trade union movement can play in the
reconfiguration of South African politics. Traditionally, academics have approached the
study of Alliance politics by focusing on the elite-level exchanges played out in the public
domain. While these studies have offered important insights and theorisations about
national dynamics, my focus will be on ‘politics from below’, looking at how rank-and-
file members of the unions perceive these dynamics and what implications this has for
South African politics as a whole. As I note in my conclusion, the thesis cannot offer
definitive answers to some of the questions it explores. Instead it will offer an insight into
the dynamics of class and nationalist politics in South Africa from a grassroots angle; an
insight which illuminates issues relating to class formation, identity politics, trade union
organisation and workers’ political attitudes which challenge the assumptions and
generalisations made by some scholars about the present and future contours of class
politics in the post-apartheid era.

One of the rationales behind this focus is that while an Alliance split could be led
‘from above’, by the union’s hierarchy, such a move is unlikely in the first place, and even
less likely to succeed, without the prior support of trade union members. As my literature
review demonstrated, COSATU is deemed uniquely pregnant with the potential to
reconfigure South African politics and to end the single party dominance of the ANC.
However, existing studies of members’ attitudes towards the Alliance and the ANC rely
heavily upon the statistical survey data provided by the SWOP survey team. These
surveys are of great value, but my research builds upon this quantitative survey data by providing a qualitative, ethnographic insight into the attitudes of ordinary union members.

1.4.2 My sample
Following the work of industrial sociologists exploring the dynamics of workplace change at particular field sites (Barchiesi 2005; Bezuidenhout et al 2007; Kenny 2004; Von Holdt 2003), my research uses a single industry as a case study to identify and analyse broader national dynamics and trends in trade union members’ political attitudes and party allegiances. In particular, my case study explores the political attitudes and engagement of rank-and-file members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), South Africa’s largest and most politically influential trade union. My analysis explores how workers experience and adapt to the changing social, political and institutional environment brought about by the transition to democracy in 1994. In particular, it will examine how these experiences shape their attitudes and engagement within their union. It will also examine the changing relationship these workers have with the state in the democratic era, and how they experience economic transformation under the ANC government. The thesis will explore the roots of their affinities with the party and why, at this particular time, these workers are not agitating for a post-nationalist politics emerging in South Africa with their unions as the driving force behind this change.

The fieldwork took place between January 2007 and June 2008, with an extra month of fieldwork conducted in April 2009 to cover the elections and to solicit the responses of my key informants towards the election and its implications. I conducted the bulk of my formal interviews in December 2007, the month I was able to get access to the power stations themselves. The timing of these interviews spanned the period immediately before and after the ANC’s crucial conference in Polokwane.
Access to the Union and its members in the energy industry was secured with the kind assistance of the NUM. Its national leadership, including Frans Baleni and Oupa Komane, were extremely supportive of the project and happy to assist me where possible. Contact with the Union was initially secured through Lesiba Seshoka, the NUM’s Communications Director, based at the Union’s headquarters in downtown Johannesburg. Lesiba was able to introduce me to the national leadership and also the relevant full time officials for the energy sector, such as Job Matsepe. Job and Lesiba also introduced me to the regional leadership of NUM in the Highveld region, where the majority of the power stations are located. Regional leaders, such as Paris Mashego, introduced me to the fulltime shopsteward for Eskom in the region, Joe Skosana. Joe was instrumental in setting up contacts with the Branch Committees of Duvha and Arnot power stations and for securing access to the power stations themselves. Once I has made contact with the branches in the stations, we were able to agree upon how the research would be conducted. It was Paris, Joe and Job who informed me of NUM meetings, training workshops and wage negotiations and it was these three figures who secured me access to such meetings. Access to local ANC branches was secured through the NUM’s regional leadership in their Witbank headquarters, who were all themselves active in local branch structures.

The formal interviews with workers were mostly conducted over a three-week period covering two Eskom power stations, Duvha and Arnot, although several follow up interviews were also conducted in workers’ homes. The interviews inside the stations were conducted in quiet office spaces set aside by the Union for the purpose of the research. Workers would come off their shift to the place of the interviews where they would be given further information about the research (they had already received a detailed brief from their shop stewards in advance of my arrival). Informal interviews
were also conducted with workers over lunch breaks where workers ate their lunch and in several cases follow up interviews were conducted in workers’ homes.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with over sixty NUM members working in Eskom power stations in Mpumalanga. I also interviewed regional union officials and NUM’s national office bearers. I attended union meetings, workshops, training days, wage negotiations, public rallies and also local branch meetings of the ANC. During these meetings I conducted a substantial number of unstructured interviews with participants and observed what was transpiring.

The formal interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours, with the majority being around an hour long. The interviews covered a range of subjects including, but not limited to: home life, local government service delivery, party affiliation, political activism, national politics, the union, and also their working life (see appendix). I adopted such a broad focus in order to build a holistic, in-depth picture of what informed workers’ attitudes towards national politics: Did they feel the ANC had ‘delivered’ for them as individuals? How would they measure this? Were they members of a party? Were they party activists? What factors informed their support for a party? What political role did they think the NUM should play?

In short, my research builds upon the nationwide surveys conducted by the SWOP survey team, which offer a well-grounded national statistical representation of COSATU workers attitudes, with an in-depth, qualitative examination of the underlying reasons generating some of these statistical trends. For example, if the SWOP surveys show that the percentage of COSATU workers supporting the ANC has remained high, my research examines how workers rationalise this support in relation to their own

---

5 Where necessary, and this was only of 3 occasions, a shop steward was brought in to act as an interpreter to ensure that interviewees understood my questions fully and that they could articulate themselves in sufficient depth. The vast majority of workers were extremely proficient in English which was a requirement for many of the jobs performed within the station and was the lingua franca between workers of different ethnicities.
personal circumstances in their home, their political activism, their memory of ‘the struggle’, their attitudes towards the opposition parties, and their appraisals of (national and local) government performance, among other things.

The formal interviews with ordinary members were conducted at two Eskom power stations, Arnot and Duvha, but my research also included interviews with officials at all levels within NUM’s structures, including shop stewards, branch committee members, regional office bearers, full time shop stewards, the NUM’s national organiser for Eskom and also NUM’s national office bearers.

Figure 1: The NUM’s organisational structure in Eskom for one power station

![Diagram of NUM’s organisational structure](image)

Inside the power stations, workers were selected for interviews based on a strategic-random sample from the NUM’s membership lists in collaboration with the full time shop steward and branch executives so that a representative range of age, sex and skills were interviewed. I deliberately interviewed workers from a range of different age groups as I had anticipated that generational differences might be an important issue to
explore with respect to the younger generation’s greater employment prospects and attitudes towards national politics. In addition to individual interviews, in order to see how workers responded to one another’s attitudes, I conducted a series of group interviews. Although the selection was also ultimately restricted by which workers were on shift at the time and available for interviews, there was no sense that the branch leaders attempted in any way to ‘filter’ interviewees, some of whom simply turned up of their own accord when they heard that the Union was conducting research and wanted to express their views. As chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate, the workers were often extremely critical of their shop stewards, branch committee, full time shop steward, regional leaders and/or the national leadership of NUM.

The interviews with regional union officials and full time shop stewards were conducted across the duration of my fieldwork period and many of these informants were interviewed repeatedly in order to seek clarity and to verify some of my data, as well as exploring their opinions regarding the attitudes expressed by the regular members. I interviewed all of the regional leadership at NUM’s Highveld regional office in the centre of Witbank, including the Regional Secretary, the Regional Chairperson and also the Eskom full time shop steward, who was based in the regional offices. My interviews with the regional leaders allowed me to gain a broader perspective with regards to the issues affecting NUM across other industries and whether trends I witnessed in Eskom, such as the changing participatory culture within the Union, were common across NUM’s organisation elsewhere.

I triangulated my research by spending time with workers over their lunch breaks in the power station when I conducted informal group discussions with them. I also socialised with shop stewards who I had built a rapport with, typically over food and beers in Witbank. I attended 14 NUM meetings including branch meetings, local and national shop steward councils, and shop steward training workshops. Attending these
meetings and workshops allowed me to get a sense of the broader organisational issues being discussed and debated within NUM. The informal interviews I conducted at these meetings allowed me to compare what was happening in the two power stations I was working in with what was happening in power stations in other parts of the country. I also gained an insight into how shop stewards were being trained, particularly with regard to the ‘political education’ they received. In July 2007 I attended the wage negotiations between the trade unions (NUM, Solidarity and NUMSA) and Eskom during which time as a guest on NUM’s negotiations team and I was privy to the discussions between NUM shop stewards and officials, as well as the discussions between the unions. In addition to this, I attended the Mpumalanga shop stewards councils of COSATU as a whole, as well as May Day celebrations, which I shared long journeys to with workers and shop stewards from the power stations. In order to gain an insight into the local ANC activism of NUM shop stewards I accompanied some of them to 3 local ANC branch meetings\(^6\) including a Branch Executive Committee meeting in the centre of Witbank.

1.4.3 Why Eskom?

First, Eskom was chosen as a field site primarily because of the diversity of its workforce. Interviews were conducted with a broad range of workers: the NUM predominantly represents blue-collar manual workers in the power stations but it also organises skilled professionals such as artisans and engineers as well as white-collar workers in administrative, secretarial and managerial positions. My sample thus reflected this diversity, which offers weight to the findings, because Eskom’s workforce reflects a diverse range of the permanent\(^7\), full-time South African workforce as a whole.

\(^6\) It was extremely difficult to attend more meetings than this, simply because the ANC branches did not meet frequently in that area.

\(^7\) NUM has been considerably less successful at organising the casual and informal workers, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters.
Second, I chose Eskom because of its important position within the South African economy and its central role in service provision. The South African economy is considered to be uniquely dependent on electricity (Fine and Rustomjee 1996: 8; Gentle 2009). The industry itself has been through a turbulent few years due to the energy supply crisis that led to rolling blackouts, euphemistically referred to by Eskom as ‘load shedding’. The consumption of electricity lies at the heart of debates about service delivery and transformation in the post-apartheid era (see Egan and Wafer 2006; Gentle 2009) and in this vein McDonald forcefully argues that ‘ongoing inequalities in electricity access reveal just how uneven capitalist development has been in post-apartheid South Africa and how electricity provision exemplifies the inherently unequal nature of neo-liberal market economies’ (McDonald 2009b: 1). The electricity is also central to the debates around sustainable energy use and climate change in South Africa (see McDonald et al 2009a). For this reason, I placed particular emphasis on finding out workers’ attitudes towards the struggles surrounding electricity provision, particularly examples of movements that have reverted to illegal means to reconnect residents to the national power grid, much to the chagrin of Eskom itself.

1.4.4 Why NUM?

NUM was chosen as an appropriate case study because it has historically been the largest and most politically significant trade union in South Africa. The history of NUM, particularly its struggles in the mining sector, has been well documented and space does not permit an extensive discussion here (Alexander 2000; Allen 2005; Crush et al 1991; Johnsone 1976; Moodie 1994). It will suffice to say that NUM played a critical role in the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly in the 1980s, and NUM leaders played an instrumental role in building the ANC’s branch organisation in South Africa after its
leadership returned from exile (Allen 2007). At present, with its 317,000 members8, NUM maintains an unrivalled level of political access in all three Alliance organisations. The General Secretary of COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi, is originally from NUM and the Union has managed to consistently secure its influence within COSATU’s Central Executive Committee. Since the late 1980s its former leaders have assumed prominent positions within the ANC itself. NUM’s former General Secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa, was originally Nelson Mandela’s preferred choice to be his successor, and leaders such as Kgalema Motlanthe and Gwede Mantashe – both former General Secretaries of NUM – have held the powerful position of the Secretary General of the ANC and, in the case of the former, a brief stint as the President of the country. NUM’s leaders also continue to play prominent roles in the SACP’s Central Committee.

NUM is perhaps the most supportive of the ANC among COSATU’s affiliates, in part because of these present day linkages but also because of the central role NUM played in mobilising in the mines against apartheid which, with the migrant labour system and the presence of hostels, the NUM was able to do extremely effectively (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007). Because of its sheer size and significance, any change in the political course of NUM would represent a seismic shift in the South African political scene, even if it were to do so alone. Furthermore, any decision taken by COSATU with regard to a shift in political strategy without the support of NUM would likely cause severe fissures within the federation and would certainly pose questions as to the viability of such a formation and the cohesiveness of the labour movement as a whole.

8 As declared by its 13th National Congress
1.5 Setting the scene

1.5.1 Background to the field site: Nkangala

The main focus of my fieldwork was on the political attitudes of NUM members working in two Eskom power stations situated in the Nkangala district municipality of Mpumalanga, which is also where the majority of these workers reside. Most of the workers at Duvha live in the Emalahleni municipality, which includes Witbank (now formally renamed Emalahleni). Witbank\(^9\) is located about 140 km east of Johannesburg and the town itself has a population of just over 260,000 while the municipality as a whole – including Duvha Park and KwaGuqa where many workers actually live – has a population of around 430,000. The majority of workers at Arnot lived in or around Middelburg, about 30kms further east of Witbank, which forms part of the Steve Tshwete municipality and has a total population of around 180,000.

Figure 2: Map of the region.

![Map of the region](http://maps.google.com/)


---

\(^9\) I will refer to the town as Witbank for the rest of the thesis for the sake of continuity because this is how workers themselves referred to the town.
Figure 3: Nkangala District Municipality


Figure 4: Map of Witbank and Middelburg

Source: Google Maps http://maps.google.com/ accessed 08/06/2010

The two towns of Middleburg and Witbank developed as fairly typical apartheid towns with a white urban centre and large African townships in close proximity. Both towns are
home to sizeable steel industries and are surrounded by ever expanding coal mines which provide for the nearby power stations as well as the steel factories within the towns.

In terms of development indicators, official estimates\textsuperscript{10} suggest that unemployment in Nkangala has hovered between 19 and 24 per cent in the years between 2001 and 2007, consistently below the national average of around 23.6 per cent.\textsuperscript{11} In several respects, however, the Nkangala district is relatively deprived with regards to the provisions of basic services compared to other, more affluent areas with a high urban density such as Gauteng and also South Africa as a whole. Using the Statistics South Africa ‘Community Survey’ of 2007 I constructed a table using the data for a selection of these development indicators\textsuperscript{12}, such as the number of people in informal housing, access to basic utilities and consumer commodities and also the levels of consumer goods to present a snapshot of the relative affluence of the area (see table 1).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} I am using the revised Labour Force Survey statistics. These are the more conservative estimates. See the debate on the measure used in Bhorat 2004.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Statistics South Africa. 2008. ‘Labour Force Survey Historical Revision March Series 2001 to 2007’: 25 \url{http://www.statssa.gov.za/qlfs/docs/March_Series_Historical_revisions.pdf}
\end{itemize}
Table 1: Nkangala district compared with Gauteng and the national averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of residents with access to:</th>
<th>Nkangala</th>
<th>Gauteng</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electricity for lighting</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to piped water inside dwelling</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using pit latrine toilets</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse removed by local authority/private company</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in informal dwellings</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell phone in the household</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Access</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fridge</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This very brief overview suggests that in terms of basic infrastructure, the Nkangala district is less well developed than other areas of South Africa, particularly in comparison to an urban centre like Gauteng. With respect to household consumption patterns, however, it appears from the Community survey that Nkangala households enjoy a degree of parity with Gauteng and also with the rest of South Africa. As I will discuss more in chapter 6, this was reflected in Eskom workers’ evaluations of their standard of living, which they said was largely hampered by the shortcomings of local service delivery.
1.5.2 Background to Eskom

The Electricity Supply Commission (Escom) was established in 1923 by the then government. In 1987, however, the apartheid state amended existing legislation governing the electricity industry and abolished the Commission. In its place a new parastatal, Eskom (a portmanteau of its Afrikaans acronym with the original) came into being. According to Gentle (2009), the change from Escom to Eskom ‘marks a radical rupture’ as the former legislation which stipulated that electricity should be supplied ‘in the public interest’ and that the Commission’s operations should be carried out at ‘neither a profit nor at a loss’ were scrapped:

This corporatisation perpetrated by the apartheid state in its neo-liberal phase (circa 1987) has been carried forward under the ANC government since 1994, leading to the Eskom Conversion Act of 2001 which saw Eskom become an entity on the JSE Limited, offering shareholder value to its sole shareholder – the South African state – and paying dividends and taxes. (Gentle 2009: 49)

Currently, Eskom is a profitable\textsuperscript{13} parastatal divided into three divisions: ‘Generation’, ‘Transmission’ and ‘Distribution’.\textsuperscript{14} Eskom provides 98 per cent of South Africa’s electricity and generates more than 50 per cent of the electricity produced in Africa, making it the world’s eleventh largest power utility in terms of generating capacity (Accenture 2007). It comprises 24 power stations, which are spread across South Africa, although the majority are located near to the coal-rich areas east of Johannesburg (see figure 5).

\textsuperscript{13} Eskom has made a profit every year apart from 2008, during which time it invested heavily in new generation capacity because of the load shedding crisis.

\textsuperscript{14} Although there are currently plans for a large restructuring of its distribution functioning.
Figure 5: Map of Eskom power stations

5.3 Trade union organisation in the power stations

Eskom currently employs around 32,000 workers with just under 10,000 of these working in the power stations themselves. In terms of its industrial relations, Eskom currently recognises three unions in the industry: NUM, the National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA), and Solidarity. Union density in Eskom is high, owing in large part to the agent-shop arrangement in place in the union recognition agreement. With the membership figures available, roughly half of Eskom employees are members of NUM, which is the largest union organising in Eskom with around 16,000 members. Solidarity, with a mainly white membership, is the second largest union with 8,000 members and NUMSA, another COSATU affiliate, is the smallest union with 6,000 members.

The two power stations which I focused my fieldwork on were Duvha and Arnot, each with 900 and 800 workers respectively. Duvha has 401 NUM members, making up 44.5 per cent of the total workforce, and Arnot has 450 members, 56.2 per cent of the total workforce (Table 2). The map I created below (Figure 6) illustrates the location of Duvha (the red pin) 15 kms east of Witbank, while Arnot is marked out by the yellow pin and is located approximately 50kms east of Middelburg.

---


16 Although this is set to change once the industry is restructured to include Regional Electricity Distributors (REDs) which will incorporate municipal workers organised by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) into the Eskom workforce.

17 An agent shop arrangement involves all members of the workforce being deducted a percentage of their wage by the company if they are not in a union which is divided between the recognised unions. This kind of agreement attempts to override the ‘free rider’ problem where non-union members benefit from wage agreements negotiated by the unions without financially contributing to the unions themselves.

Table 2: NUM membership figures for 8 power stations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power station</th>
<th>Total power station workforce&lt;sup&gt;19&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>NUM membership&lt;sup&gt;*20&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>NUM membership as per cent of workforce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arnot</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duvha</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendrina</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendal</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kriel</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matla</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutuka</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: The location of the two power stations

Source: Map created using ‘My Maps’ function on Google Maps


<sup>20</sup> These figures were provided for me by the NUM full time shop steward, Joe Skosana

CHAPTER 2

‘A VICTIM OF OUR VICTORY’:
HOW AN ASPIRATIONS CULTURE IS CHALLENGING
THE FOUNDATIONS OF WORKING CLASS
SOLIDARITY IN NUM

Introduction
According to certain authors, the ANC’s neo-liberal project is directly at odds with the interests of South Africa’s black majority, and despite the euphoria greeting the first elections, the ‘fog’ of an ‘exhausted nationalism’ is gradually beginning to lift and is revealing the deep-seated structural inequalities in South African society that constitute a new form of ‘class apartheid’ (Alexander 2002; Bond 2003; see also Marais 1998; 2011). Scholars have drawn attention to a new, class-based politics that challenges the ANC’s nationalist discourses (Ballard et al 2006; Barchiesi 2004; Bond 2003; Desai 2002). Given the centrality of trade unions in many of the political struggles against colonialism, authoritarianism and neo-liberalism across Africa (see Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Kraus et al 2007), and the fact that COSATU represents the largest and most organised section of South African civil society, it can be argued that such class-based politics will find little traction without the involvement of COSATU, a prerequisite for which, would be the break up of its Alliance with the ANC itself. According to some, COSATU must ultimately look to form an electoral alternative to the ANC in order to introduce ‘substantive uncertainty’ into South Africa’s dominant party system, without which the ANC’s nationalist project will continue unchallenged and the goals of socioeconomic transformation will go unmet (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002; Legassick 2007).
The following three chapters will use the case study of the attitudes of NUM workers in Eskom to illustrate the changing composition of class politics in South Africa and the dynamics of class formation that have occurred in the post-apartheid period. While a great deal of attention has been drawn towards the formation of a new black upper class of so-called ‘black diamonds’ (for example Gumede 2005: 215-234), other scholars have drawn attention to the increasingly stark gap between the organised working class and South Africa’s ‘underclass’ of unemployed and rural poor (Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Seekings 2004). However, this chapter will illuminate the increasing diversity within the organised working class itself (Crankshaw 1997). In doing so, it will assess some of the potential obstacles facing COSATU and its affiliates if they attempt to mount a political challenge to the ANC.

In particular, this chapter will explore internal class cleavages within the unions that complicate, and potentially obfuscate, the prospects for a coherent ‘working class’ political programme becoming union movement’s raison d’être. It will examine how Employment Equity and Affirmative Action policies – which NUM had originally struggled for in the early 1990s – have had unintended consequences for the Union itself. While these policies have opened up opportunities for the workers which NUM represents, the manner in which workers are grasping at these opportunities has, in some cases, eroded the organisational cohesion of the Union and undermined its working class identity.

First, the chapter will explore how a class divide is emerging within the Union. NUM’s membership constitutes an increasingly diverse but also fragmented demographic: while some workers have greater resources available to them in terms of human and social capital and have been able to grasp the new opportunities available to them in the post-apartheid era, other sections of the workforce have been ‘left behind’ by these developments. This has opened up what workers and shop stewards regularly refer
to as a generational divide, but what more accurately reflects a growing class divide within the Union rooted in unequal levels of mobility between the (generally younger) relatively well-educated and skilled sections of the workforce and the (generally older) manual ‘labourers’.

Second, the chapter will explicate how it is widely perceived that these ‘two worlds in the same organisation’ – to use one official’s term (interview with Job Matspe 25/04/08) – are perceived to have very different attitudes towards participation within Union structures. The first ‘world’ - the upwardly mobile skilled workers - generally engage with NUM in an apathetic, depoliticised and instrumental fashion, treating the Union as an ‘ambulance service’ that they call out for assistance when faced with an individual ‘emergency’, such as a disciplinary hearing. The second ‘world’ claim to be more representative of the ‘traditions’ of collective action and solidarity in NUM and these less socially mobile, and less skilled workers, are more likely to frame union activism as a social obligation rather than being subject to individual discretion. These emerging divisions have augmented mistrust and suspicion within NUM’s membership and have not only eroded collective solidarities, they have also contributed to declining levels of worker activism within the Union.

Third, and finally, I will explore how NUM’s structures, and in particular the position of shop steward, has increasingly been seen as a stepping stone into supervisory or management positions. This phenomenon has been met with ambivalence among the rank-and-file members: while on the one hand it has brought them benefits (often in the form of more ‘sympathetic’ management), on the other, it has compromised the class integrity of NUM structures by inducing careerist approaches to union activism by making union positions ‘prizes’ for individual advancement.

In the course of the chapter I will argue that it is vital to study the grassroots experiences of class formation in the post-apartheid era, and the impacts these have on
The act defines black people as Africans, Coloureds and Indians.

A parastatal is a company that is owned and controlled wholly or partly by the government.

trade union organisation, if we are to understand the scope for, and possible limitations upon, a new class-based politics emerging to challenge the ANC’s nationalist project and single party dominance. I will conclude that the growing stratification of the organised working class could well, in future, produce an array of competing political impulses within this demographic: while some of the less skilled workers would perhaps be better represented by a radical socialist politics, the increasingly affluent and aspirational layer of skilled workers are actually well accommodated by, and identify with, the ANC as a party of aspirations.

2.1 The new opportunity structures of deracialised capitalism

2.1.1 Employment equity in Eskom

In the post-apartheid era companies operating in South Africa have had to adjust to a rapidly transforming social and legal environment heralded by the ANC government’s promotion of employment equity and affirmative action policies. Through these polices, and in particular through new legislation such as The Employment Equity Act (Rep of South Africa 1998), the government has sought to ensure that the legacies of apartheid in the South African workplace would be redressed. The Act attempts to achieve this through the promotion of affirmative action policies in order to increase the opportunities available to the black population. One of the most noticeable results has been the rapid increase in the number of black managers and executives, which conforms to part of the ANC government’s vision of societal transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Eskom and other parastatal companies were under considerable pressure to become forerunners in terms of employment equity and affirmative action policies in the
early 1990s. The company acknowledged the need to change its organisational culture, including the transformation of the workplace. Eskom articulated its new vision, developed with the trade unions, in the document ‘A Vision Unfolding: the Path to Power’ (Eskom 1992a) which subsequently formed the basis of the ‘Unfolding Vision Agreement’ (Eskom 1992b) between the trade unions and Eskom. In the 1990s Eskom repeatedly stressed its commitment not only towards affirmative action, but also ‘to encourage a culture of participation, involvement, transparency and movement towards democratic workplace practices and relationships’ (Eskom 1997). The ‘Unfolding Vision’ document therefore marked a shift away from the paternalistic and autocratic management culture that had pervaded Eskom during the apartheid era and lay the ground for more cooperative forms of management in which the unions would play a key role in workplace transformation in the post-apartheid era (Swanepoel 2008). It also paved the way for the advancement of black workers into positions of management at all levels of the company including, quite notably, the Board of Directors itself.

NUM officials, from national office bearers through to regional leadership and members of the Branch Executive Committees (BECs), held an extremely positive view of Eskom with respect to its affirmative action and employment equity policies. The view that Eskom was relatively exceptional in terms of the early start it made in the transformation of its workplaces and its commitment to affirmative action policies, was widespread among NUM’s national leadership. They said that Eskom had led the way on these issues and that this was reflected in the number of management, senior management and positions on the Board of Directors being filled by black workers (Interviews with Oupa Komane 20/11/07 and Frans Baleni 06/11/07).

2.1.2 Uneven equity: the emerging mobility divide among NUM members in Eskom
The manner in which Eskom has increasingly ‘outsourced’ the ‘non core’ functions performed by workers in the power stations to independent ‘contractors’ has meant that officials perceived that Eskom no longer hires manual workers, or ‘labourers’. As a result of this, any young ‘labourers’ working in the power stations are not being hired directly by the company and as a result do not form part of NUM’s membership. Hence it is often seen that the vast majority of younger workers entering into the workplace and who are becoming members of the Union are skilled and well educated workers.
though they felt their greater experience in the job made them more ‘skilled’ than their younger counterparts - particularly females\textsuperscript{24} - because they did not ‘understand the job’ as well as they did. Older workers contrasted their predicament of being stuck in low-paid, low-skilled and vulnerable jobs in Eskom with the relative mobility of the younger workers who could use their qualifications to advance in Eskom or to ‘escape’ to better paid jobs in the nearby mines, which they considered to be too physically demanding or required greater skills than they possessed. During one of the group interviews I conducted with workers who were all in their mid-fifties or older, they complained that

You see at Eskom there is a problem. If you are not educated, you are nothing, you are rubbish. But you see I built this power station and I have been here [for a] long, long [time]. I am old. These young educated guys they come here now and get everything…

At which point another one of the group added:

When they come in the plant they go straight past me and talk to managers and they forget about me, they call me madala – old man – they push me, and they say I must go home. (Group interview with Eskom workers 21/12/07)

This sense of being ‘pushed around’ in the workplace was widespread among some of the older, less-skilled workers who felt deeply alienated and, in some cases, embarrassed by what they saw as the ‘arrogance’ of their younger, more skilled counterparts. Generally, they expressed feeling left behind because Employment Equity policies had unevenly benefited their skilled counterparts and that deracialised capitalism had done little to improve their own mobility. This provoked sentiments of frustration and also resignation towards the company, who they said ‘ignored’ them, and also towards the NUM which, they argued, was neglecting its duties of attending to their needs.

It was common for the more skilled NUM members to recognise their relative privilege. Lindelani, for example, was a skilled worker in his early twenties with Matric qualifications and also a technical diploma. He was hired by Eskom a few years

\textsuperscript{24} It was sometimes said that ‘these young ladies’ or ‘the young wives’ should not be coming into the workforce and telling the older male workers what to do because it was considered ‘disrespectful’.
previously and, following his training, was already hopeful of promotions in the future. He argued that the greater opportunities available to the younger, more skilled sections of the workforce were creating feelings of resentment within NUM’s membership and was therefore ‘dividing the workers’ because:

It makes some workers think that they are better than others. So from my side, in terms of my salary, I feel like I am better than them [lower skilled members]. What you find is that some of us guys have qualifications that we can use around Eskom [to get a promotion] or even outside [the company in other industries] so that is why we feel different from them. I feel that I have the confidence to take my qualifications and go somewhere else [to get a job] if I need to. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

While the majority of younger workers discussed the predicament of older workers in a sympathetic fashion, some were notably dismissive of the ‘resentment’ they encountered from older workers. In particular, newly employed supervisors or line managers reported that they encountered ‘old fashioned’ attitudes among older workers who resented being told what to do by their younger contemporaries.

However, there were also large numbers of black workers who would be considered to be in the ‘older’ age demographic, but who had nonetheless advanced extremely successfully in the post-apartheid period and who were now in positions of middle and senior management. There were also, of course, younger workers who had little prospects for social mobility. Therefore, while this was framed as a generational divide by workers themselves, it really reflected an emerging class divide characterised by a growing sense of mistrust and animosity between workers with greater mobility prospects and those without. Crucially, as I will now elucidate, this divide was undermining the class integrity of NUM itself, which has important political implications.
2.2 The ‘generational’ divide in the Union and the changing culture of Union participation

2.2.1 The spatial dynamics of working in Eskom

While employment equity policies were certainly leading to greater heterogeneity among NUM’s membership in terms of social mobility, in reality they only served to exacerbate divisions that already existed in what was already a highly stratified worksite. The sheer diversity of Eskom’s workforce makes it fairly unique, in the South African context, for such a large-scale national industry. NUM’s membership in Eskom reflects this diversity and, indeed, as I will elucidate below, the Union’s strategy is premised on providing representation to a broad range of workers from the blue collar, manual workers (the ‘labourers’) right through to senior management, including power station managers. While, therefore, many industrial sociologists who have studied union activity among African railway workers (Jeffries 1978) or mine workers (see Allen 2007), and have identified a certain degree of camaraderie among workers that is produced and reproduced within the particular spatialities of those worksites and the jobs performed by workers, the defining characteristic of Eskom’s workforce (and NUM’s membership) is this diversity.

Eskom’s workforce in the power stations is predominantly composed of manual workers of varying skill levels; the vast majority of desk-based administrative work is carried out in the administrative centres away from the power stations themselves. The main jobs performed by NUM members, at least among my sample, are low-skilled and semi-skilled blue-collar roles, such as utility workers, boiler workers, and other general maintenance staff.25 These workers in the stations wear blue overalls and white helmets, which is the standard attire for manual labourers in Eskom. There are, however, a large number of less skilled workers who wear various different types of clothing, such as low-

---

25 I’m using the terms used by workers themselves. When I began each interview workers were asked what their role was.
level administrators, security guards, caterers and gardeners. More senior workers, including higher grade technicians and engineers, generally wear branded Eskom clothing, such as shirts and caps, with jeans or shorts. Some of the artisans, engineers and managers who are more office-bound where smart office clothes, such as shirts and trousers. There is thus a very visual distinction between the various strata of NUM’s membership, one that is accentuated by the diversity of the job roles they perform and the spatial dynamics of the power stations.

The sheer size of the power station means that NUM’s members will rarely encounter one another on a day-to-day level as most workers are separated into teams located in specific areas of the station. While some workers, notably supervisors and technicians, will, as part of their job requirement, travel around the worksite, the majority of NUM’s members will only encounter one another in passing at the end of the shift or in the canteen at the very most. Manual, low skilled workers unlikely to encounter managers and the higher skilled staff on a day-to-day level as the latter are more likely to remain in their offices than to constantly tour the station, which is largely left to workers in supervisory positions. NUM’s membership in the power stations is thus not only diverse but also spatially separated in the workplace, both visually, in terms of the uniforms they wear, and also physically due to the sheer scale of the worksites and the diverse roles that these workers are playing.

This separation is reinforced by the large disparities in the salaries earned by NUM’s members. Those in the lowest job grades, who constituted the majority of those interviewed, can expect to earn around 65-70,000 Rand,\textsuperscript{26} while those in more skilled professions, such as artisans and senior technicians, could expect to earn at least double this figure. Some of the engineers and senior managers that NUM also represents could

\textsuperscript{26} These figures are estimated using the collective wage agreement signed by NUM and the other unions in 2007.
also expect to earn four or five times as much as those workers on the lowest pay scales. These disparities within the power station, which are reproduced daily through the spatial separation of workers in the power station, are also reflected outside of work through the noticeably divergent consumption patterns exhibited by the different strata of workers. Employment equity policies have thus contributed to the stratification of NUM’s membership as more workers are able to take on jobs in higher salary grades than would have been possible a decade and a half before. This, as we will now see, had important consequences for the Union’s organisation.

2.2.2 Changing trends in union participation

Shop stewards and NUM officials right up to the national leadership regarded the declining participatory culture within the Union, evident in falling attendance rates at Union meetings (detailed in the next chapter), as the largest and most significant challenge that NUM faced. The mobility divide discussed above had important implications for the nature of workers’ participation within NUM’s structures. Once again, although this was framed as a generational divide, it is more accurate to understand the differences in workers’ attitudes towards participation within the Union’s structures as being determined by the differences in attitudes between the higher skilled workers with greater mobility and the lower skilled workers. In this respect, Job Matshepe, the NUM’s National Organiser for the electricity industry, identified what he believed to be ‘two worlds in the same organisation’ which held distinctly different attitudes towards the Union and how they should participate within it. The first comprised the (generally younger), better educated and skilled sections of the workforce and the second comprised the (generally older), less skilled manual ‘labourers’ (Interview with Job Matshepe 25/04/08). Union officials at all levels agreed that the more skilled workers
were generally\textsuperscript{27} were less likely to attend union meetings and this perception was not only shared by workers themselves, it was confirmed in their attitudes towards participating in the Union and by my observations at meetings.

One commonly cited reason for the ‘younger’, more skilled sections of the workforce to not get involved was that they generally had a more individualistic attitude. This can be partly explained by the fact that they are less dependent on the Union to improve their livelihoods than their less skilled peers are: unlike the lower paid manual labourers who were almost completely dependent on the collective bargaining of NUM to improve their salaries, training prospects and general wellbeing in the workplace, the skilled sections of the workforce were often able to pursue their interests individually. A member of the Branch Committee at Arnot power station remarked that this was something that branches across the country had been discussing at shop stewards’ councils and that

\begin{quote}
You only find these old people attending the meetings and it looks like they are the only motive force now because the young people they come and they are well-educated and they get placed in nice positions. [Whereas] the old people they are still struggling with the salaries and everything and they will not get the manager coming to say [to them individually] that ‘I want to increase your salary by this amount and all that’; they only receive incremental salary increases whereby the unions have negotiated that particular amount of increment. So it’s very disappointing. It’s the same situation at Duvha [power station] and I guess even at Kriel [power station] where we only get the old people attending meetings. So the older comrades are the only motive force behind the Union at this time. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)
\end{quote}

This is not to suggest that the more skilled workers simply ‘have it easy’, although they are clearly ‘privileged’ compared to their less skilled counterparts and broad sections of South Africa’s black majority who are unemployed, in casual work or mired in rural poverty (see Seekings and Natrassa 2005). What is important to emphasise here is that their capacity for social mobility makes them better equipped to ‘navigate’ the challenges of living in post-apartheid South Africa as individuals, and this makes them less

\textsuperscript{27} Although in general they were seen to be less involved, there were some notable exceptions and while some of the more senior shop stewards argued that this was because they had received the correct ‘political education’ and therefore ‘understood’ the Union properly (Interview with Joe Skosana 16/05/08)
dependent on the kinds of collective solidarities that made this social mobility possible in the first place.

Indeed, labour analysts have pointed to the difficulties that COSATU’s affiliates have found when attempting to mobilise the growing number of skilled members they represent, who place different demands on their unions than the low-skilled workers that formed the majority of their membership back in the 1980s and early 1990s (Webster and Buhlunu, 2004). As the skilled workers are less reliant on the Union’s collective bargaining efforts, they are generally less likely to attend Union meetings, even during wage negotiations. As a result, shop stewards often said that the more skilled ‘youngsters’ engaged in the Union in an passive, individualistic manner, rather than displaying the kind of enthusiasm for collective activism supposedly displayed by former ‘generations’. It was often alleged – in a range of metaphors – that these workers treated the union as an ‘ambulance service’, which they would only ‘call out’ in the case of a personal emergency, such as when they faced an individual disciplinary hearing. The full time shop steward, Joe Skosana, said that more skilled members entering the Union increasingly treated it as a professional legal service which was there for advice and representation – should the need arise - and that they did not see the broader importance of the Union:

If you look we’ve got managers who are [NUM] members who are very high up in the company. They treat the union as a laissez faire sort of thing - you just pay subscriptions and when you’ve got problems the Union must sort them out for you. They’re not there to assist the organisation itself, the Union. They say the Union is a body that is responsible for resolving his issues or her issues individually. That’s a problem because some of them they can assist us in a number of issues [by engaging in Union structures] but they are not there for the organisation, they just look after themselves. (Interview with Joe Skosana 16/05/08)

In this respect, shop stewards and officials in NUM would often relay to me the difficulty they faced in trying to draw some of the more qualified workers into meetings and they explained that this was usually down to them being more concerned with their own career advancement, and were sometimes wary that becoming too heavily involved with the Union was a potential ‘distraction’ and something that consumed too much of
their time28 (Interview with Eskom worker 25/04/08). This was something that the more skilled workers themselves complained about. They said that they would be told or ‘reminded’ by management that it was not in their interests to ‘waste time’ becoming actively involved in NUM structures. When meetings are held during working hours, as they are at Duvha, workers in skilled positions, or who were supervisors or managers, protested that they could not be ‘irresponsible’ and leave their posts to come to the meeting. Furthermore, they said they felt pressured to leave their job to attend a meeting because their managers would accuse them of prioritising the Union ahead of their career.

The general feeling among ‘older’, less skilled workers and, indeed, shop stewards and officials, was therefore that the ‘younger’, more skilled members of NUM, simply did not share the sense of collective solidarity that they were ‘supposed’ to. Although less skilled workers did not necessarily begrudge other workers getting promoted, they often passed extremely negative judgement on what was widely depicted as the individualistic and materialistic consumption patterns of ‘younger’ workers who, it was often alleged, were more concerned with ‘buying nice things’ than being dutiful comrades in the Union. Skilled and well-educated workers form an increasingly large proportion of the workforce represented by COSATU’s affiliates and that these workers do indeed have a capacity to consume which distinguishes them from their counterparts in the 1980s (Buhlungu et al 2006a; Cherry 2006). The skilled section of the workforce organised by NUM in Eskom are no different in that sense: while some of the manual labourers in the lower pay grades complained about the difficulty to simply ‘get by’, the more skilled workers – particularly the younger ones – were more likely to complain about their incapacity to afford ‘nice

28 This was something that some of the skilled workers themselves said about the Union. They would sometimes allege that their management put pressure on them not to ‘spend too much time’ on Union business.
cars’ or other consumer items than they were to frame their day-to-day existence as being characterised by hand-to-mouth subsistence.

Unlike previous generations, who were often forced to live in hostels when working in the power stations, the younger generation of skilled Eskom workers had grown up without these restrictions on their lifestyles and their patterns of consumption were markedly different from their (generally older), less skilled peers in the power stations. They were not only exposed to multi-racial schooling during their education, they were also more likely to have White or Indian friends and to socialise in racially diverse settings such as shopping malls. Their consumption is also markedly different from older generations in terms of the way in which they described spending their money while socialising and aspired to purchase branded clothing, for example. What was also noticeable was that while lower skilled workers often described being ‘stuck’ in Eskom, the more skilled workers were better able to articulate quite elaborate plans for where they saw themselves in future, and would often assert that they would, sooner or later, leave Eskom to find better paid work elsewhere.

The more skilled ‘youngsters’ were criticised by ‘politically educated’ shop stewards and the lower skilled workers for being obsessed with material possessions and pursuing what was widely framed as a hedonistic lifestyle. As one shop steward remarked, this different approach to life had knock on effects for how they engaged in NUM structures:

> There is a difference [between the generations]. I’m not sure how to put this but maybe you see these young people are involved more in drugs, liquor and all these things. In terms of participating [in the Union] there are some who participate but not like in the past. You don’t find

---

29 Although most said that they only began mixing with other racial groups if they got as far as post-matric levels of education and training.
30 I found this out from speaking to some of the younger generation about their lifestyles and by spending time with them in the places where they would hang out, which often involved trips to Nandos in shopping malls. It is also worth noting that outside of the workplace, the younger generation are more likely to where designer label clothing such as branded trainers (‘takkies’) and sunglasses.
31 Something that is noticeable at union gatherings such as May Day but also in shop stewards councils.
them participating that much like the 1976 youth32 [would in the Union]. They have stopped participating so the interest [in the Union] is really going down, I must say. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

This ‘difference’ in the way ‘younger’ workers approached the Union was identified as something apparent across the NUM’s organisation in other industries and other parts of the country. It was a dynamic that Piet Matosa, the NUM’s Regional Chair, said was being discussed at a national level because:

It is something that is widespread. And I think we should be worried about what do we teach the young ones and the youth joining the unions. Now Alex you will remember that in South Africa the political climate has dramatically changed. I joined the mining industry as I’ve said when a certain group of people were not allowed to be members of a trade union and oppression was the game of the day. Now there is no more apartheid; people are no more beaten [anymore]. At times it is difficult to identify the enemy. The drop in Union meeting attendance is [because] the type of people that are joining the industry don’t have the same problems that we had when we were joining the industry. Something what I think is driving these young guys is possession. Possession in terms of what do I own as an individual, what do I want as an individual. (original emphasis, interview with Piet Matosa 27/05/08)

To an extent, it might come as no great surprise that Eskom workers, particularly the more skilled ones, do not see engagement within union structures as being of central importance in their working lives: these workers are much less bound by a sense of moral obligation to engage in a collective ‘struggle’ than some of the older, less skilled workers, particularly those who had lived through the liberation struggle. The avenues of upward mobility available to the more skilled workers means that they are no longer dependent on the union to secure their livelihoods, even though the very fact that they now have such opportunities owes a great deal to the ‘victories’ fought for by NUM itself. Furthermore, while the identity of being a ‘good comrade’ back in the 1980s might have been a potentially desirable social identity to aspire towards, the unprecedented capacity of the more skilled workers to consume offers them the opportunity to express their social identities in a range of contexts through their consumption patterns (Bauman 2007; Bocock 1993). As a result, the social acclamation of being a ‘good comrade’ in the Union is not necessarily a central element of their identity formation.

32 The ‘1976 youth’ is refers to what is recounted by Union members – and in South African literature more broadly – as the younger generation of activists that emerged on the political scene following the Soweto uprising of 1976.
2.3 Competing class interests within Union structures

3.1 The structures of the Union: vehicles of working class power or ‘stepping stones’ of personal advancement?

The end of apartheid offered unprecedented opportunities for the organisations that were formerly involved in the national liberation struggle to engage with the state. This has fundamentally transformed the manner in which some of these organisations operate, a point I will discuss with reference to the unions in Chapter 4. This engagement, however, created opportunities for activists as many of these organisations became increasingly professionalised, for example with the creation of full time positions for senior figures (Friedman and Reitzes 1996; Seekings 2000). Scholars have commented on how a ‘race to riches’ has affected the organisational dynamics within the various branches of the liberation movement, in both the ANC (Butler 2007; Cronin 2005; Lodge 2004; Motlanthe 2005; Southall 2008) and SANCO (Seekings 1997; 2000; Zuern 2001; 2006) as leading positions within these movements increasingly represent secure forms of employment and/or stepping stones into lucrative jobs in the private sector. In this respect, Buhlunlu notes that this has also affected the trade unions because:

[T]he opening up or deracialisation of society triggered class formation on a scale that has no precedent in black South African history. Activists of the struggle period were catapulted into new positions of power and high remuneration without the stigma that was associated with those positions in the days of apartheid. These processes of class formation were part of the context within which unions were operating and they shaped developments within the union movement. (Buhlunlu 2002a: 15)

Labour analysts have highlighted how the pressures on the unions to engage within the institutional spaces available to them in the post-apartheid period has led to the ascendance of an elite ‘professional’ bureaucratic layer of union officials which has led to increasingly top-down decision making and the gradual depoliticisation of union activity (Buhlunlu 2002a: 5; Lehulere 2003: 38; Maree 1998: 35). Buhlunlu, for example, argues that ‘processes of organisational modernisation in a context of political transition and integration of South Africa into the global economy’ has led to a changing role for union
officials ‘manifested by the disappearance of the activist organiser and the emergence of new types of union officials’ (Buhlangu 2002a: 3). He argues that there has been a decline in the politically-driven ‘activist organisers’ of old and a growth of ‘career unionists’, who want to make a lifetime career out of their union work, and the ‘entrepreneur unionists’ who want to use union positions as stepping stones to promotions (2002a).

It is also possible to witness similar processes of class formation within the unions at the workplace level. One of the more complex issues arising out of the opportunities created by Employment Equity policies, for example, has been the phenomenon of NUM shop stewards being promoted into supervisory and management positions in Eskom. This is an issue affecting COSATU affiliates in other industries (see for example Von Holdt 2002). It has long been noted that shop stewards in the UK find themselves in a contradictory location between management and union members, and that they are usually required to take on a mediating role between the two (Lane 1974). In this respect, Webster notes how the post-apartheid era led to new pressures being exerted on shop stewards because they are no longer simply there to ‘stir up trouble’ and have increasingly been required to play a ‘managerial function settling grievances’ (Webster 2001b: 197). As such, Webster contends that:

[T]he behaviour of shop stewards in South Africa cannot be fully understood without exploring how their identity in the workplace is shaped by the changing political context. The apartheid workplace nurtured strong, oppositional shop-floor structures and blocked the promotion of shop stewards; the abolition of political apartheid has led to a decline in shop-floor structures and the rapid promotion of key shop stewards. (Webster 2001b: 197)

The end of apartheid then, not only reconfigured the relationship between shop stewards and management, it also lifted any restrictions – whether legal or simply normative - on skilled (and usually charismatic) shop stewards taking up managerial positions.

The promotion of shop stewards is an extremely important issue because shop stewards in NUM, like in other unions, play a pivotal role in union organisation in

33 They are allowed to remain shop stewards even if this happens.
general. NUM shop stewards are the elected representatives of ordinary members in their section of the workforce, holding their post for a two-year term with the potential to be re-elected. The shop steward holds a unique position in the Union: they are responsible for, among other things, providing representation to members in disputes with management; for communicating union developments to the membership; and, in turn, communicating workers’ grievances and demands back to union officials. In short, they form the indispensable ‘connect’ between the Union and its membership base. As will be discussed in the next chapter, a great deal of attention is paid in the union literature to the democratic functioning of shop steward structures and it is seen as one of the crucial markers of democratic worker control and a check on the power of potentially oligarchic leaders (see Wood 2003).

The significance of shop steward promotions was brought to my attention by workers who would regularly raise the issue as a primary concern when given an open question about NUM’s performance at the local level. During my research I witnessed first hand, the promotion of one shop steward and one fulltime shop steward. I also heard countless tales from branch leaders and union officials of shop stewards that had been promoted, with varying perspectives on the impact this was having on the Union itself.

Regular members and also shop stewards would recount examples of the promotion of shop stewards in their workplace. Although some workers argued that they had not witnessed this phenomenon first-hand, they often interjected that they had heard from other workers that had, or they would argue that it was an issue at other Eskom worksites such as neighbouring power stations. Bulumko, for example, is a boiler worker at Duvha in his early sixties. He told me that he would like to become a shop steward himself ‘because I want to be helpful to the people’. He contrasted this with what he thought was actually motivating shop stewards. He said that the phenomenon of shop
stewards being promoted by Eskom was driven by personal ambitions and also the
tactical impulses of Eskom itself:

You see when most of the people, when they go to the union when they get to become the shop
steward, they get their own advantages, they’ve got their own interests, they want to get a better
job, they want to get a better position. And then you see that they are promoted and they get to a
managerial position. Eskom is buying them. Not all our shop stewards are like that. Not all, but
most of them. So it’s a big problem. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

Although he was unable to give an estimate as to how many times this had happened in
his workplace, Bulumko, like many of his counterparts, was adamant that this was a
widespread issue and one which, as we will see, they believed has great significance for
the Union.

Njabulu is a ‘utility man’ in the power station, where he has worked for over 20
years. He took the view that, in contrast with what had happened historically, shop
stewards often now utilise their position to pursue their career goals. He said that they
use union positions as

A career ladder. These people want to be shop steward because they are looking at their own
future. I’m not saying that I disagree with people who are shop stewards that they must not be
promoted but these people are wanting to be a shop steward because they know when you are a
shop steward management can give you any position so that you can stop talking too much or
what what. (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/07)

Becoming a shop steward then, according to Njabulu and some of his colleagues, was a
‘prize’ because Eskom would promote shop stewards in order to ‘silence them’ or ‘take
them to their side’, as was often said. In a similar vein Andile, who was an artisan\(^34\) and a
shop steward, suggested that shop steward positions were being used by some workers to
‘get in the eyes’ of management by putting themselves in ‘the shop window’ through
their engagement with managers. Like Njabulu, he was also critical of the attitudes of
some of what he framed as the current generation of shop stewards. He argued that such
shop stewards paid little attention to him and his colleagues:

Yeah I think this because you know some people want to be visible and just want to come to the
NUM to build a CV underneath [them] and they just want to work their way up and just to make

\(^{34}\) Workers referred to as ‘artisans’ within Eskom were generally skilled manual workers, for example
electricians, technicians or mechanics.
NUM a stepping-stone. Yeah, they don’t actually have an interest of defending workers’ rights. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

In a finding that contradicts the suggestion that all of the skilled section of the workforce were disengaged from the Union structures, it was clear that many of these shop stewards being promoted to management were skilled workers who were active in the Union’s structures. After all, in order to be promoted in the first place, an obvious prerequisite for this was that the worker would need some of the necessary skills required to perform in the position to which they were being promoted. Workers and officials generally reported that it was shop stewards who already had high skill levels that were being promoted, and that it wasn’t just because he or she was a shop steward per se. As the full time shop steward for Eskom in the Highveld region remarked, these workers were being ‘naturally’ promoted and that this would have happened whether or not he/she was a shop steward:

You see there is a difference now. In the old days you have got shop stewards who did not have much education so they could not advance up because of that. Now you’ve got a shop steward who might be a technician, some are even engineers. Now when that guy gets promoted it’s not because he’s a shop steward, it’s because he’s got the skills and the education. (Personal communication with Joe Skosana 21/04/09)

However, this perception was not shared by the majority of workers or shop stewards themselves. It was actually perceived that becoming a shop steward served, at the very least, to enhance your prospects for promotion. Piet Matosa, speaking as the Highveld Regional Chairperson at the time, and who is now the national Deputy President of the Union, said that this was something that happened nationally and across different sectors. He argued that workers who became shop stewards benefited from increasing levels of human capital through the skills and training they would get from NUM which it offered to all its newly elected shop stewards.35 It also increased their

35 NUM has a purpose-built facility in Johannesburg – the Elijah Barayi Memorial Training Centre – which offers education and training to shop stewards and leaders ranging from ‘political education’ through to the basics of employment law, negotiation tactics and the basics of employee representation and case work.
social capital by giving them a chance to interact with management and demonstrate their skills:

By engaging management on member problems obviously you are going to be noticed by management because now that you are working for a union and secondly, we always encourage that shop stewards should develop themselves and the union is taking them and sending them to [training] courses. Now it is obvious that the information they get sharpened in their way of thinking and the way they look at things and the way they reason. Now automatically a way of approaching things changes because of the understanding that they have. Unfortunately there is nobody that doesn’t want promotion. Now once you are identified by an employer, that ‘no, this guy is trainable, we can take him for further training’ our members get absorbed by the employers and unfortunately there is no way that the union can stop anyone from progressing. (Interview with Piet Matosa 22/05/08)

Becoming a shop steward was, in this sense, a means of accumulating social capital, understood as ‘the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119) through personal interactions and increasing familiarity with management.

The scale of this phenomenon of shop stewards being promoted to management positions is, however, difficult to quantify. Workers, just like their officials, found it difficult to offer any accurate and verifiable account of the numbers of times this happened. Some shop stewards and officials argued that this phenomenon was over-exaggerated and they also questioned whether becoming a shop steward was actually beneficial for workers’ career prospects, especially when considering the negative attitude of some power station management towards the unions and the manner in which shop stewards would be regarded with contempt rather than as candidates for promotion. While noting these caveats, the significance of this phenomenon – whatever its size – lies in the fact that it alters the manner in which the Union, and its structures, are perceived by ordinary workers. As I will now elaborate, their attitudes towards shop steward promotions are largely ambivalent.
2.3.2 The double-edged sword of upward mobility: the positive side

Survey evidence and analysis provided by the SWOP team suggests that workers are remarkably ambivalent about the phenomenon of shop steward promotion, with half of the workers surveyed agreeing with the statement that ‘it is acceptable for shop stewards to be promoted into management positions’ (Southall and Tangri 2006: 120-121). This kind of attitude was recognisable among Eskom workers who generally saw shop steward promotions as something of a double edged sword: while they were mindful of the potentially debilitating effects this process would have on union organisation, they nonetheless often framed it as a natural process and one that could potentially improve their own lives. They were often sympathetic towards their shop stewards’ aspirations of upward mobility. Trying to attain promotion through such means was broadly regarded as understandable, considering the material hardships that many black workers continued to face. One worker, Moses, for example, said that: ‘I’ve got 8 children and I’m earning 1,500 [Rand per week], this is why a shop steward take management position if given’ (Interview with Eskom Worker 10/12/07). It was often said that it was ‘natural’ for workers to want to ‘feed their families’ or ‘put bread on the table’. Workers would often say that they didn’t see anything wrong per se if a shop steward was promoted owing to his skills and ability and there were very few workers who begrudged their shop stewards being promoted simply because they were a shop steward. After all, as it was regularly pointed out to me, ‘shop stewards don’t elect themselves’ and workers said that they would re-elect shop stewards who had demonstrably performed for them, even if in the process they had been promoted to management positions.36

Furthermore, the promotion of shop stewards into management positions and, indeed, the presence of supervisors and management in the union structures in general,

36 Indeed, those shop stewards that I was in contact with who were promoted said that they would stand for re-election. NUM Regional Chairperson, Piet Matosa, for example, was continuously elected into positions within the Union despite formerly occupying a position in the mining company which he described as being ‘practically management’.
was not necessarily framed in a negative light, or as being inherently contradictory. Ordinary workers argued that seeing their comrades promoted was, in itself, reflective of a broader ‘victory’ of the transition from apartheid consolidated through having ‘their own’ representatives in positions of management. It was commonly expressed that ‘comrades’ who pursued their personal ambitions would, in some way or another, be able to ‘assist’ the members they were ‘leaving behind’. At the very least, workers hoped that having their own leaders promoted would ensure a more sympathetic ‘ear’ in management. It was regularly expressed that an understanding management would treat them better and ‘understand’ their plight. It was often said by shop stewards and officials that it was better to have these personal links with management because ‘you know this guy’ and that ‘you know you can influence him’ or that he would ‘give us a platform’ to speak to him or her.

Such a view was shared by the local shop steward branch executives as well as the regional and national leadership. According to this view, which was widely held among more senior shop stewards and Union officials, having shop stewards promoted into management was a way of increasing the influence of NUM in all sections of power station management. The Union’s own policy in this regard, something that was regularly recounted by these leaders, was that there was ‘no contradiction’ in a shop steward being promoted into a position of management *per se*.

I asked the full time shop steward, Joe Skosana, about Xolani, one of the shop stewards on the branch executive that I had interviewed who had been promoted into a management position during my time researching. I asked whether he was still an NUM member and, somewhat surprised, Joe replied that he was still active and was still visiting the regional offices on a regular basis. He explained that this was part of a broader strategy on the part of NUM to recruit new members and retain existing ones from management positions. He explained:
We have members who are very senior management, those who are even three job grades higher than [Xolanji]. I think it’s a policy of COSATU that we support managers being union members because then you have a manager who goes into the power station and he understands the workers issues and where we are coming from. So if you’ve got them there you can try to engage them in the forums.

*It is strategic*

You see that is what we think; you might be able to get the company to start implementing policies that are biased towards workers rather than trying to build from outside all of the time. It takes a lot to convince a company not to implement a policy that they agreed on if you are engaged only as an outsider. It is like the policy of the intelligence community – you plant your person in there, not to report everything back to you or anything but just to represent you in there as a mole. (Personal communication with Joe Škosana 21/04/09)

It short, it was argued that the union’s relationship with Eskom should not, and could not, be characterised simply by antagonism alone. What this reflects is the wider strategy taken by COSATU and its affiliates in the post-apartheid period. Instead of re-adopting a militant strategy of resistance towards management in the face of the ANC governments’ ‘neo-liberal’ turn, trade union strategy instead appears to be focused primarily on seeking reformist accommodations with management through a combination of continued mobilisation but complementing this with new strategies of infiltrating management structures that were previously off limits to the unions and their members. This strategy appears to be aimed at navigating, as best they can, the contours of capitalism within the post-apartheid setting, rather than pursuing their radical overhaul. What the ambivalent attitudes of workers towards shop stewards reflects, is that this strategy largely mirrors their own ‘coping strategies’ and does not reflect a bureaucratic union leadership that has become ‘detached’ from its (commonly assumed) more radical and uncompromising membership base, as is often highlighted by union analysts (Michels 1972).

*2.3.3 The double-edged sword of upward mobility: the negative side*

Sandbrook has examined how the close relationships between the trade union and the ruling party in Kenya, led union officials into taking political jobs after independence in pursuit of personal gain (1975: 182). In this respect, several commentators have pointed
to the sizeable ‘brain drain’ which COSATU experienced during and after the political transition as its national leaders took up high-level positions in the ANC, the government or in business (Buhlungu 2006: 12; Wood 2001). At the workplace level, the promotion of shop stewards into management positions has been regarded as a potential threat to collective solidarity and organisational strength in South Africa (Harcourt and Wood 2003: 96). Indeed, the process of shop stewards being promoted into positions of management is usually treated as a ‘problem’ for the unions, one which undermines their working class ethos and practically incapacitates the union through the flight of vital skills into management positions. In this respect a 2006 NALEDI report warns that:

Being a union leader, even at shop steward level, is potentially a stepping-stone to advancement. This has led to intensified contestation and political battles, which can potentially supplant union principles of solidarity and democracy with individualism and opportunism. This is further exacerbated by the politics of patronage and factionalism that are increasingly dominating the ANC… newer staff seeing trade unionism more as employment than a political calling. (NALEDI 2006: 29 see also Buhlungu 2002a; Bramble 2003)

In a similar way, Karl Von Holdt argues from his study of NUMSA organisation in Highveld Steel that:

The social identity of shop stewards was coming under pressure. Among shop stewards the ethos of collective solidarity, service to workers and commitment to struggle was dissolving. Increasingly, the shop steward committee was seen as a stepping-stone to opportunities for promotion or careers outside the factory, which undermined its traditional role as the representative of workers. Thus the broader process of class formation reached deep into the social structure of the union, undermining solidarity by recasting relationships, introducing new identities, and imbuing the shop steward committee with a different meaning. It became a platform for new aspirations and ambitions, which undermined its role as the accountable representative of workers in the workplace. (Von Holdt: 2002)

Southall and Tangri have raised fears that the SWOP surveys demonstrate that a ‘considerable degree of ambivalence’ might work against the collective strengths of workers in the long term if their most talented shop stewards are absorbed by management (2006: 121).

At a local and a national level it was felt that affirmative action, and the promotion of shop stewards in particular, had had some unintended negative

---

37 A research organisation which conducts research on behalf of the South African labour movement and has close ties with COSATU
consequences. Frans Baleni, the NUM’s General Secretary, remarked that this reflected one of the largest problems facing the union because they were now encountering senior managers – who had formerly been NUM members – that were more hostile towards the unions than their White counterparts because:

They have crossed the floor, and they are on the other side with management. For example the chief [wage] negotiator of Eskom was a branch chairperson of NUM. Now they tend to be more negative towards the Union because they fear that they must be seen from management side to have really crossed the bridge, that they are not still linked with the Union and so on and they become more difficult than the people who had no relationship with Unions [before]. (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07)

There was a sense that former union shop stewards who had gone into management were often ‘used’ by the management against the union because, it was often said, ‘they know all about us’. As mentioned before, it was widely believed that Eskom management had consciously sought to undermine the organisational integrity of the union by ‘buying’ shop stewards by using promotion as an incentive to certain shop stewards to ‘switch sides’ and take on a managerial role. This comes as no surprise, considering that trade unions around the world have encountered the dangers of their shop stewards being lured into supervisory or management roles, which Beynon describes as the ‘oldest trick in the book’ and as a management method of dividing shop stewards’ loyalties (quoted in Webster 2001b: 206).

Workers would often ask ‘what are you going to think?’ when their ‘strong men’ were being ‘bought’ by Eskom. Sizwe, for example, had worked in the power station for over 25 years, expressed how grateful he was to the Union and what it had done for him. He said that in his twenty years as an NUM member he was very happy with the way it was organised and recognised what it had done for him saying that ‘If they were not there maybe I could have been fired a long time ago’ (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07). However, Sizwe was wary of what he perceived to be the ‘biggest’ problem facing the union at present, one that was seriously disempowering the union in an
organisational sense. He, like many of his comrades, identified what he perceived to be
the ‘buying’ or ‘poaching’ of the best shop stewards by management:

The problem with the unions, what I can say is that the union must be very much cleverer to the
management because they are trying to recruit some of those active guys you see. They must be
very much careful of that because that’s not good. They just say “that guy’s the best, let’s take that
guy to an HR [human resources] position then we are going to hammer the employees”. As I said
the HR and the management they are forming a pact to get those strong guys to their side you
see? If the Union do not wake up they are going to be like Mathla power station where the union
has just been demolished [by this]. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

It was often believed that management would cherry-pick the ‘strong’ shop stewards.
However, Sizwe’s statement about Eskom management using newly-promoted shop
stewards to ‘hammer the employees’ was indicative of a broader perception that
management promoted strong union leaders not only to co-opt ‘trouble-makers’, but also
to use their knowledge of the union (and its weaknesses) against the organisation. Such a
perception was extremely widespread, and workers would raise their concerns that ‘they
know how we operate’ and that, as a result ‘they know how to kill us’.

If workers felt that these managers were undermining the Union is such ways
they would often say, contrary to the Union’s official position, that managers were ‘not
welcome’ and that they would ‘chase them out’ of Union meetings. This was because, as
one worker put it: ‘we will end up maybe saying like you are a sell out now’ (Interview
with Eskom worker 12/12/07). Although the Union leaders desperately sought to keep
managers within the Union’s ranks, it was sometimes said by workers that they could not
be trusted. Vusi, a long-serving utility worker said that the ‘old timers’ would ‘take action’
against these upwardly mobile shop stewards saying that at the next round of shop
steward elections: ‘If you step on the side of management we vote you out. We vote you
out. … because you are on the line of management’ (Interview with Eskom worker
11/12/07).

Although they were not necessarily resentful of their shop stewards having
ambitions, many workers were nonetheless resentful and hostile to those shop stewards
that were seen to have ‘forgotten their roots’ and been ‘turned against us’. A further problem that this raised, however, was that this phenomenon of shop stewards being promoted into management positions was seen to be symptomatic of a broader change in the culture of trade union leadership. It is to this that I will turn to now.

2.3.4 A new ‘culture’ of Union leadership?

It was often said that shop stewards who were promoted into management would not ‘look after’ the workers they represented because they were motivated by self-preservation. Some of the older members were particularly resentful of what they perceived to be a careerist culture among younger, upwardly mobile union members who did not understand the ‘true’ ethos of the union and were not adequately representing the ‘older guys’. Matsimela, who had been a member of the union for over 20 years, argued that: ‘the younger shop stewards are there [in the position] for their gains. They don’t go to the interest of older people like myself, they don’t they don’t, most of them are there for their own gains’ (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07).

Baruti, who was on the BEC and who was a long-serving shop steward said that this had been something he had witnessed over time, something that had been particularly bad with the younger generation of shop stewards. He said that it was having a negative impact on the union:

> Because it makes the members lose trust in the unions because you go there and they can say that this person is just after his or her interests, he or she doesn’t represent the members’ interests. Because you can see someone who is an opportunist – he just wants to further his or her career – so that sort of makes the trust of the members go down. It actually kills the union. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

In a similar way, Jacob, who is a technician, echoed this sentiment when he said that he felt this was undermining the standing of shop stewards in the eyes of him and his colleagues:

> The shop stewards are not good enough because now the shop steward he concentrates on the promotion you see? He just fights for his own terms, they don’t worry about the workers all the time because if you’ve got a problem he’s not there to solve the problem, he stays far away from
you. Yes, they like it in management you see. Always they take sides with the management to get a promotion. That is our problem. (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/07)

This was a cause for great concern among workers and some Union leaders alike who identified what they believed to be a marked break from the past when the NUM had been the ‘Union of strikes’ during the apartheid era; when its leaders had risked their jobs and, indeed, their own safety by becoming a shop steward or official within the NUM. During apartheid, the NUM’s mobilisation in Eskom was extremely difficult and the older members and the more experienced national leadership often described the difficulties and intimidation they had faced when trying to ‘mobilise workers’. This shift in the culture of leadership was therefore framed in terms of a move away from selfless ‘comradely’ leadership demonstrated during the apartheid era towards a self-interested pursuit of self preservation. Put simply, many of the lower skilled and older workers said that the new generation of leaders simply ‘don’t care’ about the ‘traditions’ of the trade union movement. This attitude towards the ‘younger generation’ of NUM leaders reflected the discourses of a ‘generational divide’ discussed earlier in the chapter.

This attitude was also evident among NUM’s leaders. Job Matsepe, a veteran unionist and now the National Organiser for the NUM in Eskom, publicly berated what he perceived to be a new generation of shop stewards who were ‘in it for themselves’ at NUM gatherings. He made the distinction between what he referred to as the ‘true leaders’ of the past and the ‘younger generation’ of shop stewards who were ‘destroying’ the movement. At one shop stewards council meeting, for example, he described, in somewhat evangelical tones, being a leader as ‘a call’, and he decried shop stewards who, he alleged, would attend wage negotiations, conferences or NUM gatherings but were more concerned with the perks associated with such activity than ‘fighting for workers’. He said they would complain ‘because management did not put them in the hotels they wanted’ or that they were overly concerned with getting the money for transport and car
rentals rather than the task in hand. He rounded on the shop stewards present at the national shop stewards’ council with the stark warning:

As a leader you are elected to lead…. If you don’t want to work for the organisation then take your jacket and leave….The honeymoon is over. (Observations at Eskom National Shop Steward’s Council 07/03/08)

When I asked him about this in an interview, he explained the reasons why he was so passionate:

You see the challenge that we are facing today’s leadership is that the struggles of the workers are no longer like what they used to be in the past right? For heaven’s sake in the past we have elected true leaders but today people just get into positions because they want to climb ladders. A person is elected and then from there within six months or seven months he’s a manager. We lack true leaders. (Interview with Job Matsepe 25/04/08)

This reflected a broader problem that COSATU and its affiliates have faced in the post-apartheid period as Union positions become attractive because of the perks associated with them and the potential for career advancement, whether in the Union itself or in business or politics (Bramble 2003). Authors such as Buhlungu, for example, have discussed the rise of ‘career’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ unionists who have used their position in this way (Buhlungu 2002a). Webster and Buhlungu argue that a by-product of this at a national and regional level has been the corruption of Union structures similar to what was described by Job: ‘in some cases it is simply a case of misuse of resources such as cell phones. However, in certain cases it has led to instances of serious corruption, while in others it arises from expenditure on lavish items such as expensive luxury cars, accommodation at five star hotels, and first class air travel’ (Webster and Buhlungu 2004: 45).

The full time shop steward for Arnott and Duvha remarked that this reflected a broader societal problem facing South African after the transition:

There is a problem, with people going for positions – in the leadership. It’s a societal problem. Even in the union there is this issue. Before 1994 there was not such a problem because people were not focused on leadership they were focused on liberation people. But now positions are seen as a route to wealth so for example you become a mayor and then you. It’s not about providing a particular service; it’s about benefiting from your position of leadership. (Personal communication with Joe Skosana 21/04/2008)
Once again, discourses of generational shift were evident in the attitudes of both NUM leaders and ordinary rank-and-file members. What these attitudes held in common was a general mistrust of the ‘younger generation’s’ moral compass. In short, the involvement of ‘younger’, more skilled workers within the Union was depicted as being instrumentally driven: either they would abstain from collective activism in NUM if they believed they could pursue their interests elsewhere or, if they were involved, this was often argued to reflect a cynical, opportunistic strategy of using union positions in the pursuit of individualistic social mobility. It is no surprise, perhaps, that many of these younger, more skilled workers argued that they felt they were caught between a rock and a hard place. However, perhaps revealingly, most of them would simply shrug and laugh this off, adding that they didn’t care.

That union positions have increasingly been seen as a route to personal advancement should not be of any great surprise if we compare it with the manner in which other civil society organisations, political parties and government institutions have been transformed in the post-apartheid era. What can be said to have transpired in the NUM in Eskom, therefore, in many ways mirrors broader social change in South Africa as the opportunities available for enrichment through official structures of political parties and civil society distort the internal functioning of such organisations and distract them from their raison d’être.

**Conclusion**

John Radebe, NUM’s full time shop steward in Eskom for the Gauteng region, remarked that the Union had become a ‘victim of our own victory’ in the post-apartheid era (Interview with John Radebe 14/05/08). By this, John meant that while the NUM had been at the forefront of the campaign for Employment Equity and Affirmative Action policies to be introduced in Eskom, these had had unforeseen consequences for NUM’s
organisation. Although the end of apartheid opened up new opportunity structures for NUM members in Eskom, the skilled and educated sections of the workforce have been able to benefit from these to a greater degree than some of their less skilled counterparts. This has opened up an emerging class divide between those with greater prospects for social mobility and those without. In short, NUM’s membership base in Eskom has become an increasingly diverse and fragmented demographic. This has two important political implications in particular, which highlight the need to critically examine and unpack the experiences that South Africa’s organised working class have of deracialised capitalism before we race to conclusions about the future contours and trajectories of class politics in South Africa.

First, it can be safely assumed that these processes of class formation are not unique to Eskom’s workforce and are indicative of the increasing stratification of the organised working class as a whole (Cranshaw 1997). In short, the ANC’s workplace policies aimed at removing the glass ceiling imposed on black workers during apartheid have opened up an aspirational culture among the more skilled and upwardly mobile sections of the organised working class who are able to grasp at the new opportunities available to them. One might tentatively conclude from this that the growing stratification of those workers represented by COSATU will make it increasingly difficult for the federation to unite its membership behind a single, coherent ‘working class’ political platform any more effectively that the ANC’s ‘broad church’ aspirational politics already does. The manner in which COSATU workers as a whole have become increasingly distinguished from unorganised sections of the South African workforce, the rural poor and the unemployed (Seekings and Nattrass 2005) further problematises any assumption that the trade unions can, by virtue of their organisational capacity and strategic position within the economy, become the driving force behind a new socialist politics capable of challenging the ANC.
Second, NUM itself is being ‘hollowed out’ by these processes of class formation. The growing diversification of NUM’s membership has created bitter rifts within the Union as the new avenues of opportunity available to black workers have simultaneously opened up new cultures of leadership and participation within NUM which threaten its organisational integrity and ethos. Leadership positions are increasingly being treated as pathways to wealth and career advancement by some members, and the opportunities for individual advancement have augmented a more passive and instrumental approach to NUM activism among the relatively skilled members. This has contributed to declining participation in the Union and has eroded its integrity as an unproblematic champion of working class interests. As the next chapter will elaborate, these problems have been further compounded by an organisational crisis in the Union, one characterised by the demobilisation of its members. These trends further obfuscate the capacity of the unions to mount a political challenge to the ANC if, as other case studies would suggest, these dynamics can be witnessed across other industries and COSATU affiliates. In sum, rather than potentially pulling in one direction, it is very likely that the competing class interests within the unions will pull them apart, should they choose to embark upon a radical new political strategy.
CHAPTER 3

‘WE ARE PARALYSED, TOTALLY PARALYSED’: UNION POWER IN THE POWER STATION

Introduction

Democratic union organisation has long been heralded as essential to checking the ‘oligarchic tendencies’ of union leaders who, it is assumed, are inherently more inclined to reach accommodations with management or political leaders owing to the bureaucratic pressures on their positions (Lipset 1977; Michels 1972). The democratic organisation of unions can, however, act as a counterweight to such bureaucratic tendencies by transferring power to ordinary members and thereby giving greater weight to their demands (Wood 2003). Western advocates of a new, radical form of trade unionism, capable of reversing the decline of Western unions in the era of globalisation, have placed democratic organisation and rank-and-file participation at the heart of forging a new ‘people’s politics’ against neo-liberalism (Moody 1997b; Scipes 2002; Waterman 2001). Democratic organisation, they argue, makes workers the central agents of change in their unions and will override the pervading depoliticised ‘service’ model unionism entrenched by union leaders. This in turn augments workers’ militancy, allowing the unions to forge organic ‘horizontal linkages’ with other social/community movements resisting neo-liberal globalisation in a new form of ‘social movement unionism’ (SMU) (Moody 1997b; Scipes 2002; Waterman 2001).

In the case of South Africa, labour analysts share the assumption that maintaining and/or resurrecting democratic organisation lies at the heart of checking what are identified as the increasingly bureaucratic tendencies of union officials resulting
from the profoundly altered institutional context of the post-apartheid period (Buhlunngu 2002a; Wood and Dibben 2006). This, they argue, will help to maintain workers’ activism in union structures and will complement other strategies – such as forming ‘horizontal linkages’ with social movements – which are deemed vital to the unions’ internal and political ‘revitalisation’ (Webster and Buhlunngu 2004).

Some more radical scholars see the divorce of control between union leaders and their members, and the narrow, conservative strategic outlook of COSATU’s leadership, as the primary obstacles preventing COSATU forging a new independent left wing politics in South Africa, whether in alliance with the social movements (Barchiesi 2005; Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a; Ngwane 2003) or by the federation forming a workers’ party (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002).

It will be argued that a prerequisite for COSATU becoming the harbinger of a new working class politics would be that its affiliates are strongly organised with strong ‘vertical linkages’ between the union leadership and its ordinary members. Only if union shop floor organisation is characterised by democratic worker control and vibrant workers activism is a new oppositional politics likely to be led by the Unions in a successful manner i.e. with the full support and activism of its rank-and-file. The case study evidence presented here, which correlates with comparative studies in other workplaces (Bramble 2003; Kenny 2004), presents a picture of demobilisation in NUM.

A central part of the analysis of this chapter, however, will be focused on accounting for the diversity for the reasons of NUM’s demobilisation and exploring the significance of these in terms of our understandings of class and trade union politics more broadly. It will be argued that the readings of Bond and Ceruti et al of the relationship between union members and their leaders and also, more broadly, between trade unions and the nationalist movement, do not sufficiently interrogate the complexities of the manner in which the organised working class experience deracialised
capitalism and also how they seek to formulate responses to it. Rather than there simply being a divide between the union leadership and ordinary union members, the schisms opening up within the rank-and-file itself are equally important. These are rooted in the emerging class divide described in the last chapter and are compounded in the suspicion and mistrust provoked by some of the organisational difficulties facing the Union, which will be discussed below.

The first part of the chapter will elucidate that there are important disparities between two apparently identical sites of union organisation in terms of the local democratic functioning of NUM branch structures in each power station: while one station functioned relatively well, and members were well-informed of developments in the Union, at the other station there was a breakdown of democratic organisation which led to mistrust between members and their local and regional leadership and this contributed to a general disengagement from NUM affairs. While breakdown of democracy at one site would appear to support those who argue that trade union militancy is being suppressed by a bureaucratic and undemocratic union leadership, the fact that similar processes of demobilisation are occurring at another site with apparently strong union organisation points to the need for more explanatory variables to be explored.

In the second part of the chapter it will be argued that NUM is struggling to reinvent its collective identity in the post-apartheid era. A problem common across both stations was the loss of identity augmented by the inability of NUM to strike in Eskom due to legal restrictions. This debilitates the Union by fostering mistrust between members in the power stations and the national leadership in Johannesburg.

The final section of this chapter will investigate the fragmentation within NUM described in the previous chapter. It will be argued that this has been compounded by these organisational difficulties, resulting in the gradual erosion of a unifying identity of
NUM as a militant ‘union of strikes’ and the demobilisation of an activist layer of its membership who have become disillusioned with what they see as undemocratic practices in the Union and demoralised by the inability to mount industrial action. Far from moving towards a radical form of unionism, such as Social Movement Unionism (SMU), NUM is gradually sleep-walking into a depoliticised, ‘service’ model of trade unionism.

It will be concluded that the institutional changes occurring within NUM are broadly reflective of how civil society organisations have adapted to the post-apartheid social and institutional setting. Like many former ‘militant’ wings of the liberation movement, the trade unions have accepted the institutional framework of mediation and compromise with the post-colonial government, eschewing their former relationship with the state which was predominantly characterised by an antagonistic relationship. As a result, the unions, like other sections of the liberation movement, have been demobilised. The responses of workers to this reflect the contradictory impulses of class politics in the post-apartheid era and highlight the complexities of the relationship between class formation, trade union politics and the nationalist movement in post-apartheid South Africa.

3.1 Democratic organisation in NUM

3.1.1 Background

Out of political determination and practical necessity, South Africa’s black trade unions developed strong traditions of democratic organisation during the struggle against apartheid, with a rigorous commitment to shopfloor democracy and accountable union leadership (Buhlangu 2004; Friedman 1987; Wood 2003). Buhlangu asserts that this was not an elite-led project (Buhlangu 2004 see also Maree 2006; Buhlangu 2006b) and several authors have argued that it was the strong participatory cultures adopted by the
unions which encouraged their militancy in the workplace and their capacity to engage
with other civil society groups in the broader political struggle against apartheid (Baskin
unionism’ (SMU) to describe this radical form of democratic and politicised unionism.

However, Von Holdt’s study of workers at Highveld Steel points to some of the
undemocratic practices exhibited by unionists during the apartheid struggle (Von Holdt
2003). Some analysts have also pointed to increasingly undemocratic tendencies emerging
within COSATU affiliates in the post-apartheid era (Bramble 2003), particularly as
certain groups such as women (Tshoaedi and Hlela 2006), young workers and casual
labourers are far less likely to participate in union structures (Wood and Dibben 2006).
There have also been notable instances of an increasingly bureaucratised union
leadership bypassing democratic procedures by reaching compromises and
accommodations with management without the mandate of their more militant
membership (Desai 2008) and the related problem of union leaders using their positions
for personal advancement (Buhlunugu 2002; Maree 1998; Webster and Buhlunugu 2004;
Wood and Harcourt 2000). These tendencies have not only undermined union
democracy, they are also contributing to a declining participatory culture in the unions, in
which members are becoming passive recipients of officials’ initiatives (Bramble 2003;
Buhlunugu 2002; Von Holdt 2003). According to NALEDI:

Members’ role is insufficiently articulated which then results again in too much reliance on ‘deal-
makers’. In this respect members are reduced to spectators waiting to be called upon in case there
is a deadlock. This model weakens shop floor activism and changes the relationship between
union and members to that of client and service provider. (NALEDI 2006: 29)

Despite these observations, many analysts hold that the traditions of rigorous
shopfloor democracy developed during the apartheid era are entrenched within the union
movement’s organisational culture and, to a large extent, remain clearly evident today
(Cherry and Southall 2006; Hirschsohn 1998; 2007; Wood 2003; Wood and Dibben
2006). There are, according to Wood, no ‘immutable iron laws of oligarchy’ and
COSATU’s unions have managed to check the bureaucratising tendencies of the leadership and have maintained worker-control of the unions (Wood 2003).

Wood and Dibben define shopfloor democracy as concerning ‘the regularity and extent of rank-and-file participation in the organisational life of unions, the existence of transparent structures for democratic representation and the extent of the right of recall’ (Wood and Dibben 2006). Essential characteristics of a vibrant shopfloor culture would include high levels of worker participation in union meetings as well as democratically elected and accountable officials and shop stewards. Looking at NUM in Eskom, the Union’s organisation was, on the surface, firmly democratic, in keeping with the traditions built by the NUM itself, particularly during the 1980s (Allen 2005). Like 95 per cent of other COSATU workers surveyed by SWOP (Wood and Dibben 2006: 55), NUM workers are represented through a well-established shop steward structure. The Union’s constitution stipulates that all shop stewards must be directly elected by members and hold office for three years (NUM 2007). It was widely agreed that the Union adhered to these democratic processes and the turnover of shop stewards was something I witnessed during my time in the field. Furthermore, workers expressed that they expected their shop stewards to report back to them regularly whenever an issue arose, and that they should ‘make themselves available’ whenever they were needed.38 There was also a widely held expectation among workers that errant shop stewards could be recalled and that they would not hesitate to do so.39

Interest in union affairs across COSATU unions is strong amongst members. According to the SWOP survey in 2005, 77 per cent of workers claimed that they attended meetings every month and there were also fewer instances where workers said

---

38 This supports the SWOP survey finding about workers’ expectations of their shop stewards which found that only 1 per cent of workers did not expect their shop stewards to report back to them (Wood and Dibben 2006: 57).
39 Although it was very rarely something that workers could point to as having happened in their memory.
they had never attended a union meeting than there were in the 1994 and 1998 surveys (Wood and Dibben 2006: 55). In NUM, one expectation that was widely held by members was that the Union must hold regular meetings in order to canvass opinion from its members and to hear their complaints. This was expressed in a variety of fashions, but the underlying belief was that without this, NUM would cease to function in the interests of its members. It was widely held that the local Branch Executive Committee (BEC) in each power station should call a general (or ‘mass’) meeting at least once a month, which is stipulated by the constitution (NUM 2007: 5.8.1). It was also expected that the full-time shop steward should attend mass meetings at least ‘every two or three months’ and it was widely expected that the regional leadership should also attend these meetings ‘two or three times a year’. If one were to take these expectations of meetings as evidence of interest in union affairs then, one could conclude that NUM members in Eskom remain interested and engaged in NUM’s structures.

NUM’s organisation would thus appear to adhere to the Union’s constitution and to offer members a real opportunity to influence the direction of the Union. Regular members themselves held great expectations for the democratic functioning of their union. However, as I will now discuss, there was a significant shortfall between these expectations and the actual manner in which members experienced democratic organisation in the Union.

3.1.2 Democracy in practice? Reactions to the 2007 wage negotiations

One issue that brings the democratic functioning of the Union sharply into focus is the process of reporting back during wage negotiations. During negotiations, the demand for feedback was particularly acute and Union meetings were particularly well attended. Workers regularly identified the wage negotiations as a time when the democratic functioning of the Union was most important, and that regional leaders who were in the
negotiations must come and attend mass meetings to update them and also to let them feed back into the process.

On paper, NUM has a rigorous process of preparing for these negotiations and then subsequently reporting back developments to its members. Before the negotiations NUM’s branches meet with members to ask for their salary and other demands. This usually takes place during mass meetings and the information is passed on to regional leaders and the fulltime shop stewards, as well as the national organiser, Job Matshepe. During the negotiations themselves the Union’s representatives, including fulltime shop stewards and officers at NUM’s headquarters in Johannesburg continue to share information about what members have said. During the regular pauses in negotiations (‘caucuses’), each Eskom offer is weighed up with respect to what members have asked for. For example, the representatives discussed why it was that members had dug their heels in over particular issues - such as the length of the wage agreement and the salary demands - and tried to establish the limits of their negotiating mandate.40

When I asked the chief negotiator, Paris Mashego, who was also the NUM’s Highveld Regional Secretary, how the Union fed back information to their members about the results of negotiations, he explained that:

At the national level in the negotiations every region is represented… Now our communication line one is immediately after negotiations because Eskom workers is not all of them but the majority of them have access to computer we immediately we forward the outcome of the negotiations [by e mail], But it has not been our traditional approach. We do that but we also link it to our traditional approach. We believe that our membership is one on one. We believe that the person when he come from a region [to the negotiations] that when he arrives [back] at the region he calls a shop steward meeting. In the shop steward meeting he presents a report. Now every shop steward from each depot and power station goes to his members and gives a report. If that person might have a problem in representing the demands as they are then some of us are dispatched to go to that particular area to go and assist. So that’s how we communicate. (Interview with Paris Mashego 27/06/07)

In reality, however, this ‘ideal model’ of communicating did not always work and members were extremely critical of the Unions’ efforts in this regard.

40 The membership was opposed to a two-year agreement because they were concerned that inflation was so high that in a years’ time they would need to reopen negotiations once more. It was a view shared by the negotiators themselves and was the one issue that caused the greatest confrontation between the unions and management during negotiations.
3.1.3 Disparities within NUM organisation

What was clear from the interviews and my experience in the power stations was that there was a large degree of disparity between the two power stations in terms of the actual practice of democratic organisation. This was most apparent in the way members described their experiences of the ‘feedback’ they received from their shop stewards and regional officials and how effectively they believed these leaders allowed them to have an input in meetings. While workers at Arnot were generally satisfied with their local branch and not a single worker there complained about the local organisation of NUM, Duvha workers described the Union’s organisational practices almost unanimously in negative terms.

One reason why Duvha workers felt that the democratic traditions of the Union had broken down was what they perceived to be the shortcomings and incompetence of their local branch committee in the power station, composed of a group of shop stewards whose job it is to liaise with the regional leadership and to organise meetings and deliver feedback to them. Workers complained that meetings were infrequent and that the branch committee did not report back sufficiently frequently or in enough depth. For example Thato, who was an operator at Duvha, expressed concern that his job might be ‘contracted’ (outsourced) to a private contractor, something that he said his friends had experienced. Thato complained that there was no sense of urgency on the part of NUM to communicate what was happening in negotiations with the company to NUM members. He said:

We are often between heaven and earth. We don't know what the Union has agreed to nowadays because we are just workers. We don't know what is happening all of the time. At the moment they never tell us the bad things. We never know if we are going to be contracted [out] or not, they just tell us ‘these people will not be contracted out of Eskom’ and then later you see that they have been contracted out of Eskom. With the way they communicate with us I cannot say whether my job is secure. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

It was often said that the breakdown of feedback during wage negotiations was particularly poor, and was symptomatic of the broader decline in the democratic
functioning of the Union. Lefu, an operator at Duvha power station, for example, said that he no longer attended meetings because of the lack of feedback they received and the failure of branch leaders to come down and talk to them during the wage negotiations. He echoed a popular sentiment when he said:

The main problem of the Union, especially at the NUM, it’s not in touch with its members like coming to meetings with the members. The branch people they are not coming always to the members and then they don’t give the proper feedback. Some of the negotiation[s] which they held with management, they don’t come back to give feedback and when they negotiate with salaries and stuff we don’t get the proper feedback from the head office as such. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

These perceptions of the weakness of the local branch committee at Duvha were not unjustified. It was noticeable that meetings at Duvha were not only less frequent than those at Arnot, but that they were also noticeably less well attended. This disparity in attendance was partly down to the practical issue of timing, because Duvha holds its meetings during working hours and Arnot holds them after, and many workers at Duvha complained they could not get off their shift to attend. It was noticeable that Arnot branch leaders were aware of this problem and had been proactive in arranging meetings outside of working hours, whereas the Duvha branch appeared unresponsive to what was a frequently aired complaint. What was also noticeable that while Arnot branch committee members were adamant that they would hold a ‘mass meeting’ of their branch every month, Duvha shop stewards and committee members were far more vague and would say that meetings would be held ‘when we can’. Workers at Duvha complained that their meetings were infrequent and unpredictable and that it sometimes meetings would go ahead without their knowledge.

The regional leadership, including the full time shop steward, were mindful that Duvha was considered a location where the Union was not ‘strong’ in terms of

41 I will discuss this in more detail below.
organisation compared with the other power stations. The regional leadership held the opinion that Arnot was a place where organisation was considered ‘strong’ and the branch leadership there were regarded as extremely competent and active compared to other power stations. While workers at Duvha were often extremely critical of their branch leaders, workers at Arnot did not report any problems with their branch committee and were generally very happy with the way their branch was organised in terms of the manner in which feedback was given during wage negotiations and more generally in other aspects of NUM business. No workers raised complaints with me about the quality or quantity of the feedback they received from their local branch committee, in stark contrast to Duvha. There was therefore a perception among workers in Arnot that their local branch was run extremely efficiently and that when I asked workers at Arnot if they were happy with the union they would often reply ‘one hundred per cent’ and said that it functioned ‘very smoothly’.

To some extent these disparities in branch organisation might therefore be explained by the relative competencies of the branch leaders at each station. However, the differences between the two branches were also highlighted by their different relationship with the regional leadership. Not all Duvha workers perceived that it was the fault of their local branch leaders that they did not receive proper representation; many workers said that the fault lied further up the NUM’s structures with the regional leadership. One worker, for example, argued that the Union:

is dead from the top, I can’t blame Nathi - this is our [branch] chairperson - I can’t blame him. It [is] dead from the top from Joe [Skosana, full time shop steward] and Paris [Mashego, the Regional Secretary] down. It has declined there because when we have meetings for the wage negotiations, for salaries, normally they come to people [to ask] which wage do we need, how many percent do we need? Now they just don’t consult, they just sit with Eskom and now they just announce [the decision]. They don’t involve the people. [I believe] the Union must be led by the masses. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

---

42 When I originally informed the Regional Chair that I would be going into Duvha and Arnot he told me that he would have preferred it if I had been going to somewhere where the Union was ‘strong’ in both cases, but that the two sites would make a useful comparison because of this.
The use of email communication, although used at both stations, was seen as a substitute for regional leaders coming to the station at Duvha. As one worker lamented:

They don’t even bother to give us the feedback! This full time shop steward, I don’t even know when I’ve seen him the last time and now today he is here. Maybe now after today we will see him next year! [sarcasm] They don’t give us the feedback like they used to now they just sit on internet or send agreements to the shop stewards. They no longer come here so that they can talk to us and give us the answers. Time and again they give us excuses. … I say it is seven years since I last saw the full time shop steward and that is why I am no longer going to the meetings because you raise your hand, ask a question, but he is not there. He must come himself so when you ask a question he can answer it. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

It was a view shared by some shop stewards, who expressed frustration that their regional leaders, including the full time shop steward, would only communicate with them through email and that they no longer came ‘on the ground’ to talk to them or to ordinary members at meetings.

The lack of contact with regional leaders caused particular grievance during the wage negotiations, as it was the fulltime shop steward and the regional chairperson who was involved in the negotiations themselves. Workers at Duvha argued that the breakdown in feedback and communication in the Union was indicative of the long term demise or ‘death’ of the organisation. Tumelo, a plant technician at Duvha who had been an NUM member for twenty years, believed that the failure of regional leaders to report back adequately during wage negotiations was ‘killing’ the Union because:

When they negotiate they are negotiating but they can’t find them coming here to explain. No, they didn’t come. They always sign [the agreement] and [then] tell us [about it after]. Who are our killers? The killers are the leaders above us, the people that go to negotiate. … It’s a killer for us because they must come to us and tell us there is such a problem and this and this. This happened before, but now, nothing! How can the union perform? They kill our union down because the members are not allowed an opinion that he can raise [to] our leaders. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

Shop stewards at Duvha, and particularly the branch leaders, would therefore lay the blame for the inadequate feedback they gave to members at the door of the regional leadership. One shop steward, for example, argued that the Union was now ‘dying’ because it had lost power owing to the ‘people on top’ being distracted, which was in turn breaking down communication channels in the union:
Ja, eh, the Union was strong was strong in the apartheid times now it’s deteriorating [whistles and points his finger downwards]. What I see is this [Union] dying. In the eighties the Union was too strong\(^{43}\), and they could go out for the people and get them money [in wage negotiations] but now Eskom does what it likes because our [NUM] officers there at the top level – I don’t know if they are busy – because those people are supposed to be representing us but we never see them down here. What I can say is now from 1996 our union reps - our full time shop steward all those from the top - they used to come to us if anything was happening in Eskom but now we don’t see them. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

The shop steward proceeded to candidly explain how this led him and his fellow shop stewards to incur the ‘anger’ of ordinary members because they were unable to give accurate feedback about regional or national developments, particularly during the wage negotiations. He said that ‘we must lie sometimes to [members] because our representatives up there [in the region] lied to us you see?’ (original emphasis Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07).

In contrast, there were no such complaints from the shop stewards and branch leaders at Arnot. The ‘gap’ between the branch and regional leaders was better-managed at Arnot than at Duvha. Although there was no evidence that the regional leaders, including the full time shop steward, visited Arnot more than Duvha\(^ {44}\), the relatively few complaints members raised about feedback from the Arnot branch, and the fact that shop stewards there felt that things were running smoothly, suggests that the branch leaders there are far more adept at communicating regional and national developments to their members. It is hard to pin point why exactly this is. It could be that Arnot leaders were more proficient with email communication or, more likely, that the far more meticulous manner in which they described approaching meetings made them more effective at disseminating information to their members. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships contributed to a more smooth relationship between region and branch as it was clear from the full time shop steward that branch leaders from Arnot would be more

\(^{43}\) This is a figure of speech, he is not saying that the Union was literally too strong.  
\(^{44}\) In fact, not only is Duvha closer to the regional offices, the full time shop steward worked at Duvha before taking on his role and still had friends and connections at the power station.
likely to visit the regional offices themselves and I also noted that the full time shop steward and branch members from Arnot were active members of the same ANC branch in Witbank.

What this highlights is that the importance of local-level investigation into union democracy. One could come away from Arnot claiming that shopfloor democracy in NUM was more or less intact, whereas one would conclude from Duvha that NUM was a greatly divided Union beset by mistrust and perceptions of a democratic breakdown. The SWOP surveys offer a valuable insight into the national-level dynamics of trade union organisation. However, this research highlights the possibility of strong disparities from workplace to workplace within the same trade union. Whoever was actually to blame for the organisational shortcomings at Duvha, what is important is that the perception that NUM’s democratic traditions were being eroded. The sense of alienation workers felt as a result led many of them to say that they were increasingly disengaged from the Union itself and were not longer active participants at NUM meetings. The disparity between the two stations, however, and also the difficulty Duvha workers had of pinning the blame on a particular stratum of leadership, points to flaws in catch-all theories about union oligarchy as being the sole cause of union demobilisation. This is a point further underlined by the other organisational difficulties NUM was experiencing across both power stations and also across the country.

3.2 Powering the nation while disempowering the workers: Eskom, ‘essential services’ and the ‘slow death’ of the ‘Union of toyi-toy’

3.2.1 ‘They denied our rights’: ‘essential services’ and union paralysis

The generation, supply and distribution of electricity was investigated by the Essential Services Committee – part of the Department of Labour – and was declared an ‘essential

45 Because, for example, one of them was a manager and had a company car.
service’ under section 71 (1) of the Labour Relations Act (LRA) on 17 October 1997. An essential service is defined by the LRA as ‘a service, the interruption of which endangers the life, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the population’ (Labour Relations Act: Section 213). The LRA clearly stipulates that no person working in an essential service can take part in a strike unless trade unions and employers have a collective agreement in place called a ‘minimum services agreement’ (MSA) (Labour Relations Act: Section 72). Judge Dhaya Pillay explains that:

A minimum service agreement is a collective agreement in terms of which the employer and trade union parties identify and agree on providing a minimum quantity and quality of essential service during industrial action sufficient to avoid endangering life, personal safety and health. (Pillay 2001: 29)

Eskom management and the trade unions - NUM, NUMSA, Solidarity and the Eskom Employees’ Association – negotiated and signed an MSA in September 1997. However, the unions officially terminated the MSA in 2004, arguing that it was overly prohibitive on their ability to embark on strike action. This has proved to be something of an own-goal for the unions because, although a new MSA is being negotiated, negotiations have taken a long time. The unions have accused Eskom of dragging its feet in these negotiations over a new MSA (NUM and NUMSA 2010). Without such an agreement in place, all Eskom workers are considered as ‘essential’ and are prevented from striking. After a dispute was declared by the unions over this issue, the independent Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration was brought in to arbitrate over the issue. A new agreement has still not been signed and, as such, any strike at the present time would be both illegal and unprotected.

For many workers this inability to strike was an extremely big problem; one that they felt prevented them from attaining the wages they felt they deserved and which also undermined the Union itself and their relationship with it. At NUM’s Eskom Shop Steward Council, for example, this issue was discussed at length and it was agreed by both leaders and the shop stewards present, who were from all over the country, that the
MSA issue was affecting morale among workers and their faith in the Union (Field notes from NUM National Shop Stewards Council 07/03/08).

It was widely argued that the inability to strike was ‘killing’ or ‘paralysing’ the union. This was regularly framed as an affront to their dignity as it was commonly described as depriving them of the basic rights which they had fought and struggled for against the apartheid government. It was often said that Eskom wanted to ‘take us back to the eighties’ when any form of Union mobilisation was made extremely difficult in Eskom. For example, Dingane, an operator in Arnot power station who had been in the Union since just after its inception in the mid eighties, complained that:

They denied our rights. You see, Eskom just does whatever it wants because of this minimum service agreement. I’m thinking of blaming the government for that because where’s my rights now as a worker? You give me a starvation wage and if I strike you say I am wrong. You see? How can we only get 7% for 2 years even though [the price of] things is going up and up? I blame the government for this because they made it difficult for the Union to operate. They call us an essential service. If they are clever enough, if they know that we are an essential service, they must treat us better! Now they will not let us strike; they paralyse us and they call us essential services but they give us starvation money. Even they didn’t raise the apartheid money. We’re still earning what the old government give us. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

Dingane, like many relatively unskilled workers, described himself as ‘stuck’ in the same job in Eskom due to his lack of education. For him, strikes were an essential tool of improving his miserly income.

This was a common complaint: the inability of the union to strike was inextricably linked to the union’s failure to deliver a ‘living’ wage for its members during negotiations. A group of less skilled, more elderly workers in Arnot, for example, explained how they were finding it increasingly difficult to meet their costs of living due to reductions in their real wage. They said they were no longer afraid to go on strike now, as they had been in the apartheid era, but that legal restrictions had hamstrung the union and that they had lost their power. When I asked if they were not striking because they were afraid, one replied:

No, no, because the government discharges its directive now and says ‘before toji toji you must sign a letter to apply for magistrate’ and then it’s the law and they put this agreement that binds us. Now you see at the wage agreement in July all we get was 7% and that’s because we cannot
toy toy. And now all the prices are going up [through inflation] but we can’t toy toy because of that law. Now the union is paralysed now, totally paralysed. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

3.2.2 Suspicion and blame: whose fault was it?

According to the NUM’s national leadership, Eskom was approaching negotiations over the new MSA in ‘bad faith’ and it was suggested that the company’s reluctance to agree to a new agreement was reflective of a new generation of management that was trying to weaken the unions, not through overt tactics, but by ‘stealth’ (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07). According to the national office bearers, there had been a marked change in the management culture of Eskom in the mid to late 1990s and this was exemplified in particular by what they perceived to be Eskom’s attempts to prevent industrial action by its employees. For example, Deputy General Secretary Oupa Komane argued that:

Since the installation of black management I must say the relationship has dramatically changed. This manifests itself in the form of the very same issue you are raising regarding the minimum service [agreement]. There are obviously some operations that you can define as an essential service, that when a strike starts then you are able to agree that this part of the operation must continue … but Eskom went to the extreme because they said ‘look every workplace is part of an essential service’. Clearly you can be able to select those that are [and those that are not] essential services within Eskom. (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/07)

However, while many workers were extremely bitter that Eskom was denying them the right to strike, they also blamed their national Union leaders for this and, more specifically, the breakdown of communication within the Union itself. The national leaders had, after all, been the ones to terminate the existing MSA in 2004 and although officials claimed that this had been done after consultation with the membership, it was quite clear that at the power station level this was not perceived to be the case. Dingane, the operator whose complaint I discussed before, was quite clear that he felt it was those people in higher positions or ‘on top’ in NUM that were to blame for the Union’s weakness. He said that the Union must be able to strike while he was on such a low wage:
I am proud to be an NUM member and those people who are on top there we pushed them to be on top for us but now they … are working against the NUM. And for me it’s not good…. At the end of the day these people are working against us…. We cannot be paralysed as an ‘essential service’, what about my rights? I don’t have rights when I am on starvation money. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

The majority of workers shared this view; the inability to be able to take strike action was a direct result of their leaders signing agreements without consultation. For example, workers were often confused as to how and why the MSA had been abandoned and why the Union had allowed Eskom the position to prevent any strike action.

This uncertainty often fuelled rumours about Union officials and their role in signing the MSA. For example, Mompati, who worked at Duvha as a boiler worker, argued that the inability to strike, and the very fact that the unions were prevented from striking, was down to a breakdown in communications within the Union. He said that the ‘old’ system of shopfloor democracy within the Union had broken down and that ‘we must correct this now’, adding that it would ‘be better to go back to the old system’. Mompati suggested that the manner in which the Union’s leadership, at the regional and national level, overrode democracy within the Union suggested they were collaborating with Eskom:

If you take the decision yourself [without consultation] it means you are on of the side of management. What I want to know is why? Why did you not come to members to ask [first] before you sign such things [as the MSA]? [sic] If I am a member it looks like bribery inside from the shop stewards to make them sign this, [management to shop stewards]. To us members it looks like bribery because we cannot trust a leader, how can you trust him because he is not bringing back the full information? (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07)

It was often alleged that the national leadership were ‘too close’ to Eskom and that deals were being struck with Eskom’s management and that the national leadership was doing this in secret.46 It was speculated that leaders were dealing with Eskom ‘under the table’ or ‘in secret rooms’. It was also speculated – though rarely with anything resembling

---

46 This was not only expressed by rank-and-file workers in the power stations but also by some shop stewards in workshops. However, in the case of the latter it was unclear whether this reflected their actual beliefs or simply factional battles within the union itself.
certainty – that regional and national leaders were accepting ‘bribes’ or ‘salaries’ from Eskom.47

The reason behind these beliefs – and the speculative nature of them – was not based on any concrete evidence or historical examples of this actually happening. Instead, the speculative nature of these allegations reflected the sense of bewilderment on the part of rank-and-file members as to why their Union leaders would sign agreements such as the wage settlement that were clearly so apposite to members’ interests48. As Rosnow and Fine have argued in their study of rumours:

Our minds strive to eliminate chaos and uncertainty. When the truth is not directly forthcoming we piece together information as best we can, giving rise to rumours, rationalisations, and the search for a definition of the situation. The reason rumours circulate is that they explain things and relieve the tensions and uncertainty. (Rosnow and Fine 2000: 341)

The uncertainty generated by the sense of disenfranchisement and alienation that some workers felt from their Union leadership contributed to the creation and dissemination of such rumours and conspiracy theories.

One point worth clarifying here, however, is that while the inability to strike was (perhaps rightly) blamed on the national leadership, it would be crude and inaccurate to suggest that this was an example of a bureaucratic leadership that was styming rank-and-file militancy; much less that this was part of some broader conspiracy. National leaders lamented the inability of workers to strike in Eskom and were involved in an ongoing (and very bitter) legal battle with Eskom to agree a new MSA agreement. Leaders like Oupa Komane, who had himself risen through the ranks as a militant shop steward and organiser in Eskom, considered striking to be one of the primary reasons the Union had made substantial gains in the early nineties (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/07). Like the workers themselves, NUM leaders and officials appeared, at least, to

47 When these statements were made workers would often cast around stating that ‘perhaps’ their leaders were ‘on Eskom salaries’
48 It should be noted that this bewilderment was expressed at both power stations and even branch officials themselves expressed being perplexed about what was happening at the national level.
resent the inability to strike, although this was clearly not a perception that many workers on the ground had of them.

An assumption by many advocates of SMU is that there is an inherent divide between the militancy of the rank-and-file union members – those hit hardest by neoliberalism – and their leadership who, owing to the oligarchic tendencies of union organisation, tend to be more conservative and unwilling to embark on strike action. Such an assumption has been criticised as simplistic (Schiavone 2007). NUM’s organisation in Eskom is an example of the complex relationship between a union’s leadership and the rank-and-file. During the wage negotiations, the NUM’s representatives discussed the willingness of members to embark on an unprotected strike. As the leaders began to realise that Eskom was unwilling to go near to the 8% plus matrix,\textsuperscript{49} they began discussing whether the members would be willing to embark on an unprotected strike. What emerged was a mixed picture; while some shop stewards reported the ‘anger’ of their members and their desire to strike, others were more sceptical, declaring that they had encountered a great deal of apprehension from some of their members. It left the Union leaders in a difficult position: an unprotected strike in particular would have to be well observed, lest those members that went out on strike face the wrath of management for their illegal actions. When I asked workers about their willingness to embark on an unprotected strike the response was similarly mixed, with the majority saying that they would but admitting that they thought it unlikely that many of their co-workers would.

Framing this inability to strike in terms of an oligarchic leadership that has in some way ‘betrayed’ its members therefore risks over-simplifying a complex relationship between the rank-and-file and their leaders. However, as I will now discuss, workers’

\textsuperscript{49}The matrix pay scale was designed to supplement the lowest paid workers so that the bare minimum any worker would get would be 8% but those in lower salary grades stood to gain an extra 1 – 3%.
perceptions of their leaders – whether or not they were accurate – offer an important insight into how they framed the changing organisational dynamics of NUM and also reveals why many of them were deciding to disengage from the Union.

3.2.3 The break from the past

If NUM members were unsure as to whether or not they would go on strike, or who was to blame for the legal barriers to such action, what was more clear was the sense among nearly all members across both power stations that developments over the last 10-15 years signalled a marked break from the past with regards to the Union. For example, Bongani, an NUM shop steward at Duvha, was categorical about the ‘shift’ that he had witnessed in the democratic functioning of the Union and its increasing unwillingness to mount industrial action:

Nobody knows what agreements are struck there [between management and the Union] nowadays. At the end of the day, we want them to come to us to say ‘we don’t care if they fire us, we are going on strike’. Nowadays we do not have them saying ‘we are going to go on strike’, or that ‘we are going to make South Africa black out’.50 As a result [at the wage negotiations] we ended up going back to 5 comma something [percent pay increase] that we didn’t want; we said we want a one year agreement but they forced us into 2 year approval! They have sat in their head offices discussing their own issues.51 For me it’s their Union now; we are no longer the Union because I believe the Union is from the ground upwards, not upwards downwards. They are not supporting us like when we say we want to cause a black out. What they are saying is supporting the other party - Eskom. Maybe underhand they are receiving something, getting something underneath [gestures under the table] to say to the President of NUM ‘here’s a [bribe] package’. I understand it that way because I just don’t know [what is happening]. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

Bongani said that this was a break from the past and that ‘In Cyril Ramaphosa’s days … we would go on strike. There was not the issue of them putting something under the carpet’. It was widely perceived that Cyril Ramaphosa, and some other former leaders 52 would go out and get ‘good results’ for workers in terms of wage agreements and that, if necessary, he ‘understood’ the need for members to strike. Ramaphosa’s days were often ‘remembered’ as a time when workers said the Union was ‘winning’, when NUM was

50 For obvious reasons Eskom workers often used this image to describe the prospect of strike action.
51 ‘Their own issues’ refers to the interest of the leaders, such as career advancement
52 Ache Polane in particular was mentioned several times.
democratically organised and the Union was not ‘afraid’ to go on strike. Now, in contrast to the ‘comradely’ leadership displayed by former NUM leaders, workers felt they had an elite oligarchic leadership who cared little for ‘due process’ being followed within the Union and were more concerned with pursuing their own interests than it was with the continued ‘suffering’ of workers.

For many workers the inability to strike – whoever was to blame – was symptomatic of the Union’s decline. The group of old men mentioned earlier, who complained that the Union was now ‘totally paralysed’, and was too afraid to go on strike, recalled the last strike they remembered in 1996:

Yes I remember a big strike at [Eskom] Megawatt Park [in Johannesburg] when we were crying about the wage for July. The Union from Witbank they organised buses and all the power stations we went to Johannesburg. Then after we went there the management told us they won’t even give us the 10%, just 7%. That’s then when things started going wrong when people started breaking the houses, club[bing] the car; it was big damage! But since then that was the last one, the last strike until now. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

References to the 1996 strike were frequent. The incident they referred to happened on 16th July, 1996 when an estimated 3000 NUM members working for Eskom marched to Megawatt Park, Eskom’s headquarters in central Johannesburg. The protest happened during a protracted wage dispute between the unions and Eskom. The protest soon turned violent as the frustrations of workers turned to anger and windows were smashed, conference rooms were destroyed, and several cars and parts of the building were set on fire. The level of damage was quite extensive and Eskom soon filed a damages case against the NUM for 6.1m Rand, a figure that Gwede Mantashe, then General Secretary of the NUM, admitted threatened NUM’s very existence if they lost the court battle (Independent Online 23/06/2000; Financial Mail 28/02/2010). The Union still claims that it was ‘agitators’, and not its own members, that were responsible for the damage although, as one shop steward dryly noted, ‘it was not God’ that burned down the offices (Personal communication, 20/04/2008). Indeed, the incident itself is

---

53 Although this was later dropped
widely revered by union members as a time ‘when we were winning’ because they felt the strike and the march had been successful, even though the majority of them were critical of the ‘undisciplined comrades’ who had turned the incident violent. They identified the incident as a marker of the union’s golden age, when they said Eskom ‘feared us’; a time when Eskom would not ‘dare’ to act as ‘arrogantly’ as it was doing at present, now that the Union was ‘paralysed’ or ‘impotent’.

The broader sense of NUM’s disempowerment was also often expressed in relation to more micro-level engagements with management and supervisors. For example, workers would often idealise a period in which management at a local level became ‘intimidated’ by the Union ‘when they knew we were strong’. They would recount examples of when, for example, a racist comment in the workplace would lead to the workforce downing tools and marching out in protest. In a clear expression of where they felt the balance of power lay in these cases, it would often be said that the management would have to ‘come begging’ to get them back to work. More broadly, workers sometimes referred to small grievances such as discrepancies over the payment of bonuses, back pay or overtime, and described how they had called the management or their supervisors ‘to order’ after confronting them with their shop steward and fellow members.

The impression that the Union had lost its identity as ‘the union of strikes’ or ‘the union of toyi-toyi’ was held by workers, shop stewards and Union leaders alike. Direct action was thus revered as the strategy or ‘weapon’ which not only ‘got results’, but also forged the Union’s identity of a virile ‘man’s union’ which could stand up to management. The idealised version of what the Union ‘ought’ to be doing was thus referred to using a militaristic vocabulary of ‘fighting’, ‘struggling’ and ‘attacking’ management, just as the symbolic surrendering of this ‘weapon’ – the ‘slogan’ of toyi-toyi –

---

54 This was the language most commonly used to describe the strike option.
was argued to be symptomatic of the Union's ‘death’ and ‘dying’ or being ‘paralysed’ and ‘crippled’.  

However, the manner in which these Eskom workers romanticise trade union activity during the struggle against apartheid in the late 1980s and early 1990s is not only inaccurate; the apartheid period is not an appropriate yardstick with which to measure declining militancy in the trade unions. After all, the kind of militancy COSATU affiliates demonstrated during the period was in large part provoked by the exceptional relationship they held with the state at the time. Thus, in the post-apartheid era one might expect a degree of demobilisation, particularly as the changed institutional environment and the manner in which the trade unions have been able to extract greater concessions and protections through their engagement in corporatist forums. As was discussed above, the drift towards centralised, collective bargaining in large industries has led to increasing ‘professionalisation’ and bureaucratisation of Union officials and more evidence of oligarchic leadership tendencies (Bramble 2003: 189-191; Buhlunlu 2002: 15; Gall 1997: 206; Maree 1998: 35-42; Van Driel 2003: 78). The manner in which NUM members in Eskom have become estranged from leadership decisions taken in national forums like the NEDLAC or the CCMA has been evident across other COSATU affiliates (Cherry 2006: 158-160). Paradoxically, therefore, while the democratic era has opened up these spaces through which the trade unions can engage, it has simultaneously made trade union bargaining more complex, and the pressures for the union leaders to strike deals at the national level has strained their relationship with the rank and file (Bassett 2005: 68; Buhlunlu 2002: 2-5; NALEDI 2006: 30; Maree 1998: 35-42). In short, while legal restrictions on industrial action in Eskom are relatively exceptional, the

---

55 Sometimes it was referred to as having a limb amputated and thus being rendered immobile.
56 According to all of the union officials I asked, NUM in Eskom did not launch large-scale industrial action until 1992. They said this was mainly due to the difficulties NUM encountered in mobilising in the key industry due to a strong apartheid security presence.
57 Although the ‘essential services’ apply to many of the public sector workplaces.
broader process of union demobilisation is widespread in South Africa, reflecting the radically different social and institutional environment within which trade unions are operating (Buhlangu 2010). The result, as I will discuss now, has been the gradual erosion of activism within NUM in Eskom and, according to other studies, across other COSATU affiliates.

3.2.4 ‘The Union is dying’: increasing despair and disengagement in NUM

Shop stewards, officials and workers themselves perceived that current rates of participation in Union meetings were poorly at both power stations relative to the overall size of the membership. NUM organises roughly 400 workers at Duvha and 450 at Arnott. In Duvha, for example, shop stewards and the full time shop steward seemed to agree that average attendance rates hovered around 50-100 people for each mass meeting, and these estimates were similar to those that ordinary members made. Arnott was generally described as being better organised than Duvha - even by Duvha shop stewards themselves – and it was estimated that it attracted over 100 members to the majority of its mass meetings, with even more workers attending at peak times, such as during the wage dispute. The problem with this is that this falls well short of meeting the 50% attendance that was needed to make the meetings quorate according to NUM’s constitution.

It was sometimes argued that the reason for this disparity was due to the fact that the Duvha branch held meetings during working hours, whereas Arnott branch did not, as was discussed above. Arnott also continues to have some workers who reside in hostels

---

58 These figures were provided for me by the NUM full time shop steward, Joe Skosana. They are correct as of 2008.
59 During wage negotiations this figure increased significantly.
60 Although the higher band of estimates were ‘100’ or ‘150’, most that I asked said it was somewhere between 60 and 100 which would be my observation from the meetings I went to as well.
61 This would be a fairly accurate estimation based on members’ own perceptions and my observations at meetings.
near to the station, which has historically boosted the attendance of NUM meetings. The fact that hostels have gradually been phased out and workers have sought permanent accommodation in the surrounding areas has posed a problem for NUM in other sectors of its organisation, particularly the mines (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007), and this problem was regularly brought to my attention by NUM officials as a reason for declining attendances.

However, it was widely perceived that participation rates were not falling just because of practical consideration, or because of the supposedly apathetic and instrumentalist attitudes of skilled members discussed in the previous chapter. It was also believed that workers who were becoming disillusioned with the Union, for the reasons I discussed above, were also beginning to turn their backs on the Union. It was often said that the decline in democratic practices in the Union was leading to disillusionment, and that there was little point in attending meetings if there was ‘no information’ because feedback was not adequately delivered by branch representatives, or the regional leadership were not present. As one worker explained, in what reflected a commonly expressed sentiment:

Less people attend meetings now because they think that nothing good can come out of the meeting or from our representative. So now I ask: why should I go there when there is nothing going to happen? (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

This question: ‘why should I bother going to meetings?’ was commonly asked by workers. One group of older workers, for example, agreed that the declining attendance also reflected a sense of disenfranchisement with the Union itself:

It is a big problem. You see the people at the ground level, their expectations from their head office people, they lose hope of those people because some of their expectations they are not meeting them. So that decreases their morale and trust to the Union. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

Although, as I discussed in the previous chapter, some of the ‘older’, generally less skilled workers were more likely to attend meetings than the ‘younger’, more skilled workers, I often heard from them that they were frustrated at meetings because they simply did not
understand what was transpiring. They regularly complained that they had no idea what was being discussed and why, who the people were that were addressing them, and why it was that they ‘never’ saw regional leaders. All of these issues relating to feedback and communication were far more frequently raised by Duvha workers, because of the organisational difficulties NUM was experiencing there. However, these problems were to a large extent common at both and this was clearly a major reason for declining participation as it appeared to entrench a cynical attitude towards the Union among ordinary members.

The declining attendance of meetings was further exacerbated at both power stations by the sense of disillusionment borne out of the Union’s inability to strike legally.\textsuperscript{62} It was regularly said that the Union was beating a constant retreat and that ‘nothing good’ could come out of attending meetings if they had lost the ability to ‘scare’ Eskom. One BEC member agreed that this sentiment was widespread when I asked him if many people were attending mass meetings:

\begin{quote}
Most [of them attend] but not all because some are working shifts. But some are what I can say, maybe I can say they lost hope in terms of these issues that are not dealt with like the MSA and all those things. They see us as fighting a losing battle whereby there were things that were taken from the conditions of service in terms of Eskom with the Unions and they feel that at the top they are not doing enough to challenge Eskom; people have lost their control and say in the Union. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)
\end{quote}

This contributed to a more passive participatory culture among workers where not only were they unlikely to engage in industrial action, they were also increasingly less likely to be involved in broader COSATU events such as May Day celebrations. Some workers felt that this was reflective of a broader shift in the nature of participation in the Union and the way NUM was organised. There was a belief that the Union had lost a \textit{sense of urgency} with regards to mobilising its members for Union gatherings. Kwanele, a ‘utility

\textsuperscript{62} Although there was a degree of disagreement as to whether this was a terminal decline or one that could be redressed through a radical organisational overhaul.
man’ at Duvha, for example, raised a common complaint that their regional leaders no
longer sought to organise wider Union gatherings:

[In the past] those people from the regional office hired some buses like for going to stadiums
and they tried to tell the people what we are as a Union and what we are doing. But now that has
all changed… When the new government take over and changed things. Maybe it’s different
because in the old times we were fighting with the apartheid government but now its our own
people maybe we must compromise. I don’t know but it’s changed the way we act I’m telling you.
(Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

This declining sense of urgency to mobilise their members actively was also said
to be reflected in the lack of ‘incentives’ that NUM offered. Workers often complained
about a seemingly superficial issue - union merchandise. This was a widespread bugbear
among workers who often said that they could not remember the last time they had been
given NUM t-shirts, caps or tracksuits. When I asked Kwanele, for example, why he felt
that this was important, he explained it was

because if you have twins you buy them look-alike clothing and they are proud of their father
because they say ‘our father looks after us because we are twins he bought us the same clothes’. I
think that people down here they feel the same about those things. It gives them pride you see.
(Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

Other workers explained that wearing a union t-shirt gave them a sense of belonging and
purpose. The lack of merchandise fed into a broader sentiment that the Union ‘doesn’t
care anymore’63 and that the Union’s leadership was no longer concerned with creating a
sense of unity among its members, whether it be through merchandise or by mobilising
them for Union gatherings.

The participatory culture was thus changing within the Union and this was
reflected in declining attendance levels resulting from the Union’s own internal
shortcomings as well as the changing demographic base of its membership. While the
more skilled members were less likely to attend meetings, what was extremely troubling
for shop stewards was that the disillusionment felt by workers with regards to oligarchic
tendencies in the Union and the inability to strike was fuelling the perception among the

---

63 Some workers said that they had seen fellow members leaving to join NUMSA which was more
proactive in supplying its members with t-shirts and caps.
more active ‘old men’ in the Union that participating in the Union was futile, leading them to disengage. What transpired was that NUM was facing a major ‘crisis’ according to officials, shop stewards and ordinary members. While there was no clear consensus as to who was to blame for this, what was agreed by members and officials at all levels was that this declining rate of participation in NUM was the ‘greatest challenge’ they faced, one that regional and national leaders argued was widespread across other industries within which NUM mobilised (Interviews with Piet Matosa 25/05/07; Job Matsepe 25/04/08).

The problem of falling union attendances is not restricted to NUM in Eskom; this trend has been witnessed in other unions at various worksites in South Africa (see for example Bramble 2003; Kenny 2005). Theorists of collective action have long claimed that collective identities and solidarities are formed through the everyday participation and interaction between the members of trade unions or social movements (see Polletta and Jasper 2001). Indeed, as was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, advocates of a new SMU hold that a strong participatory ethos for trade unions is essential for building and sustaining rank and file militancy (Moody 1997a). Worker involvement in union affairs would be essential if a new independent left politics was to emerge from ‘below’. Such an initiative is also unlikely to be successfully led from ‘above’ by leaders if workers are disengaged and alienated from their unions and their leaders. The evidence presented here, as I will now conclude, suggests that while the increasing demobilisation of NUM in Eskom - reflective of broader trends elsewhere – raises serious questions about whether the trade unions are in a position to join, let alone instigate, a new class based politics.
Conclusion

What can this insight into the radically altered social, political and institutional context of the post-apartheid era, and its impacts on grassroots trade union organisation, reveal to us about the contours of South African politics? Seeing as the thesis is based on a single case study, any generalisations must remain fairly tentative. What the case study evidence can do, however, is challenge certain mechanical readings of the relationship between class and nationalist politics.

Rosa Luxemburg identified social democratic parties and the trade union bureaucracy as a force that would suppress the revolutionary potential of the working class. However, she predicted that as workers’ self confidence grew, nothing could ultimately prevent the ‘volcano’ of working class militancy erupting and sparking radical political change. She argued that:

> Whether they stand aside or endeavour to resist the movement … trade union leaders, like the [social democratic] party leaders… will simply be swept aside by the rush of events, and the economic and political struggles of the masses will be fought out without them. (quoted in Smith 2005: 11)

There is certainly a great deal of scholarship that points to the growing bureaucratisation of COSATU’s leadership, and argues that this has led to a degree of demobilisation of the federation’s rank-and-file membership, which has served to stymie their militancy (Bramble 2003: 189-191; Buhlunugu 2002: 15; Desai 2008; Gall 1997: 206; Maree 1998: 35-42; Van Driel 2003: 78). Other scholars have argued that where rank-and-file militancy has been evident, COSATU’s leadership have channelled this militancy away from a broader political challenge to the ANC’s neo-liberal nationalist project (Ceruti 2008; Bond 2007). For those that argue the ANC’s nationalist project has merely augmented a new form of ‘class apartheid’ (Bond 2000), such a demobilisation would reflect the kind of suppression of the union rank and file that Rosa Luxemburg observed, which has undermined the potential for industrial unrest to reach its ‘natural’ conclusion - the formation of a ‘burgeoning mass movement’ of class-based actors who, in a variety
of contexts, have become disillusioned with the ANC (Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; 2010; Ceruti 2008).

On the surface, some of the sentiments expressed by Eskom workers paint the classic picture of rank-and-file union members of a who feel that their militancy has been suppressed by a bureaucratic union leadership. However, scratching below the surface of these sentiments, one uncovers a great deal of complexity in the relationship between workers and their leaders and, ultimately, between trade unions and the post-colonial state in South Africa.

The demobilisation of NUM in Eskom, according to its members, has resulted from a bewildering range of factors, some of which connected and some of which discreet. They include: a bureaucratic and even ‘corrupted’ national leadership; the breakdown of democratic traditions within NUM at particular worksites, whether this is caused by local or national leaders; the individualism of the ‘younger’, highly skilled workers; the abuse of union structures by careerist individuals using them as a stepping stone towards social mobility; the erosion of the mobilising capacity of the union due to the legal restraints on striking, whether caused by ‘the government’, the ‘dirty tricks’ of Eskom, or the incompetence and/or corruption of national leaders; and, finally, the related loss of the Union’s core identity as the ‘union of toyi toyi’ and the despondency that has resulted.

This myriad of (often contradictory) explanations of union demobilisation highlights the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all theories of oligarchic bureaucratic leadership stymieing rank-and-file militancy. The radically altered social, political and institutional context of the post-apartheid era have not simply led to the growing gap between union members and the rank-and-file, but have actually led to a multiplicity of agents pulling the Union in different directions. For example, while the leadership have ‘pulled’ the Union towards more centralised, bureaucratic and professionalised forms of
organisation, this has been countered in some cases by rank-and-file pressures for greater worker-control and union militancy. In other cases, however, this leadership strategy is supported, usually implicitly, by the growing ranks of workers who view the Union in a relatively passive manner as a service provider rather than a militant vehicle of collective solidarities. In short, while the leadership and certain sections of the membership have been ‘pulled apart’ amidst the radical transformations brought about by the post-apartheid era, in other cases they have drawn closer together. Rather than reading the situation as being ordinary union members vs. union leadership, it is just as prescient to highlight the fact that schisms have opened up within the rank-and-file as well as between the rank-and-file and the union leadership in some cases.

I am, therefore, not concluding that Ceruti, Bond, Desai et al are wrong to highlight rank-and-file resistance to the ANC’s economic agenda, or the manner in which this has, in many cases, been suppressed by a bureaucratic leadership. What I am arguing is that what these accounts do not adequately take into consideration are changes occurring within the working class and the manner in which the ANC’s nationalist project is not provoking singular forms of class agency; such readings do not account for the complexity and nuances of the manner in which the organised working class experience deracialised capitalism and also how they respond to it.

This point will be highlighted once more in the next chapter, which will analyse workers’ attitudes towards the political role of NUM and the wider relationship between South Africa’s trade unions and the ruling party.
CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF NUM

Introduction

Trade Unions have played a pivotal role in popular struggles against colonialism (Berg and Butler 1964; Davies 1966; Freund 1988), neo-liberal economic reforms (Beckman & Sachikonye 2001; Sibanda & Nyamukapa 2000) and also in heading calls for democratisation across Africa (Kraus et al 2007a). In some instances, such as Namibia (Jauch 2010) and Zimbabwe before the 1990s (Raftopoulos and Sachikonye (eds) 2001; Schiphorst 1996), trade union federations have played a subordinate role to the national liberation movement in the post-colonial period, often reduced to performing a ‘conveyor belt’ function for the ruling party. In many areas of Africa, however, independent trade union federations have provided a constant source of discomfort for incumbent regimes as they represent an independent power base and hold an unrivalled capacity for political mobilisation in African civil society (Freund 1988; Kraus 2007). In Zambia and Zimbabwe, for example, trade union federations were responsible for spearheading the formation of opposition parties which eventually unseated the incumbent regime in Zambia (Bratton 1992; Larmer 2006; Rakner 1992), and arguably would have defeated Zimbabwe’s nationalist movement, ZANU PF, had elections been free and fair (Alexander 2000; Matombo and Sachikonye 2010; Raftopoulos and Sachikonye (eds) 2001).

If South Africa is witnessing the beginning of a post-nationalist politics, characterised by a new, class-based struggle against the exhausted nationalist project of the ANC (Alexander 2002; Bond 2000; 2010; Saul 2005), it remains to be seen what role the trade unions will play in this. According to some commentators, it is the
conservatism, co-optation or simply the narrow strategic outlook of union leaders that has prevented COSATU affiliates thus far from forming organic linkages with social movements (Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008; Ngwane 2003) or looking to challenge the ANC at the polls through the formation of an independent workers’ party (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002). This narrow strategic outlook, it is argued, was epitomised by COSATU’s support for Jacob Zuma in the ANC’s succession battle (Bassett and Clarke 2008; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a), a claim I will return to at the end of the chapter. There is, however, a body of literature that contests these assertions, pointing to national survey evidence which suggests that COSATU’s strategy is widely supported among the members of its affiliate unions (Buhlunlu et al 2006b; Ebrahim 2002; Pillay 2006; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b). It is to this issue of union members’ attitudes towards the Alliance which this chapter will be focused on.

The chapter will begin with a discussion of the current strategic dispossession of NUM’s national leadership and it will be argued that the Union’s strategy of engaging within the ANC-led alliance is firmly embedded in both COSATU’s and NUM’s strategy. The national leadership are resolutely supportive of the Alliance and are averse to the idea of a radical political split involving the Unions or the SACP at this time.

Second, it will be analysed whether this illustrates that COSATU’s and NUM’s leaders are in someway ‘out of touch’ with the sentiments of NUM’s rank-and-file. Two strategic ‘currents’ are identified within the Union’s membership in Eskom which, although radically different in their outlook towards the Alliance, share the overriding aversion to a political breakaway held by Union leaders. The first of these currents sees NUM’s engagement in the Alliance in pragmatic terms as the best means for expanding workers’ influence in the national political arena and in political terms as part of their most desired strategy of working within, and not against, the ANC. These attitudes are not informed by ignorance of the ANC’s policy agenda, as some authors have suggested
(Habib and Taylor 1999b). Instead, they are based on rational calculations of how best workers’ interests can be represented within the institutions of the post-apartheid state. They are therefore rooted in sophisticated understandings of their relationship to the post-apartheid state and, by extension, the ANC government, which is not framed as being either inherently antagonistic or without difficulties. Instead, these workers demonstrate a pluralistic understanding of the democratic era, in which their ‘voices’ are just some among many competing social interests vying for influence.

However, a sizable minority of workers forms the second current of opinion, which is characterised by hostility towards the continuation of the Alliance, but for pragmatic, rather than political reasons. There is support among this section of the workforce for a de-coupling of the Union from national politics completely, which is rooted in an understanding that trade unionism should be depoliticised and focused on the workplace alone. This current of opinion is once again based on logical calculations of how best to advance and defend workers’ interests in the post-apartheid era. They are not, however, advocating the formation of a new political movement by the trade unions.

The chapter will end with a discussion of the strategic implications of Jacob Zuma’s election as ANC President following the Polokwane leadership battle. It will be argued that this has served to prolong the status quo within the Alliance and has quelled any substantial drive for a new form of unionism or a left wing electoral alternative from COSATU’s leadership and also, in this case, both NUM’s leaders and its rank-and-file membership in Eskom.

4.1 Alliance politics at the national level: little room for manoeuvre

4.1.1 NUM’s leadership attitudes towards the Alliance

As the first chapter discussed, COSATU’s leadership remain firmly committed to the federation’s position within the Tripartite Alliance and NUM’s leadership are similarly
supportive of the Alliance. NUM resolved to be more than a ‘helmet and
overalls/gumboots’ union focused solely on shopfloor issues. These resolutions were
taken in the 1980s as NUM and its leaders became the driving forces behind the
formation of COSATU (Allen 2005; Baskin 1991; Moodie 2010). In the 2006 NUM
Secretariat Report, authored by Gwede Mantashe, NUM spelled out its commitment to
building working class influence within the ANC:

The National Union of Mineworkers must appreciate the importance of the ANC that continues
to be biased towards the working class and committed to the eradication of poverty. Class-
consciousness, among the cadres of the movement, must not be taken for granted. Continuous
engagement is not a choice but a “must do” for us. This will help the union understand the
political dynamics better. This is an important confirmation that our past resolution on building
ANC branches in every mine was correct. It is through these mine-based ANC branches that our
members will get an opportunity to participate, as individual activists, in the structures of the
ANC. This is in line with our understanding that suggesting that the working class is the leading
and primary motive force cannot be proclaimed but earned. The ANC is our movement; we must
build and defend it. (Mantashe 2006)

The Alliance structures, and the ANC in particular, were both described as ‘contested
terrains’ (or words to that effect) by NUM leaders. Engaging within the Alliance
structures and the ANC itself was thus framed as part of a strategy of ‘steering’ the ANC
and giving it a ‘working class bias’ (Interview with Lesiba Seshoka 31/05/07). NUM
therefore sees its members’ involvement in the ANC as essential for providing the
‘political conditions’ necessary for attaining its aims in the workplace and beyond

This commitment to jostle for influence within the Alliance in part reflects the
unrivalled access NUM has within these structures in relation to other COSATU
affiliates. Since the late 1980s its former leaders have assumed prominent positions in the
Alliance structures and within the ANC itself.

In this respect, NUM holds perhaps the closest relationship with the Alliance
partners out of COSATU’s affiliates. As well as being active in both the ANC and SACP,
NUM leaders have regular bilateral meetings with the leaders of each party and do not
simply rely on COSATU for this input, as other affiliates are forced to do. As NUM’s
General Secretary, Frans Baleni explained:
Look we have our own alliances with the ANC. For example, we had one meeting last year where we met with officials of the ANC and our national office bearers and it was the first meeting after our Congress in 2006. We outlined our vision during our term and indicated issues - for example issues within regional electricity distribution – so we do have those kind of bilaterals. We also have bilaterals with the SACP at a national level so we’re not just relying on COSATU, we just act. For example I’m having a meeting tomorrow with the Secretary General of the ANC Kgalema Motlanthe in a one-to-one. (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07)

The meeting which Kgalema referred to was a one-to-one discussion about ‘political issues’ regarding the ANC succession race at the upcoming Polokwane Conference to be held a month later (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07). On a day-to-day level then, the NUM exerts a great deal of influence within the Alliance structures. As one national office bearer stated:

Look I think we are better placed in terms of influence because we have broad networking and fortunately those who are in the position of leadership have not severed their ties with the NUM. [For example] we can call on Cyril Ramaphosa in the business community and engage him on a range of issues. We can call the representative of the president in parliament and we can brief the standing committee of parliament around our concern on safety in the mines and so on. We have such a healthy relationship that a draft [parliamentary] bill would be sent to us unofficially so that we can check and make changes and so on. So we think that compared with other unions we do exert a lot of influence. (Interview with NUM national office bearer)64

4.1.2 The national leadership’s attitudes towards the idea of an independent working class politics

NUM leaders were therefore extremely cautious about potentially ‘throwing away’ this influence in pursuit of a radical political strategy that involved the break up of the Alliance. NUM’s leadership were cautious about the political viability of such a move. They said that a break with the Alliance would be a strategic miscalculation for the SACP or COSATU to take because neither organisation was realistically considering such a move at this time, much less being physically ‘ready’ for such a split. Frans Baleni, for example, framed the decision thus:

Look, I think the Alliance is still relevant. It is our duty to ensure that we protect and defend this Alliance. It’s too early to make a rupture … For me, if the SACP is to stand on its own, to contest the election on its own, in the framework of the economic system it would be self destruction. (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07)

---

64 I concealed the official’s identity because he had eluded to a sensitive subject with respect to seeing parliamentary bills before they were presented to parliament.
This idea, that an independent SACP or COSATU forming a workers’ party would be ‘self-destruction’ or ‘suicide’, was regularly expressed by NUM’s leadership.

Other than practical difficulties associated with challenging the ANC at the present time, one of the primary reasons NUM leaders gave for the Alliance still being ‘relevant’ was that they believed there was no groundswell of support among their members for it to be dismantled, much less for a new independent left politics to emerge.

As Piet Matosa, then Regional Chair of the NUM in its Highveld region\textsuperscript{65}, stated:

You will find that in our [Union] meetings there will be a small minority people from other political organisations\textsuperscript{66} who are calling for such things but due to the understanding of the majority of members of the NUM - who were ANC members - those views will be rejected because we are not ready to form a labour party in South Africa. Once that is done again you’ve got no guarantee that the two something million members of COSATU affiliated trade unions will automatically become members of that particular labour party that forms. It would end up being a rescue situation. At a personal level I think [forming a labour party] should be discouraged. (Interview with Piet Matosa 22/06/08)

NUM leaders themselves were thus not only cautious about a new political strategy for the Union, they also said that they would actively resist such a strategy being adopted. NUM’s Deputy General Secretary, Oupa Komane, for example, explained how he reacted in a provincial meeting of the SACP in Gauteng, a faction openly declared its support for the SACP standing independently of the ANC during national elections. He recalled how this faction, calling themselves ‘Bolsheviks’ had raised the issue at the meeting, which even resulted in physical violence between delegates\textsuperscript{67}. Oupa vehemently defended the Alliance at the meeting, brandishing ‘the Bolsheviks’ ‘ultra leftists’\textsuperscript{68}. Oupa explained that these ‘ultra leftist’ elements were deaf to reason and were too radical because they did not acknowledge that the SACP being independent in elections at this

\textsuperscript{65} Now the Deputy President.
\textsuperscript{66} Union leaders would often comment that it was only workers who were members of other political parties, such as the IFP, that would make such calls during meetings.
\textsuperscript{67} Oupa described how ‘man handling’ happened. He laughed as he said ‘it’s quite an irresponsible way of expressing your views’ (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/07)
\textsuperscript{68} When I asked Oupa to explain what he meant by this term ‘ultra-leftist’ he said ‘…they are extra-radical to the point that [their policies] would not be sustainable in the economic condition of the country so ultra-leftists they are always ultra so the word itself describes itself – they are more ultra.’
time would be a ‘one step failure’ and also because their policy prescriptions were ‘unsustainable’, saying that:

Our view was that you cannot abandon the ANC because the ANC is the liberation movement. The ANC is not a socialist formation but it aspires to be socialist. The only organisations and the people that can drive the ANC in the direction that we want it to go are the Alliance partners. (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/07)

Oupa’s distinction between himself and the ‘ultra leftists’ is something that has been employed by Alliance leaders to discredit more radical sections of civil society that have challenged the ANC government (Calland 2006:146-147). After losing the debate to what he admitted was a well organised ‘Bolshevik’ faction, Oupa was not re-elected to the Provincial Executive Committee (PEC). However, Oupa, like other NUM leaders, vowed to continue to resist any moves within the trade union movement or the Alliance partners for a dissolution of the Alliance, even in the watered-down proposals of the ‘ultra leftist’ ‘Bolshevik’ faction.

Echoing COSATU’s own discussion documents (COSATU 1997), NUM leaders said that if COSATU and its affiliates broke away from the Alliance they would face the potential of entering the ‘political wilderness’ and the threat of a more punitive stance being taken towards the unions by the ANC, as could be witnessed in Zimbabwe. Lesiba Seshoka, for example, argued:

If you look at the Zimbabwean situation – I have to make that kind of a comparison – we had ZANU-PF which was working very well with the ZCTU. But as time went on we are having a very different scenario. At the moment, clearly, the ZCTU has formed its own party and there is all the chaos. Quite clearly if you look at it we are just hoping with obvious cause that that doesn’t happen. We must still be in this Alliance, [to] shape policies and ensure that the country moves forward. (Interview with Lesiba Seshoka 31/05/07)

Battling within the Alliance then, was the preferred strategy, rather than forming an independent workers’ party or using their positions within the SACP to agitate for it running independently of the ANC.
4.1.3 The national leadership’s attitudes towards independent social movements

Several authors have advocated that COSATU should form closer links with social movements although they have noted that COSATU itself will only do so if the organisation in question is not hostile to the Alliance organisations (Pillay 2006: 186 see also Alexander 2010: 35; Bassett 2005: 77; Webster and Buhlangu 2004; Xali 2005). The position of NUM officials with regards to social movements is that the Union must engage selectively with such organisations. Ultimately, they perceive this strategy as a means of strengthening the Alliance organisations (see Mantashe 2006: 73-74). They do not, in short, see cooperating with them as part of a broader political project to challenge the ANC.

NUM has therefore been extremely selective about the ‘community movements’ that it will form alliances with. While, for example, NUM was extremely active in its campaign to halt the privatisation of Eskom, this did not extend to forging formal links with social movements such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), which has built a campaign against the commodification of electricity in Soweto. This has included illegally reconnecting people to electricity supplies after they have been cut off for non-payment and resisting the installation of prepaid meters (Egan and Wafer 2006). Frans Baleni explained that while they would ‘talk’ to these movements, they would not form alliances with them over such campaigns:

*Look our engagement is more on privatisation in terms of what can result in job losses. We had a government company that tried to privatise Eskom and we had what was called the ‘Save Eskom Campaign’ and we really prevented government from privatising Eskom; about 30% could have gone at the time. But unfortunately some areas of privatisation that don’t have a direct or immediate impact on job losses we tend not to be hands on there. For example, your prepaid meters, we tend to turn a blind eye to those things. The community can be more vocal on those kinds of issues…. Look I think that we get worried when there [are] illegal connections because those illegal connections has an impact to our members. For example, it will have an impact on revenue generation and will affect the bottom line which will have a negative consequence to our membership. Obviously there are [also] dangers involved [with illegal connections] so there is the safety issue. (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/2007)*

Frans’ deputy, Oupa Komane, was similarly cautious about pursuing official links between NUM and groups like the SECC. Like other national leaders, he was concerned
that electricity supply had to be ‘sustainable’ if people were being reconnected after not paying, and that ultimately users had to pay for the service. NUM has supported the first 50 Kilowatts of electricity used by every household in South Africa being free – something that the SECC has campaigned for – but his sympathy towards the SECC and its campaigns appeared to end there. He said he was against reconnecting those that didn’t pay and that while the main reason for ‘non-payment’ of electricity bills related to the persistence of unemployment in black communities,

there is another situation that I have observed when I was working in Soweto – the culture of non-payment – I think it’s a culture that is instilled in the bloodstream of the residents there. Even those that can pay, because of the culture of non-payment found it unnecessary to pay. This makes the job of the government much more difficult. I think I recall at that time they were playing the flat tariff rate of 33 Rand 50 cent per month. Now 33 Rand 50 cent per month, for God’s sake, it can’t be exorbitant. But you still find people reluctant to pay under the pretence that they can’t afford. (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/2007)

Ultimately, this awkward embrace of independent civil society reflects the way in which NUM’s leadership is still trying to adjust the Union to the post-apartheid social and political context. Rather than seeing ‘horizontal linkages’ with civil society organisations as an important component of union strategy, as some authors do (Webster and Buhlunugu 2004), NUM leaders remain steadfastly committed to both the political Alliance with the ANC and SACP and also the broader strategy of engagement with the post-apartheid state. They are therefore extremely cautious of forging ahead with any new political initiative that could either endanger the power of the Alliance or the capacity of trade unions to engage effectively (in a cooperative manner) within the institutional spaces opened up in the post-apartheid period. Within NUM’s membership in Eskom, however, there are two currents of opinion with divergent views on the merits of COSATU’s alliance with the ANC and SACP.
4.2 Current 1: workers in support of the ANC-led alliance

4.2.1 Workers’ pragmatic support for the Alliance

The SWOP surveys revealed that, just like COSATU members’ support for the ANC, support for the Alliance remains remarkably consistent and has never fallen below 64 per cent of those surveyed (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for the Alliance to continue after the next election, by percentage (SWOP Survey)\(^69\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support Alliance</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACP alone</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC alone</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New workers’ party</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-aligned</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another party/ies</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note n/a = question not asked in the survey

The low percentages of workers supporting the formation of an independent workers’ party (7 per cent) or an independent SACP (4 per cent) leads Devan Pillay to conclude that COSATU workers appear to have ‘little stomach’ for an independent working class politics and yet ‘neither do they want a narrow nationalist politics’, as can be inferred from the low levels of support for the ANC going it alone (Pillay 2006: 179). Instead, it would appear that the majority of workers support the status quo being maintained and that they see the Alliance as the best means to ensure workers’ interests are represented in parliament (Cherry 2006).

\(^69\) See Pillay 2006: 178. I am aware that the figures for 1994 do not add up to 100 per cent. However, this is how the figures are listed by the SWOP survey team.
A popular sentiment on the ground was that NUM had to be involved in national politics in order to influence decisions made there. As one worker argued:

I think as a worker you always want to shape the developments of the government so it’s basically for those reasons that as NUM we need to change, for example, the legislation affecting the workers. We need to be involved so that the [legislation] can suit the workers and they can advance what the workers want. (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/2007)

The Alliance, it was argued, gave workers a ‘platform’ to raise their issues to government and to ensure that they would not be ignored. The Alliance was regularly framed as an intricate balancing act, in which the different parties had to ‘advise one another’ to make sure the country was governed ‘correctly’, and that without COSATU being in the Alliance, there would be no one to hold the government to account. One worker, Guguletu, who worked in a secretarial role, summarised this sentiment quite succinctly:

When we are talking about the Alliance, we are talking about different bodies in one. So each body which forms an alliance is bringing in something different from its side. So let’s say COSATU brings something for the workers and then the government is the ANC and it’s bringing us something else and then you come to SACP and it’s bringing something itself and then when you put all those facts or knowledge together, then you get something very strong. But as individuals [outside the Alliance] I don’t think we are going to make it. When we take the three and form that alliance as we did before I think it was a very good idea and if that can be driven properly I’m telling you it’s very much dynamic; we can get great results from it to build up South Africa. But when we separate them and let them work as individuals I don’t think we’ll manage. I don’t see any light if we start doing that. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/2007)

These pragmatic rationalisations for the continuation of the Alliance were extremely common among workers and support the finding of the SWOP survey team that workers identify the Alliance as the most logical and effective means of making sure their interests are carried into parliament (Buhlunger 2006b; Cherry 2006; Cherry and Southall 2006; Maree 1998). It reflects the relatively privileged position of the organised working class within the post-apartheid institutional context: COSATU arguably yields a greater amount of influence over economic policy than any other civil society organisation. Cherry argues that this privileged level of access that COSATU maintains ensures that ‘While the distance between the ordinary trade union member and the national legislature may still be long, it is certainly shorter than that experienced by most workers in Africa, if not most of the world’ (Cherry 2006: 150). It is also partly as a result
of this that COSATU members have experienced some significant improvements to their standard of living (Cherry 2006; Harcourt and Wood 2003; Pillay 2006), ones that Southall and Wood argue should not be dismissed by those advocating a breakup of the Alliance (1999a; 1999b). It would therefore be unfair to attribute, as Habib and Taylor do (1999b see also Harvey 2002), the continued support among workers for the Alliance and the ANC as being down to their lack of comprehension of macroeconomic policies such as GEAR. Instead, what the qualitative evidence presented here suggests is that workers carefully evaluate the political scene and, in the majority of cases, come to the ‘rational’ conclusion that the Alliance serves as the most logical form of interest representation for workers and their unions.

4.2.2 Workers’ political support for the Alliance

There was often, however, a political/ideological dimension informing workers’ support for the Alliance and this was reflected in the manner in which the majority of workers were apprehensive about the prospect of an independent working class politics. Shop stewards who had received more extensive ‘political education’ through NUM, and who generally had more exposure to ANC and SACP politics, expressed this in grander meta-narratives about ‘working class power’ and the ‘balance of forces’ within the ANC’s ‘broad church’. For them, the prospect of a breakaway formation was not only remote, it was also politically untenable. As one shop steward, who was also a member of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) said:

The Alliance will continue for a long time and it should continue for a long time. I don’t think a situation should or must arise whereby the SACP or COSATU that wants to dislodge themselves from the ANC ... because you can’t have workers’ freedom if you don’t have political power because most working class are black people, Africans in particular. The ANC gives us that political power and... [through that] political power you can struggle for the working class emancipation and the economic power. I also think [this debate] is something that is less relevant these days because now [with Zuma] we should be working more strongly towards strengthening the Alliance; it’s still relevant. (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/2007)
Like the national leadership, this politically savvy layer of workers would often make references to the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the working class position within it. They would often say that the ANC was an ‘open house’ and that ‘working class influence’ must be maintained through proactive engagement in the ANC’s structures. While in some cases there was a mention of the ‘two stage’ National Democratic Revolution – that liberal democracy was merely a prelude to a socialist/communist revolution – even those that held this opinion were of the mind that the conditions were not right for such a move and that working class interests could still be best pursued within the ANC for the foreseeable future.

Ordinary members were often similarly apprehensive about the idea of an independent working class politics, even if they did not express it in relation to some of these broader political concepts. Workers’ assessed the political scene carefully, and in nearly all cases – even among the very small minority that supported such a move in the long term – it was felt that a new workers’ party or an independent SACP would ‘go nowhere’ and would be a ‘disaster’ because it would be ‘destroyed’ (or words to that effect) by the ANC. This cannot be attributed simply to the caution of the COSATU and NUM’s national leadership filtering down to the grassroots: workers simply said that they did not foresee either themselves or a significant number of their colleagues supporting such a party. These attitudes are rooted in the strong bonds of attachment that these workers had with the ANC, which I will discuss in the next chapter. They are also grounded in their understanding that the ANC was not a ‘lost cause’ and could be held to account from ‘within’, as I will discuss in chapter 7. For now, it appears, forming a political alternative appears both irrational and politically untenable for the vast majority of these workers, attitudes that appear to support the statistical data of SWOP (Pillay 2006: 179).
Another insight gleaned from this qualitative approach was that the question of an alliance split was not something that was debated often in union structures, nor among workers themselves. Workers would often respond to my questions about the Alliance and the possibility of a workers’ party challenging the ANC with almost rye amusement, which I took to be a response to the manner in which I ascribed emphasis to an issue which, they told me, ‘is not really discussed’. It was also clear from the increasingly depoliticised nature of Union meetings that such broader political debates were not on the Union agenda either, as I will discuss further below.

This was not to say that there were no workers who supported a radical change in Alliance politics. The danger with this research, as with most research into contemporary politics, is that one is dealing with ever-changing political realities and there is always the potential for workers switching allegiances to a rival political formation once it had been established and then offering post-hoc rationalisations as to why they had disregarded their previous support for the ANC. In this regard, I wanted to look beyond whether workers supported COSATU making such a move in the first place – which they clearly didn’t at the present time – and to ask them whether, if a party was formed in the future (‘above their heads’, so to speak), that they would ‘consider’ lending their support to such a party. When I asked workers if they would consider voting for an independent workers’ party in the interviews they would often shrug and state that ‘of course I would consider it’ but that they would only consider leaving the ANC and/or changing their voting patterns in what they framed as improbable and exceptional circumstances where the ANC had been ‘completely lost’. One issue that emerged from the interviews was that those workers that said they would ‘consider’ voting for an alternative left-wing party often did so and rationalised this by saying that they would have to consider it in order to

---

70 I am grateful to Andrew Lawrence for raising this issue with me when commenting on my original research proposal.
keep the ANC itself ‘on track’ because it was, after all they said, workers’ votes that were ‘exchanged’ for political influence within the ANC government and they could not ‘give away our votes for free’. Once again, the overriding sentiment was that all avenues for regenerating the ANC would have to have been blocked before any talk of an alternative formation could be taken seriously. Workers who said they would consider supporting a breakaway left-wing formation then framed this as a ‘worst case scenario’ and that such a move would only be necessitated in extreme circumstances. It is worth noting that many of these workers believed that most crises could be managed by ‘struggling’ within the Alliance in the first place, rather than looking immediately for a political alternative, an attitude I will discuss in chapter 7.

A further point of caution should be raised with regards to the issue of workers’ support for an independent workers’ party or SACP: Workers who said that they would consider voting for one of these alternative bodies but were quick to clarify that they meant they wanted some hybrid form of the Alliance to continue functioning, i.e. that the newly independent party would not directly challenge the ANC but be another means of keeping it in line, so to speak. Some workers argued that they would support a workers’ party or SACP having seats in parliament if this was to be part of some kind of Alliance coalition with the ANC in order to make sure a ‘pure’ workers voice was heard in parliament rather than being consumed within the structures of the ANC. They insisted it might ‘scare’ the ANC and force it to ‘toe the line’.

4.2.3 Workers’ wariness about alliances with independent movements

The literature on ‘union revitalisation’ advocates a form of ‘social movement unionism’ where trade unions forge ‘horizontal’ links with social movements and other civil society actors who share the same interest in resisting globalisation (Webster and Buhlunngu 2004; Wood and Dibben 2006). 88 per cent of workers surveyed by SWOP agreed or
strongly agreed that their union should forge active links with community organisations, civil society grouping and social movements (Pillay 2006:185). However, Pillay notes that this offers a fairly vague picture and is open to interpretation. He asks: ‘does it mean new social movements hostile to the Alliance, critical but sympathetic groups such as the TAC, or more compliant groups such as SANCO, or all groups that take up working class issues?’ (Pillay 2006: 186).

Indeed, when I put the question to NUM members in Eskom they often sought clarification as to exactly which groups I was referring to when I asked them if they believed NUM should forge links with them. In general, workers made the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) (a member of the ANC-led Alliance), synonymous with ‘community organisations’ and ‘social movements’, and were broadly in favour of NUM having links with the organisation: there was little or no name recognition with respect to groups such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) or the umbrella organisation, the Anti Privatisation Forum (APF). Once again, forming links with community organisations was not an issue that they said was discussed within the Union and it was framed as an extremely peripheral concern by nearly all of the workers I spoke to. This is particularly interesting in light of the important role Eskom plays in service delivery in South Africa.

While NUM and COSATU have mounted campaigns against Eskom’s price increases in recent years, and debates around whether to build active links with community struggles have been evident at the national level of NUM (Mantashe 2006), the leadership of the social movements (Ngwane 2003) and among academics (Ceruti 2008; Webster and Buhlunlu 2004). However, it appear that there is notably less interest in this issue among ordinary NUM members and it was certainly apparent to me that workers were not agitating for such linkages to be forged. When, for example, I gave workers more details about the campaigns these groups were mounting, they displayed a
fairly ambivalent attitude. They were, on the one hand, often extremely sympathetic to the causes that the SECC in particular was fighting for. However, as I will discuss in section 6.2.5, workers were often quite hostile towards the ‘undisciplined’ and ‘irrational’ tactics which they felt some of South Africa’s social movements, such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, employed. For them, community problems could be addressed in a relatively unproblematic fashion through the ‘rational’ engagement in local ANC structures, street and ward committees, and the local councillor’s office, rather than engaging in illegal reconnections (which they framed as irresponsible and dangerous), or through ‘howling in the streets’ which, they argued, was counter-productive. They were extremely cautious about NUM potentially being drawn into support for such movements, arguing that ‘it must be very careful’ and ‘watch out’ because some of these movements had ‘no discipline’. They were also extremely worried about linking with ‘anti’ government protesters, which they feared were anti-ANC. ‘How anti?’ they would often ask, stating that while it was okay to be critical of government, they did not advocate their union forging links with groups that represented themselves as being ‘for the community’ but who ultimately were led by ‘political’ motivations to topple the ANC. It was usually said that they would need to ‘know all the facts’ so that they could be sure they were not aligning themselves with potentially ‘hostile forces’ \(^7\) who just wanted to ‘destabilise South Africa’.

4.3 The second current: ‘gumboots and overalls’ unionism from below?

4.3.1 Workers in pragmatic opposition to the Alliance

While the majority of workers support the continuation of the Alliance for both pragmatic and political reasons, there is a sizeable minority that are opposed to it. The

\(^7\) Often workers would speculate that the people involved in these movements were aligned to the ANC’s political rivals, such as the IFP.
SWOP surveys have shown a gradually declining level of support for the Alliance among ordinary COSATU members since 1994, although this appears to have remained fairly stable since. In 2004, 64 per cent of those surveyed supported the continuation of the alliance compared with 76 per cent in 1994 and 64 per cent in 1999. Despite this relative consistency, the number of workers saying that they would prefer COSATU not to be aligned with any political party has risen from 3 per cent in 1999 to 15 per cent in 2005.

A significant minority of NUM members were of a similar disposition. Issues such as unemployment and housing, as well as Zimbabwe, came up frequently among workers when they complained about the dysfunction of the Alliance and the tendency of workers’ interests to be overridden. Mluleki, for example, who was an artisan at Arnot and an avid ANC supporter, argued that it was as if the Alliance partners were going in opposite directions, using the analogy of two towns at opposite ends of the country:

You see the problem with the Alliance is that the ANC will say tomorrow ‘we’re gonna go to Grahamstown’ but then tomorrow COSATU follows them to Grahamstown and the ANC goes off to Nelspruit. You see the problem? What often happens is [the ANC and COSATU] agree to implement this or that laws because they are in favour of working class, but then later that day on the news at seven o clock the ANC has changed its position and talks a different story. You see? How do I trust you? Because the ANC is power, you just use COSATU to get what they want. COSATU must be independent to push the ANC to implement the policies we agreed. (Emphasis added, interview with Eskom worker 21/12/2007)

Clearly, Mluleki, an ANC voter, was not anti ANC per se, but felt that the Alliance was failing to function in a practical sense. Some of these ‘anti-Alliance’ workers often said that they believed the ANC would be more ‘afraid’ of COSATU if it were a separate entity, and that the unions would be able to ‘push’ the ANC harder if it were independent. Nhlahla, for example, expressed this in terms that were often used by workers; that being in the Alliance led to a paternalistic attitude on the part of the ANC and that, as a result, the Unions subordinated themselves ‘like a child to his father’. He said it would empower the Union to leave the Alliance:

---

72 Sometimes workers would say that the government’s failure to condemn attacks on workers by Mugabe, or generally just to critique his economic policies, were clear of examples of how COSATU positions would be ignored.
I don’t like COSATU to be involved with the ANC because the ANC is now the government. You can’t just *toyi toyi* because we are joined. It’s like the kids: you can’t just *toyi toyi* for your father that he didn’t bring the money home at the end of the month you see, because it’s your father. We make a mistake to be joined. We need to be separate[d] then you can drive ANC. Because now the ANC is the boss like the old apartheid government, and as COSATU we need to say to ANC: ‘We [are] watching you. If you don’t make a change we *toyi toyi*.’ I think COSATU must leave ANC, form COSATU alliance alone then we can get maybe 10 per cent [salary increase] at least. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/2007)

Nhlahlwa’s statement should not be read as anti-ANC. He was, after all a firm supporter of the ANC who expressed his continued political loyalties towards the organisation. His attitude was reflective of the opinion held by a section of Eskom workers who were sceptical of COSATU’s ability to command influence within the Alliance and held the view that COSATU would be better able to represent workers’ interests if it was independent, as this would give it greater leverage than the subordinate role it found itself in now.

Some workers were also concerned about the debilitating effects the Alliance was having on their own union’s organisation. This manifested itself in the sentiment that NUM should concentrate more on workers’ immediate material concerns in the workplace. After all, they said, this was the reason they had joined NUM in the first place. Workers would often argue that NUM had become detached from its members and its core priorities and had ‘forgotten’ about them because it was always ‘concentrating on politics’. As Million, a boiler worker at Duvha said, for example, the leaders were:

Too close to the government and then they forget about us you see what I am talking about is that you find we have something that is not good for us the workers and we are going to say our union is not doing enough for us because you find it takes them a long time to come and talk to us. (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/2007)

For some of these workers who were against the Alliance, NUM’s organisational shortcomings, such as declining democracy and transparency, the inability to strike, its ‘failure’ in wage negotiations and so on, were at least in part attributable to its overly close relationship with the party in government. For example, Mhambi, who was a shop steward and was extremely active within the Union and local ANC structures. Like many
workers who were critical of the alliance, Mhambi was concerned that being ‘too close’ to the ANC in government meant that COSATU leaders could be easily co-opted and thereby neglect workers’ interests because:

[As a COSATU leader] you find that maybe you are not fighting for something [for workers] because your intention is that you want to be elected at Limpopo for an ANC position. Let’s say I’m Vavi. I want to be on the seats for the [ANC’s] NEC. Then now they are bringing the issue [to Vavi] to say we need to do 1, 2, 3 in terms of workers [which is against their interests]. Then I [as Vavi] will say ‘maybe it might work, let’s try it’. You see now I am no longer serving the interests of workers. Hence … I strongly believe it [the Alliance] cannot work. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/2007)

Workers who held this view were strikingly clear about the action they would prescribe for NUM and trade unions in general: COSATU, and its affiliates, they said, must leave the alliance and not be involved in politics at all in order to concentrate on ‘workers issues’ as opposed to ‘politics’ or the ‘government issues’.

At this point, however, a crucial distinction needs to be made explicit: anti-alliance sentiment did not necessarily (if at all) reflect an anti-ANC sentiment, nor did it feed into a broader call for NUM to adopt a radical oppositional political strategy. Instead, anti-alliance sentiments often reflected a demand for the depoliticisation of the Union. Workers who expressed disaffection with the Alliance, often did so as long-standing ANC supporters: the shortcomings of the Alliance were often blamed on the way it was being run under Mbeki at the time, or from an instrumental logic that COSATU would do better independently as a trade union federation, not as a political rival to the ANC.

4.3.2 Towards a depoliticised NUM?

An underlying assumption made by those advocating that the unions should form their own electoral alternative to the ANC is that the unions are in a practical position to do so – unlike the current opposition parties or fragmented sections of civil society – because

73 It is worth noting that Vavi has declined to become a member of the NEC, saying that it would be a conflict of interest with his position as COSATU General Secretary.
they have organisational capacity to do so and can potentially launch a coherent socioeconomic platform capable of attracting the support of South Africa’s black majority (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001), whose activism would presumably be essential to making such a strategy a success. The above discussion, and also that contained in chapters 2 and 3, questions whether the unions can forge such a new monolithic left wing platform capable of representing an increasingly diverse demographic of workers any better that the ANC’s ‘broad church’ already does. Furthermore, while the above discussion noted how workers in Eskom – and in COSATU more broadly – are not agitating for a new politics to emerge from their unions; NUM itself has become an increasingly depoliticised trade union, according to its members and leaders, which questions the assumption that the unions are, or could be, easily transformed into the engines propelling a new politics.

Buhlungu has argued that there is a tendency for union leaders to be increasingly depoliticised, unlike the ‘activist’ organisers of the apartheid era (Buhlungu 2002) and COSATU’s leadership has also warned there is a danger of its members becoming increasingly depoliticised (Vavi 2006). It was noticeable that both NUM’s officials and Union members on the shopfloor shared the perception that one facet of the changing participatory culture in the Union was the depoliticisation of NUM activities. This first came to my attention in my interviews with workers. A common question (and sometimes complaint) that they raised about my research was that it focused too much on politics: ‘you should be researching more about workers’ issues’ they would often say, no matter what their individual political leanings. Although anecdotal, this reflected the manner in which the Union was becoming an increasingly depoliticised space, an observation that senior officials and shop stewards concurred with.

NUM in Eskom was clearly not a hub of heavily politicised unionism in which broader debates about politics and Union strategy were discussed on a day-to-day level.
This was evident in workers’ accounts of Union meetings as well as my own observations. When I asked workers what is generally discussed at meetings, and whether this included politics, they would often reply that politics was, at the very most, a side issue. In most cases they explained that meetings were restricted almost entirely to workplace issues. Siyanda, who was a boiler worker at Duvha, explained that politics was usually restricted to ‘workplace politics’ rather than broader political issues regarding the Alliance and the ANC government. When I asked what issues were discussed, he answered:

> I can’t say it’s politics. Most of the time when you are in the workplace you tend to forget about politics. The important thing is your work and what you’re getting [paid]. So most of the time you find that everyone is thinking of wages more than politics. But sometimes we talk about some politics that has happened around the power station like maybe the manager in this power station is different from this power station management…. [Generally, however] when we are at work it’s NUM and the workplace issues that we talk about. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/2007)

It was often said that any extra-workplace issues, such as those affecting the local community, could and should only be dealt with by local ANC branch structures, as I will discuss in Chapter 6. Workers said that if their NUM branch committee called a meeting solely on the grounds of a political discussion then ‘nobody would come’. ‘Work issues’ they said, had to come top of the agenda, and Union meetings were noticeably better attended during wage negotiations or when a major workplace dispute had arisen.

In many cases the frequency and quality of ‘political input’ at NUM meetings depended on the political background and education of the branch committee members, who were responsible for delivering the feedback. The fulltime shop steward remarked that political discussions were

> not excluded as such but it’s also being determined by the activism in that particular area or branch. If say your branch leadership or members are active in the ANC, SACP then it will always come in but if not then it gets shelved kind of. (Interview with Joe Skosana 16/05/2008)

If there was any political input, this usually came in the form of a short report from a member of the Branch Executive Committee (BEC). However, the political input was an extremely marginal element of the meeting and, in a revealing manner, workers and shop
stewards alike said that if there was to be any political input this would be ‘attached’ or ‘tagged on’. Workers were often indifferent to political input at meetings, saying that they would get their news about political developments either from the media or through their engagement within the ANC itself. It was not the prerogative of the Union to discuss such things, they often said. John Radebe, the fulltime shop steward for the Gauteng region complained that this was a problem that NUM shop stewards were discussing across the country. He said this was partly to do with the decline of hostels and workers living in close proximity to one another but that it was also symptomatic of a growing depoliticised layer of workers emerging in NUM’s ranks:

In our union involvement in Eskom there are very few branches who talk about those succession battles [in the ANC] and all those things. They are only interested in their bread and butter issues; they don’t talk a lot about these things. You talk about those things if you make your opening speech or the like but you find very little engagement when it comes to that from the floor. Yeah, they don’t really engage so much. (Interview with John Radebe 14/05/2007)

Even where local branch leaders were enthusiastic about generating political discussions, this was often poorly received. Some politically-minded shop stewards would complain that political discussions were usually ‘shelved’ or ‘put to one side’ as a result. During the meetings I attended, and from the testimonies of these shop stewards themselves, when political issues were discussed there was a noticeable lack of interest in the room. Ernest, the Branch Secretary at Arnot, for example, said that this was a cause for concern for him and his shop stewards. He said that even the ANC leadership contest was not discussed in meetings and that this was more broadly reflective of a shift in the post-apartheid era and that workers ‘nowadays’ did not ‘understand’ the Union and its need for political engagement:

Yeah since 1994 it is not race dividing society and maybe now some guys don’t see a need after 94’ for politics. From school they are not taught to debate politics and this kind of stuff, even at ANC meetings the level of knowledge of our people at Eskom is not high in terms of engagement in political issues like for example the debate about [ANC] leadership, people are not, they don’t have the capacity. They come into the workplace, you want to talk to a young guy,

---

74 On one occasion at a shop stewards council, for example, the shop steward giving the report relied on the Chair of the meeting to ask for quiet on several occasions as his report was interrupted by chatter. At the end of the report there were no questions raised, unlike the other reports which were often discussed for over an hour afterward.
you’ll find that he is very very out of touch. We need to get the shop stewards training these people who doesn’t know the union, and who doesn’t know NUM, and other unions. So you have to tell this person this is the union, this is what it does and all these things. And until the next meeting there will be deliberation about how we are going to get a shop steward out of these people who can engage our leadership like [for example] on the capitalist mode of production – they don’t want to hear anything about it. (Interview with Arnot Branch Secretary 20/12/2007)

What this highlights is that NUM in Eskom, at present, could hardly be described as a hive of political activism. Workers simply do not see NUM in primarily political terms. Nor, as the next chapters will elaborate, do they conceive of the Union it as their foremost political champion. Whatever their political colours and attitudes towards the Alliance, the majority of workers seemed to believe that it was not the prerogative of the Union to discuss politics in any great depth during NUM gatherings, much less become the galvanising force behind a new oppositional politics. But should this be unexpected? Scholars around the world have concerned themselves with ‘revitalisation’ strategies aimed at countering what they observe as an increasingly depoliticised ‘service’ model of trade unionism where members only look to their unions for basic protections in the workplace (Moody 1997a; Waterman 2001). Should we therefore assume that after the end of apartheid, and a system which arguably by its very nature necessitated a political form of unionism (Von Holdt 1987; Webster 1988), that the unions would not experience at least a degree of political demobilisation? The case study evidence presented here suggests that NUM members in Eskom no longer see the need for their union to be a hub of political militancy, given the fact that: first, they often have greater opportunities available to them now than before, and greater capacity to pursue these individually rather than through collective solidarity (chapter 2); second, they are increasingly disillusioned and disengaged from the Union itself (chapter 3); and third, that they do not share the view of some analysts that reconfiguring South African politics is either a political necessity or that their union should be responsible for this change.
4.4 NUM and Jacob Zuma

4.4.1 COSATU and the politics of reverse infiltration

In other African countries a persistent problem for trade union organisation has been the manner in which unions are ‘infiltrated’ by the ruling party (Jauch 2010; Schiphorst 2001; Werbner 2010). In South Africa, on the other hand, quite the reverse has been the case. COSATU is regularly lambasted by ANC leaders for attempting to ‘meddle’ within ‘internal’ party affairs. COSATU’s attempts at ‘infiltrating’ the ANC were most visible in the build up to the 2007 ANC conference at Polokwane as Vavi and other COSATU leaders encouraged union members to join in the struggle to oust Mbeki and to support Jacob Zuma. Eddie Webster has described COSATU as the ‘elephant in the room’ at Polokwane, not formally acknowledged but nonetheless a hugely significant player in proceedings (Webster and Callinicos 2008).

Although they were cautious about throwing the Union’s weight behind Zuma explicitly, it was abundantly clear that NUM’s national leaders were supportive of Jacob Zuma, even if that was not the official position taken by the Union itself (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/2007; ). As Chapter 7 will discuss, Zuma was extremely popular from Union leaders right down to the rank-and-file membership. Shop stewards at the lower levels who were engaged in their local branch structures were very open about the manner in which they had actively campaigned for Zuma and they were of the impression that an official Union position had been taken in this regard:

The decision that was taken a long time ago – I think about 2006 – was that we are supporting Zuma and we have never been shy about that and as we are supporting Zuma every member of the Union, especially the leadership, is expected to make sure that wherever he [the leaders] is in meetings or engaging people just in social activities you need to push that position to say why we are saying it is good for us. So we have never shied away from it. (Interview with Joe Skosana 16/05/2008)

NUM members who were ANC branch activists would also discuss how there had been a ‘complete sweep’ at local levels whereby COSATU shop stewards and officials from various affiliates had ‘taken over’ the control of the Branch Executive Committee. For
them, as I will discuss more in chapter 7, this formed part of a broader ‘reclaiming’ of the ANC and getting the post-apartheid project as a whole ‘back on track’ (see also Beresford 2009).

According to Oupa Komane, it was possible to trace a ‘shift’ in the way in which the Alliance was operating in the months following Polokwane and he claimed that ‘the gaps that we had among the Alliance partners have been tremendously closed and we are now having a much more united Alliance than ever before’. For Oupa and other national leaders, the time in which Mbeki had ‘abused state power’ ‘for his own ends’ was over. With Zuma and other new members in the ANC’s ‘top six’ positions, they had a ‘team’ that would ensure government policy would be ‘consistent with the policies of the ANC’ (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/2007).

4.4.2 Criticisms of the trade union support for Zuma
COSATU’s support for Zuma has been criticised by those who argue a Zuma presidency offers little prospect of meaningful transformation and would certainly appear to be a false dawn for the left (Bond 2007; Geruti 2008). The federation’s unrelenting support of Zuma is sometimes framed as a dead-end strategy for the unions (what Desai calls a ‘populist cul-de-sac’) that reflects the failure of COSATU’s leadership to envision and embrace a genuine challenge to the neo-liberal development project of the ANC government (Desai 2005; see also Bassett and Clarke 2008). Some left-wing commentators have highlighted a ‘reviving mass movement’ evident in the mounting unrest and protests in the townships in recent years, as well as the recent wave of strikes that resulted in some of the largest industrial action in the post-apartheid era. For them, COSATU’s support for Zuma reflects a missed opportunity in which a potentially broader revolt against the government’s neo-liberal development project has been
channelled within the narrow and self-defeating confines of the ANC succession battle
(Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008: 107). Ceruti laments that:

For the first time in a decade, union members began to feel their unions were ready to back a
fight. .... Vavi and Nzimande talk of contesting the state in favour of the working class, but the
concept of NDR, which dominates the party and COSATU, limited their replies to the crisis.
Within the NDR frame, the state can only be contested by contesting nationalist organisation –
hence Zuma, rather than a clear labour candidate such as Vavi or Nzimande. Zuma was the
‘natural’ choice for what was essentially a grassroots revolt against neo-liberalism only from the
point of view of a strategy that could not imagine fundamentally new ways of influencing
government policy even while they were helping to call up something quite new on the ground.
(Ceruti 2008: 112)

In a similar vein Bond writes:

the angry rumble from below was readily channelled away from structural critique of neo-liberal
nationalist rule, and into the song Umshini Wami (‘bring me my machine gun’). The prodigious
venality of the Zuma-Mbeki squabble threw copious amounts of toxic dust high into the air,
blinding most to what’s really at stake here: class struggle, to borrow a worn but potent phrase.
(Bond 2007: 5)

Supporting Zuma then has been portrayed as an opportunity lost by these analysts and,
for some authors, has tarnished the moral standing of the federation by being associated
with such a controversial figure (Suttner 2008). It has also served to entrench the ‘insider
politics’ of the ANC according to Bassett and Clarke and with it, COSATU’s
marginalised role in South African politics (Bassett and Clarke 2008: 799).

4.4.3 What expectation of a Zuma presidency did NUM and Eskom workers have?

While Bond is right to argue that there will not be a significant shift in economic policy,
it is a misconception to perceive the COSATU leadership’s response to Zuma’s election
as being entirely hubristic. COSATU’s leaders have, after all, from the time he was
elected, stressed that they did not expect Zuma’s leadership to herald a fundamental
change in direction regarding macroeconomic policy: what they expected was for the
ANC’s policy resolutions to be upheld by a new and more accountable ANC leadership.

NUM leadership, shop stewards and ordinary workers were also realistic about
what they expected Zuma to achieve. Union leaders would often say that they would
expect there to be compromises over policy issues ‘given the material conditions at that
time’ (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/11/2007). Workers would argue that they understood Zuma would not be a ‘messiah’ and a common sentiment was that he will not be able to change everything. As one shop steward remarked: ‘we are not expecting the world to spin a different way’ (Pers comms with NUM shop steward 07/04/2008). Although detailed policy expectations were largely vacant, Zuma was expected to provide a platform and space for a more thoroughgoing interaction with labour so that their views were heard.

Regular workers and their shop stewards were also quick to express their continued vigilance with respect to the new leadership, often exclaiming that the new leaders would have to ‘convince us’ and that there was no ‘blank cheque’. Workers were also quick to express that should Zuma fail to perform where ‘we have put him’, they will seek his replacement. As Mondli, an artisan and local ANC activist told me in the run up to Polokwane:

For me, to my sight, I think it's good because Mbeki is forcing to be a leader again … according to our [ANC] democracy he must move him out so we can get another leader in. If Zuma is not doing good, we'll take him out again and put another one in. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

ANC activists in particular would claim that supporting Zuma was just one part of regenerating the ANC; a means to an end rather than an end in himself. They were also adamant that they would not, as a Union, give Zuma a ‘free ride’ in office, particularly if he ‘deviated’. As one regional leader remarked:

We have said to Zuma you are leading us but we are not going to have a soft spot for you because of we are going to be doing that we are going to destroy our organisation, we just need to be robust when dealing with you (Interview with Mluleki Senena 04/12/07)

Oupa Komane was similarly adamant that the organisational integrity and militancy of NUM was not at threat because of the close alliance COSATU has with Zuma. He said NUM and the unions would ‘take action’ if he attempted to close down dissent within the Alliance as Mbeki had done:

There is nothing [slight pause] - and I need to put this clear - COSATU never said that they support Zuma on the basis that Zuma will do something that COSATU expect [in terms of particular
policies]; no! .... If he deviates and does things that tend to purge the Alliance partners, obviously we will deal with him. It is about a principle, not the individual.

Q: *Deal with him?*

... We will engage him. You see the only way to deal with leaders is to engage them. It depends whether they are responsive to our engagement. Under Thabo, Thabo was not responsive to our engagement and he would actually shout [or shut] down everybody else. ... And nothing stops, we will continue to mobilise the masses and march against the government. (Interview with Oupa Komane 30/12/07)

Workers and shop stewards also claimed that they would continue with 'mass action' and 'go to the streets' when pressed to say what they would do if Zuma failed to meet their expectations. While Eskom workers operated through ANC structures to bring in their preferred candidate into the ANC, they were also careful to withhold an uncritical support of Zuma. According to them, far from foreclosing the option of militancy, the election of the new ANC leadership had expanded and broadened the NUM's scope for engagement in national politics. By renewing the ability of the Alliance to function properly, the election of Zuma had expanded NUM and COSATU’s ability to engage with politics, an engagement they claimed would not be dependent on Zuma’s patronage.

It would appear form the evidence presented here that COSATU’s support for Zuma did not channel a potentially broader revolt *back inside* the ANC and Alliance structures at a time when workers might have otherwise looked *outside* of these structures to address their disaffection with the ANC government. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, in the eyes of these workers, the logical step for workers is (and always has been) to battle *inside* the alliance first, a strategy rooted in the belief that the ANC has the capacity to regenerate (see also Beresford 2009). For these workers, supporting Zuma was not simply a matter of flag-bearing on behalf of the COSATU leadership’s strategy. The manner in which members framed their support for Zuma in relation to issues like domestic violence (discussed in Chapter 7), for example, was scorned by union leaders who said that these workers ‘did not understand Zuma’ or what the Union itself was
fighting for. In this sense, it was clear that workers did not simply get their political queues from their union leaders with respect to their support for Zuma. Instead, it highlights that the majority remain committed to fighting political struggles within the ANC and the Alliance and that this is not reflective of them blindly following their leaders' strategy.

**Conclusion**

In the previous two chapters I have argued that NUM, like other COSATU affiliates, has undergone considerable internal transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. The unions cannot be understood in isolation from the huge changes in the social and political context brought about in the democratic era. These changes call into question the assumption that the unions can unquestionably become the standard bearers of a monolithic new ‘working class’ politics aimed at reconfiguring South Africa’s dominant party system. The increasingly diverse and fragmented nature of NUM’s membership in Eskom, coupled with the manner in which union members are increasingly disengaged from NUM itself, offer considerable obstacles to such a move and point to the difficulty the unions could face in constructing a coherent political platform and mobilising its members in support of it.

The findings detailed in this chapter support the evidence provided by the SWOP survey team who find that workers in South Africa do not currently have the stomach for an independent working class politics (see for example Pillay 2006). The majority of these workers were strongly in favour of a continuation of the Alliance and were cautious (if not opposed) towards the idea of their union becoming involved in the formation of a new independent working class politics. Although some workers were against the continuation of the Alliance, this current of opinion was not arguing for new independent working class politics, but a depoliticised and non-aligned form of trade
unionism, which would be more effective at meeting the needs of members. In short, there appears to be little consideration, much less a *drive*, towards the unions forging a post-nationalist, class-based politics from either ‘above’, in the Union’s leadership, or ‘below’, among NUM’s rank and file. In fact, it would appear that the majority of Union members at all levels are averse to such an idea and might actually mobilise against it. They do not appear to be considering the possibility of an independent left wing political formation emerging to challenge the ANC, much less from their own Union, with which they have engaged in an increasingly depoliticised fashion.

What is striking about the attitudes displayed by workers is that cannot be attributed to some form of ‘false consciousness’ informed by ignorance of the ANC’s policies or blind faith in the party itself. The presence of the two currents of opinion demonstrates that union members do not simply take their political cues from their union leadership, even of the majority of them appear to agree with their current strategy. Their attitudes are rationalised and grounded within sophisticated understandings of how best to advance and defend their interest within the democratic polity. In this respect, they do not appear to have ‘realised’ – as so many ‘enlightened’ scholars have – that their interests would be better pursued via the formation of a new, radical working class politics: their calculations, based on their everyday experiences and surveying of the political scene, draw them to the conclusion that their class interests need not be pursued in opposition to the nationalist movement, but through holding it accountable, in whichever way that might be. Whereas notions of ‘exhausted nationalism’ and a monolithic ANC government leave little room for imagining alternatives other than oppositional forms of politics, workers’ attitudes towards the relationship between class and nationalist politics highlight the greater complexity of post-apartheid politics and the varieties of political agency available to them.
As the next chapters will elucidate, the manner in which workers remain committed to optimising their influence in national politics through the Alliance structures is not only informed by their perceptions of their Union’s role in the post-apartheid period, but also reflects their understanding of their position in post-apartheid society and the complex nature of their support for the ANC.
CHAPTER 5

‘THEY BROUGHT US THE LIGHT’
ESKOM WORKERS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ANC

Introduction

This chapter explores the reasons behind enduring support for the ANC among Eskom workers and what this tells us about partisan loyalties in South Africa. The chapter offers an insight into workers’ historical affinities with the ANC, their evolving relationship with the post-apartheid state and how this in turn affects their party loyalties.

If, as some have predicted, South Africa is entering a post-nationalist era, characterised by the increasing salience of class as the defining feature of politics, then a gradual disillusionment with the ANC and its neo-liberal macroeconomic policies would presumably act as a catalyst for such a political transformation (Alexander 2010; Barchiesi 2004; Bond 2003; Desai 2002). According to some scholars, this disillusionment will put COSATU and its unions on a ‘collision course’ with the ANC (Gall 1997) leading to the inevitable implosion of the Alliance under the weight of its ideological contradictions (Buhlungu 2005) and producing fertile conditions for the formation of a new left wing politics, either in the form of a new electoral challenge to the ANC (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001) or the growth of a new, undetermined politics emerging from South Africa’s burgeoning social movements.

Such arguments are premised on the idea that the political capital the ANC possesses as the ‘liberation party’ is already becoming exhausted in the face of its inability to address South Africa’s socioeconomic ills. But are workers ready to turn their backs on the ANC just yet? Quantitative survey evidence suggests not. The SWOP surveys
conducted before the first three elections since 1994 demonstrate a remarkable consistency in the voting preferences of workers, with 75 percent of workers intending to vote for the ANC in 1994, 75 percent in 1999 and 73 percent 2004 (Buhlungu et al 2006b: 205). What the SWOP surveys cannot tell us with any degree of certainty, however, is the underlying reasons behind this support. In a similar manner to the last chapter exploring workers’ attitudes towards the Alliance, this chapter will paint a picture of the attitudes of ordinary NUM members, this time with respect to the ANC itself, exploring why they continue to support the party and what factors determine this support.

Do we attribute workers’ continued support for the ANC as being down to some form of ‘false consciousness’ emanating from irrational, emotive attachments to the ANC as the party at the head of the nationalist movement? Will these attachments gradually be weakened once the fog of nationalism lifts and the ANC’s great neo-liberal ‘betrayal’ are laid bare? Or do we attribute this support as a reflection of the organised working class being among the ‘winners’ of the democratic transition - that they have become increasingly preoccupied with protecting their relative privilege in a Faustian ‘class compromise’, rather than advancing a broader project of socioeconomic transformation (Seekings 2004)?

This chapter will demonstrate from qualitative case study evidence that a synergy of both ‘emotive’ identity based explanations of party loyalties and ‘rational’ evaluations of government performance produce a mutually reinforcing relationship that forms the foundations of workers’ continued support for the ANC. In the first section of the chapter it will be argued that the concept of identity voting is still important for understanding the political affinity that these workers have with the ANC. Workers identify the ANC as the heroic party that ‘fought’ and ‘struggled’ for them against the apartheid government and is synonymous with them recovering their sense of dignity.
This is the symbolic/ideological dimension to their support for the party. It is reinforced by the Party’s own ‘liberation discourses’ of the ANC-led alliance being the sole legitimate political champion of liberated South Africans, which in turn highlights the importance of understanding contemporary South Africa as a post-liberation society (Dorman 2006).

In a sense the author concurs with Bond et al in their arguments that such ‘liberation discourses’ will increasingly ring hollow, reflecting an exhausted nationalism (Bond and Manyana’s 2002), if the liberation movement subsequently fails to bring about socioeconomic transformations through the delivery of tangible improvements to the everyday lives of its core constituency. However, in the second part of this chapter it will be argued that it is essential to go beyond readings of the ANC government as being monolithically neo-liberal – as many scholars are prone to do (Bond 2000; Marais 1998) - because the ‘Third Way’ social democratic element of the ANC’s programme has led to tangible, albeit uneven and incremental, improvements to the everyday lives of South Africa’s organised working class in the form of local service delivery and the expansion of access to public welfare. They do not, in short, see the ANC government as a ‘neo-liberal’ incarnation of the old apartheid government requiring a ‘recall to arms’ in the form of an oppositional political strategy. Instead, these workers see the post-apartheid state and, by extension, the ANC government, as a benevolent, if somewhat dysfunctional, force in their lives. This is the material/tangible dimension of their continued support for the ANC and points toward the need for scholars to understand the post-apartheid state not simply as being the instrument of one particular class or social group, but as the object of political contestation (Lodge 2002) which, while predominantly favouring the interests of big business, has nonetheless redirected considerable resources into a developmentalist agenda (Seekings 2002).
Together, these two dimensions of workers’ support for the ANC – the symbolic/ideological and the tangible/material - form a mutually reinforcing relationship with one another. Although assessments of government performance are important to workers, these are themselves shaped by the identification of the ANC as an extraordinary party, one whose legitimacy is conferred upon it by both its history and the manner in which workers continue to perceive it as ‘struggling’ for them in the post-apartheid period. This endows the ANC with a unique form of political capital which sets it apart, in the eyes of these workers, from ‘ordinary’ parties.

In short, the chapter provides a detailed qualitative insight into the roots of party loyalties among South Africa’s working class; loyalties that can only be understood through a thorough consideration of the transformation of the state in the post-apartheid era and the manner in which this transformation is experienced by the organised working class itself. Such understandings problematise any simplistic readings of party loyalties in the post-apartheid era and of the relationship between class and nationalist politics.

5.1 The symbolic/ideological dimension of workers’ support for the ANC

5.1.1 Identity-based explanations of voting behaviour and party loyalties in South Africa

It has been argued that the relatively rigid voting patterns of South African citizens and the persistent levels of support for the ANC during successive elections reflect a broader pattern of party support and voting behaviour which is driven by the expression of identities. Analyses of the first elections in South Africa claimed that the polls resembled more of a ‘racial-cum-ethnic census’ than a competitive multiparty election (Johnson and Schlemmer 1996; Welsh 1994). Ferree argues that such approaches are informed by the assumption that:

---

75 This is the term given to this approach by Roger Southall (2009: 19)
Voters derive psychic benefits from supporting ethnic parties because the very act of casting a vote for an ethnic party is an affirmation of identity. Thus, voting is not an act of choice, based on rational weighing of alternatives, but an expression of allegiance to a group…their allegiance to their party, constructed as it is from the raw material of identity, is nonnegotiable. Patterns of partisanship are fixed, rigid. Elections become a rubber stamp for demographics, a mere “counting of heads”. (Ferree 2008: 805)

In this vein, Steven Friedman’s work suggests that one of the primary factors influencing the voting preferences of South Africans are the *identities* associated with issues such as race, religion and language rather than simply an instrumental calculation of their material interests:

Elections are not solely a means of counting public preferences. … Understanding voting … as an instrumental exercise in which citizens weigh the uncertain benefits of casting a ballot against the sure cost of doing so – is a hallowed tenet of rational choice theory which has failed repeatedly to explain actual behaviour. …. its application in South Africa borders on the absurd. This is so not only because the memory of a racial franchise is a spur to voter enthusiasm…. South African parties are defined by, and draw their support from, identities – race, language and religion primary among them. Casting a ballot is primarily not an instrumental calculation but an expression of who a citizen is. And people will go to great lengths to express who they are. (Friedman 2008)

Friedman asserts that analysts who argue that ‘issues’ predominate voter-choices do so ‘Because to vote our identities is considered primitive, a sign that we continue to fall short of the North American or Western European democratic norm’ (2004: 2). He argued shortly before the 2004 elections that:

Two elections seem scheduled for April 14. One will happen in the minds of commentators and the media, the other in the heads of the electorate. One will be about ‘issues’, the other about identities. Many of those who shape our debate seem determined to spend the campaign earnestly pronouncing on whether jobs, HIV/AIDS or crime are most likely to influence voters. There is an air of absurdity to this, since it is an open secret that those who most lack jobs, are most likely to lose if anti-retroviral medication is not available to the poor and are most likely to be victims of violent crime, will vote for the governing party – and those who have done best out of the economy these past ten years, who can afford health care and can buy private security are most likely to support the opposition. Clearly, then, it is not ‘the issues’ which decide how South Africans vote. It is, rather, identity – race, language, religion – which largely shapes electoral choices. (Friedman 2004: 2)

These approaches, however, are quite speculative because they are not empirically grounded. I will now turn to how exactly identities relating to race were actually expressed by Eskom workers in relations to their party loyalties.
5.1.2 *Eskom workers’ attitudes towards the ‘illegitimate’ opposition*

The importance of racial identities was apparent across almost every interview I conducted with Eskom workers. Workers often said that politics was still ‘all about race’. In terms of their contemporary voting patterns, this was vividly illustrated by workers’ attitudes towards the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). Commentators have suggested that the DA’s greatest impediment to gaining greater support has been its inability to appeal to the African population in order to escape the label of it being a party for the minorities, particularly the whites (Jolobe 2009). Indeed, workers were dismissive of the DA because of its association with these minority interests and, significantly, with the old regime itself. They would often state that they do not ‘trust the voice’ of Tony Leon or Helen Zille because they would associate Leon, Zille, and the DA as a party, with the apartheid regimes’ prerogatives of maintaining white privilege. In this vein, Thandlwwe, a boiler worker at Arnott power station argued that he did not think the DA had reformed its stance after apartheid [sic]:

> I think because of the history and because of the current situation now in terms of their political consciousness. I think it is clear that they still see it as relevant to them to still suppress a black person – they still see apartheid as relevant irrespective of what they have done. Which is very surprising because of all the things that have changed now. By now they should be seeing that this type of thing is not relevant. So I think because of that they can’t be comrades with us, they are still alone. They have not transformed yet. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

The DA was widely associated as a ‘whites’ party’ imbued with the values of the former regime and was thus portrayed as illegitimate. This highlights the argument that racial identities continue to play a major role in shaping voter attitudes and that being seen to be racially ‘exclusive’ is a severe disadvantage for any party (Schultz Herzenberg 2009), one that the DA clearly has tremendous difficulties in overcoming.

However, it was not, as we shall see, that the ANC was simply perceived as a ‘black’ party, or a perception of its racial ‘inclusiveness’ that made it popular. Instead, it was the role the ANC played as an organisation during the struggle against apartheid that gave the party an unrivalled legitimacy among these workers compared with other
parties. This was evident in workers’ attitudes towards the Congress of the People (Cope).

Initially, it was seen that the emergence of Cope from an internal split within the ANC had the potential to radically reconfigure South African politics. Whereas in the past the ANC did not face any major threat from a ‘black’ party whose leaders could lay claim to having a comparable liberation pedigree, Cope cannot be as easily dismissed by the ANC as an illegitimate ‘minority party’ due to its broader cross-racial appeal and the fact that some of its leaders were prominent both in the ANC and the liberation movement more broadly (Booyzen 2009; Lodge 2009). Unlike the other major opposition party, the DA, Cope has been able to establish branch structures in township areas across the country. Cherry’s study of local dynamics in the Eastern Cape, for example, reveal the manner in which the party was able to penetrate deep into areas once loyal to the ANC and also to attract ANC activists into its ranks (Cherry 2009). However, by its own admission, the party’s performance in 2009 fell well short of the party’s own expectations as it polled just 7 per cent in the national poll. Butler (2009a) has argued that its presence served as a ‘wake up call’ for the ANC itself, possibly leading it to concentrate even greater time and resources on its election campaigns.

With regards to where this research was conducted, Mpumalanga, Cope found it particularly difficult to gain a foothold in the election and received only 2.9 per cent of the vote for the national ballot (IEC 2009). Among the workers I interviewed there was little sense that the new party would make much headway and, indeed, in the weeks building up to the elections shop stewards sent around sms messages, emails and leaflets pre-emptively inviting workers to a ‘funeral for the late Cope’ to be held at the end of the election (Observations. Also see appendix item 1). There were also reports that ‘undisciplined comrades’ – who were known within the Union and local ANC structures - were acting ‘arrogantly’ by physically attacking Cope supporters in Witbank because,
one shop steward explained, ‘they don’t perceive Cope to be legitimate’ (Personal communication with NUM shop steward 21/04/09). Cope’s arrival was initially greeted with derision among workers who widely described the new ANC-challengers as ‘cry babies’, ‘sore losers’ or ‘opportunists’ who could not accept the outcome of the democratic processes that had enabled Jacob Zuma to succeed Mbeki as ANC President.

Although Cope tried desperately to emphasise its credentials as a legitimate rival to the ANC with credible liberation pedigree – not least through its name76 - it was perceived by these workers as a ‘bastard child’ of the ANC, rather than its legitimate heir. In short, among these workers at least, the arrival of Cope as a new ‘black’ party heralded neither the onset of ‘rational choice’ evaluations of the ANC government’s performance as the predicator of party loyalties, nor the erosion of the ANC’s status as the party of national liberation. To understand why, we need to examine the roots of workers’ affinities with the ANC itself.

1.3 The ANC and the mantle of liberation

Why is it that the ANC is accorded such a prominent place in these workers’ political imaginations and why were opposition parties treated as illegitimate challengers to the ANC? This support is rooted in the historic symbolism of the ANC as the figurehead of the liberation struggle which bestows upon it a unique ‘mantle of liberation’, setting it apart from its challengers.

According to Buhlunugu and Psoulis, it is important not to downplay the ‘enduring bonds of solidarity’ forged between unions and liberation movements during the national liberation struggle which explain some of the reluctance that union leaders have in turning their backs on the ANC at this time (Buhlunugu and Psoulis 1999; see also

---

76 Congress of the People was a bitterly contested name as the ANC argued that the name belonged to the party’s history because of its association with the Freedom Charter.
Gumede 2005: 268). Indeed, the importance of voting for the liberation party that ‘fought for us’ during the anti-apartheid struggle is strongly prevalent among rank and file trade union members in Eskom. Workers justify their vote with frequent references to the ANC being the party that ‘we have come a long way with’ and which had ‘taken us from prison’, and it is quite clear that the party is still highly revered owing to its liberation heritage. As Ntokozo, a supervisor in the power station elaborates:

> Because when we had the previous regime we are having that perception that the whites are getting more than us. So now we say ‘yes, we have been liberated by who? by ANC!’ That’s why we stand for ANC. Because we say this is the organisation that liberated us. … So we say let’s go on with these people because they liberate us. Most labour are in support of ANC just because of that. (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07)

A sentiment that was often aired was that the ANC had taken workers from the ‘darkness’ and ‘jail’ of apartheid. Although some workers acknowledged the role of other organisations in the anti-apartheid struggle, such as the PAC, the vast majority identified the ANC as the undisputed figurehead of the struggle movement.

Workers often rationalised their support for the ANC in relation to personal narratives regarding individual experiences of brutality, oppression and indignity suffered during the apartheid era. Interestingly, even when these experiences were directly rooted in the workplace, it was regularly the ANC, and not NUM, that was attributed with being their ‘saviour’. Take, for example, the case of Tumelo, who had lived in a hostel in Eskom for 19 years in the apartheid period. He framed living in the hostel as an affront to his dignity, particularly because he could not see his wife and family who were not allowed to live close to the power station:

> I think that thing affected me in my heart because I wouldn’t see my family and cause I was staying in the rural place. My home was 3 or 5 hundred kilometres away, maybe 4 or 5 hours. Just one day, Saturday only, I might go and visit my child. So, you know my friend, it was better when Mandela came out because you remember that time, when he came out, everything started changing. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

He said that now he was able to live in the town, in a house that ‘the ANC built for us’. He also recalled how during the apartheid era if a worker was late for work ‘they would not listen to you, they would just fire you’. He recalled, with great affection, an incident
in which he and his comrades had been late for work in the early 1990s. He said that their boss had confronted them for being late (through no fault of their own, Tumelo suggested) and threatened to fire them. However, Tumelo and his friends stood up to him – ‘something we would not have considered before’ – and had defiantly told him that this would be unlawful:

the boss said ‘you are only behaving like this because your boss Mandela is out of jail’. He was right. You see, Mandela, that man, he powered us, he gave us our rights.’ (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

Tumelo’s account of a struggle for personal dignity and the ‘gift’ of empowerment which he claimed to receive from the ANC was in no way atypical and these kinds of narratives were extremely common as workers rationalised their continued affinity with the ANC and their apprehensive (or even hostile) attitudes towards potential challengers.

In most cases, workers had a distant relationship with the ANC during its years in exile and, although there were sometimes stories of clandestine meetings happening in townships, few were able to recount direct interactions with the ANC during this period in any great depth. Nonetheless, the ANC occupied a primary place within workers’ political imaginations with respect to its leadership role during the struggle. Workers would often describe themselves as being ‘baptized’ into the ANC through their involvement in NUM, because, they would often explain, NUM promoted this and that ANC ‘issues’ were often discussed during union meetings, albeit often in a secretive manner. ‘Our politics was ANC politics’ was a common refrain used by workers to describe these linkages. Although the union was often not the only liberation organisation which workers had direct links with during the fight against apartheid, it was the ANC that was placed as the primary figurehead of this struggle and it was leaders such as Mandela and Tambo who were revered as the ‘fathers’ of this struggle. One might expect to find large disparities between the different generations of NUM’s membership, with regards to their attitudes towards the ANC, given that some of the
younger workers would not be able to recall such personal connections to the party during the struggle period. However, both young and old workers alike demonstrated similarly high levels of support for the ANC and there was no significant difference between workers of different generations in terms of how they rationalised this support: many of the younger workers clearly identified strongly with the organisation, and would recount memories of the hardships their parents or grandparents faced during the apartheid era or, in some cases, proudly boast of their forbearer’s struggle credentials. There was also no significant difference in levels of ANC support between workers from different skill/job backgrounds and it was clear that ANC support was extremely high across the vast majority of workers in NUM.

This unique status that the ANC enjoys among these workers – what might be termed the mantle of liberation - endows it with an authority and legitimacy that sets it apart, at least in the eyes of these workers, from other political organisations. It means that the ANC thus occupies a unique space in these workers’ political imaginations owing, in part, to the historical symbolism attached to it through its role as the figurehead of the liberation forces, delineating it as an extraordinary party, not simply one of many in a multiparty system.

This image of being a unique political entity is something that ANC leaders have consciously played up to. Tom Lodge, for example, notes how:

It remains an orthodoxy within the ANC that the organisation is not merely a political party, but remains a liberation movement. Through this characterisation, its spokesmen suggest that it embraces a much broader constituency than social-cleavage-based political parties... (2003: 215-216)

This is an image that the ANC has consciously played up as it has sought to discredit opposition parties as being ‘illegitimate’ (Southall 2009: 19) and also by deploying reactionary language against what it calls ‘counter-revolutionary’ critical civil society organisations (Ballard 2005). It shares a great deal in common with the liberation movements in neighbouring countries in this regard that have persistently reasserted their
claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the black majorities which they have
liberated in what Dorman calls the ‘liberation discourse’ (2006: 1098; see also Kriger
2005; Ranger 2004). Such discourses, she contends, involve the re-emergence of the
‘exclusionary languages of liberation’ as ruling parties have sought to delegitimise
potential challengers to their control of the state either from rival parties or civil society
groups (Dorman 2006: 1092; see also Bompani 2006: 1147). However, as we have seen
here, this discursive construction of the ANC’s status is a two-way phenomenon; it is not
simply top-down party rhetoric. Workers rationalise their ongoing partisan loyalty with
references to these highly personalised narratives of overcoming hardships, oppression
and indignity. Rightly or wrongly, they attribute these to the ANC which speaks to the
manner in which the ANC’s status as the figurehead of the liberation struggle is deeply
entrenched within workers’ political imaginations. It also offers an insight into precisely
why the politics of identity continues to be a dominant feature of South African partisan
loyalties.

The political capital the ANC enjoys as a result of this symbolic/ideological
dimension of its support is only one part of how a nationalist movement can sustain its
unique position in post-liberation societies. Claims to be the sole legitimate
representative of ‘the people’ will increasingly ring hollow if the nationalist movement
subsequently fails to tangibly improve the lives of the liberated population as a party on
government. As Dorman has noted with respect to the example of Zimbabwe, it was in
the face of an economic crisis that ZANU PF faced its first major electoral challenge,
and that after the crisis ‘attempts to reinvigorate the “liberation discourse” proved
effective in some constituencies, but not in others’ (2006: 1098). One could argue that if
a liberation movement is seen to have reneged on its ‘historical mission’ to improve the
lot of its core constituency it is left open to the possibility of challengers emerging to
contest its ideological claims, perhaps by positioning themselves as the ‘true’ face of the
revolution. To maintain its unique space in the political domain therefore requires any liberation movement to reinforce its ideological claims of monopolistic legitimacy through the material improvement of the population’s everyday lives. This is something that the ANC itself is mindful of. As Lodge notes:

[T]he ANC in its self-conception as a liberation movement is not merely referring to its broad social appeal. It also assumes that its role continues to be one of liberation, “of Africans in particular and black people in general from political and economic bondage”, and that this goal depends upon its own efforts to transform government institutions and to re-organise economic life. (2003: 216)

It is to this process of attempting to re-organise the economic life of the population that I will turn to now, assessing how the ANC’s developmental agenda has impacted on partisan loyalties and served to consolidate its unique position in these workers’ political imaginations.

5.2 The material/tangible dimension of workers support for the ANC

5.2.1 Rational choice theories of voting patterns

There is a body of literature that critiques identity-based explanations of voting behaviour in South Africa. These scholars assert that while voting is clearly divided along social cleavages, this reflects the manner in which these cleavages are directly related to competing material or class interests in South African society. In other words, calling the elections a racial census masks the fact that most black voters chose the ANC based on the perception that it most accurately represents their material class interests (Garcia-Rivero 2006; Habib and Naidu 2006; Seekings 1997). Commentators informed by this viewpoint have drawn attention to the manner in which voting preferences are increasingly being shaped by ‘rational choice’ (Himmelweyt et al 1981) appraisals of the ANC government’s performance (Mattes and Piombo 2002; Schulz-Herzenberg 2009; Seekings 1997). Cohen (2009) offered the most extreme example of this approach when he predicted the theory that ‘most South Africans are attached to the ANC through some
sort of deep, historical and cultural affiliation that goes beyond politics’ was about to be finally ‘put to bed’ after the 2009 elections which, he argued, would see popular antipathy towards the ANC’s track record in government come back to bite the ruling party.

There is considerable debate as to whether the class interests of COSATU are incompatible with the ANC’s neo-liberal macroeconomic agenda or whether, in fact, COSATU workers have been some of the ‘winners’ of the post-apartheid era and are therefore relatively contented with the political status quo. With regards to the first of these arguments, some analysts have argued that ultimately the class interests of COSATU workers would be better served via the formation of an independent workers’ party that could challenge the ANC and thereby bring ‘substantive uncertainty’ to South African elections (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002). The only impediment to the unions embracing some form of radical new politics, it is argued, is the narrow strategic outlook of the present leadership, concerned as they are with channelling political struggles within the Alliance (Bassett 2005; Bassett and Clarke 2008; Ceruti 2008a). Such a view generally posits that union members are among the net ‘losers’ of the political transition alongside the broader working poor and that they will ultimately eschew their support for the ANC and will be attracted by the radical politics of the social movements (Ngwane 2003; Interview with S’bu Zikode 26/05/06) or a political party offering a left wing socioeconomic platform (Habib and Taylor 1999b; 2001).

The alternative reading posits that COSATU members represent a relatively privileged section of South African society and positions them among the winners of the transition. It is true that COSATU members have experienced real improvements to their living standards in the post-apartheid era, particularly those workers with greater prospects for social mobility (Cherry 2006: 162). As such, Buhlunug et al conclude from the SWOP survey data on workers’ attitudes towards the ANC and the ANC government’s delivery record that COSATU members continue to identify their class
interests with the party (Buhlungu et al 2006b: 262). Jeremy Seekings takes this argument further, arguing that workers represented by COSATU’s affiliates are a relatively privileged section of the black majority and that this position of privilege has led COSATU and its affiliates into a ‘class compromise’ (2004). This compromise resembles something of a Faustian pact, whereby the unions and their members increasingly agitate to preserve the political and economic status quo in a thinly veiled attempt to defend their own (selfish) interests, even if this comes at the expense of less privileged sections of South African society (Seekings 2004; 2006a). What these approaches share in common is that they highlight the importance of assessments of government performance for determining workers’ voting patterns. In short, they argue, the material benefits COSATU workers have experienced in the post-apartheid era contribute to their ongoing support for the ANC.

The next sections will evaluate Eskom workers’ position in the post-apartheid economy and then how they evaluate changes in their standard of living. I will then proceed to analyse how this impacts upon their partisan loyalties.

5.2.2 Eskom workers’ livelihoods: a privileged aristocracy of labour?

It is difficult to depict workers as simply being among the ‘winners’ of the democratic transition or, for that matter, as unquestioned ‘losers’ who have not experienced improvements in their lives. It is more accurate instead to firstly acknowledge the organised working class as being increasingly heterogeneous in terms of social mobility and, as a result, in terms of remuneration and consumption patterns (as discussed in Chapter 2). Second, this qualitative case study, along with comparative ones conducted by other scholars (for example Barchiesi 2005), situates workers at the interface between the relatively privileged life that their remuneration, job security and skills should
guarantee for them on paper, and the broader crisis of social reproduction affecting South African society at large.

Aliber notes how ‘The overall pattern of formal sector employment in South Africa over the past several years is that fewer people have employment but those who do have enjoyed real increases in remuneration’ (2003: 476). The average income for COSATU members in 2006 was R4,500 a month, compared to R6,400 a month for other union members and R3,000 for non-members (NALEDI 2006). In this respect, Eskom workers are relatively privileged compared to other sections of society, particularly the unemployed. Even workers employed by Eskom in the lowest job grade in 2007, on the lowest salary within that grade, received R5,138 per month (Eskom 2007) which is higher than that national average for COSATU workers (R4,500 per month) and substantially better than the national average of R3,500 per month for non-union members (NALEDI 2006).77 Eskom workers also enjoy a range of other benefits that compare favourably with unionized workers in other sectors including fringe benefits such as housing allowance,78 pension, medical aid contributions and death benefits (Eskom 2007).

COSATU’s rank-and-file constitute a relatively skilled section of the workforce and the most recent SWOP survey revealed that there has been a big decline in the proportion of unskilled and semi-skilled categories within COSATU’s membership (Buhlungu 2006a: 9). Only 14 per cent of COSATU members having only primary education and an increasing number of COSATU workers holding Matric or even degree level qualifications (Buhlungu 2006a: 9). NUM’s membership in Eskom consists of a broad range of workers, including the relatively unskilled ‘labourers’ and also semi-skilled

---

77 It is also worth reiterating that the NUM represents workers across different job grades in Eskom, up to and including senior management levels. As such, although most of the NUM’s members reside in the lower job grades, it can be reasonably assumed that the average salary earned by NUM members would be considerably higher than this figure.77

78 As of 2007 Eskom workers received a ‘housing subsidy’ of 500 rand per month towards their bond payments on their homes.
and highly skilled professionals. Although precise figures are not available, it was clear from my sample of workers that a large proportion of them had Matric level education or higher, with many workers holding a Technical Diploma or a higher education degree of some kind. The high number of workers with a technical diploma is indicative that many of the Eskom workers represented by the NUM have specific skill qualifications before joining the company, such as the trained artisans and engineers, while others receive training once they are employed by Eskom to improve their skills and to build careers within the company.\textsuperscript{79}

As well as higher average wages and better education and skills, workers represented by COSATU also enjoy greater job security than non-unionised workers. 92 per cent of members are in permanent, full-time jobs (Buhlungu 2006a: 9) despite the trend towards the casualisation and informalisation of working practices across various sectors of the economy (Buhlungu and Webster 2006: 251). It was quite clear from the length of time workers had been employed by Eskom that job security was a relatively favourable aspect of working for Eskom. Workers generally framed the prospect of leaving Eskom in voluntary terms and there was no sense that they feared retrenchment in the near future, especially with Eskom’s plans\textsuperscript{80} to extend its capacity by building more power stations in the coming years.\textsuperscript{81}

On paper then, in terms of remuneration, skills and job security, Eskom workers would appear to fit the ‘labour aristocracy’ stereotype. However, if one is to delve a little

\textsuperscript{79} However, while some NUM members were extremely well-skilled, there was a stark skills divide within NUM’s membership, particularly between some of the younger entrants to the workforce who had had greater educational opportunities, and the (generally) older, manual ‘labourers’ who has relatively little education and training. This divide has important political significance, as I will discuss more in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{80} Eskom is planning a significant expansion of its electricity generation including the building of new coal-fired power stations. See http://www.eskom.co.za/live/content.php?Item_ID=5981

\textsuperscript{81} Space does not allow for a discussion here. However, it should be noted that while Eskom workers benefited from job security in the past, this could potentially be under threat in the future according to union officials and shop stewards. This is because Eskom has attempted to outsource certain ‘non core’ jobs performed in the power stations (i.e. those not directly relating to the generation of power such as receptionists, gardeners, security guards) to external contractors and it has also increasingly used third-party labour brokers as a means of hiring workers.
deeper into the livelihoods of these workers it is clear that a simplistic categorisation of them as a relatively privileged ‘labour aristocracy’ over simplifies their situation. The organised working class, as I have said, are also deeply immersed within the broader crisis of social reproduction in South Africa: they are not in some way detached from the rest of South African society and many in fact use their wages to support extended networks of family dependents, a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in South African economic history and persists today arguably as strongly as ever (Aliber 2003; Bezuidenhout et al 2007; Carter and May 1999; Leibbrandt et al 2001). This was evident in my case study of Eskom workers, the majority of whom explained that they were responsible for supporting a large number of dependents (sometimes as many as 10), when I asked them about their extended households - a finding that correlates with other studies (see Torres 2005). As well as their immediate families living in their households, workers also reported being under considerable pressure to support members of their extended families, including those not directly related to them. Some workers even said that they supported friends and neighbours either through direct financial support or allowing them to reside in their homes and thereby incurring the costs of this, something that has been observed by Ceruti (2007) in her study of working class Sowetans.

It is important, therefore, to look beyond the individual worker to form a more holistic and nuanced picture of workers’ livelihoods. These extended networks of dependents have an important impact on their living standards. Moses, for example, has worked as a planner in the power station for nine years. He owns his own house in the township outside Witbank and, with a technical diploma he occupies one of the relatively high pay-bands and benefits from a secure job that does not face the threat of being outsourced. As such he would appear to be the model ‘privileged’ COSATU member. However, he complained bitterly about the decline of the union’s power and its inability to secure a better pay settlement with Eskom during the pay disputes. This, he argued,
was making it ‘impossible’ to balance his obligations to support those dependent on his wage with the increased cost of living. A father of five, Moses not only supports his children who are all dependent on his wage (in full time education), he supports his spouse who works informally and sporadically, as well as his mother and, more recently, his unemployed brother and his family. Although only temporary, he said that this was fairly ‘typical’ in that family members who had fallen on hard times would immediately look to him for support ‘because they know it’s there, because they know I’m earning for a long time’. He adds ‘I don’t mind as such but it makes it tough sometimes’ (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07). For Moses, having to support his unemployed brother and his family has a predictably negative impact on his own standard of living, sometimes making the bond repayments on his home difficult to meet. Moses’ example is in no way remarkable: although some workers did not have such extended networks to support, the majority of workers supported dependents beyond their immediate family. Workers described how supporting these extended networks of dependents was drawing them, despite their regular wage, into financial difficulty and debt.

Like many workers in the South African economy, Eskom workers had experienced declining real wages in recent years, especially in the face of inflation on staple foods and fuel. A commonly expressed sentiment was that the price of everything was always going up while wage increases were not keeping pace with these price rises. This contributed to increasing levels of personal indebtedness, something that union leaders were deeply concerned about (Interview with Job Matsepe 25/04/10) and reflects a broader trend affecting workers across South Africa (Hurwitz and Luiz 2001).

Barchiesi has argued that the inability of many salaried workers to meet the increased costs of basic services reflects a ‘crisis of waged labour’ in South Africa in
which the wage has failed to meet its ‘promise’ in post-apartheid society. He concludes from his extensive empirical investigation that

for most respondents, the extra-workplace spaces of the community, the family and the household are materially experienced as areas of declining living standards and difficulties to cope with basic consumption due to employment uncertainties and the amount of resources shifted towards commodified social provisions. The sense of precariousness that is primarily felt in the workplace is therefore amplified within residential neighbourhoods where “everything is about money” and “things are more and more expensive. (Barchiesi 2005: 300)

Eskom workers regularly complained that the contraction in their real wages was depriving them of the standard of living they had expected to attain once ‘their’ government was in power. In this respect, it was common for workers to bemoan the ‘apartheid salaries’ that they were receiving, something that fuelled much of the anger with national leaders and their ‘failure’ in the 2007 wage negotiations.

The distinction between the government and their employer was clouded for many Eskom workers owing to its status as a parastatal enterprise and many would vent their frustration asking things like ‘why does our government oppress us in terms of wages?’ (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/07). Their ‘low’ wages thus became a source of often bitter discontent with the government.

While the anger for this was often directed towards the government itself, it would be wrong, however, to depict workers’ attitudes towards the ANC government as being framed in entirely negative terms. They did not frame this in a language of ‘betrayal’ with regards to the ANC, the party they almost unanimously support. As I will elucidate below, this was because they also recognised some positive impacts that the ANC government had had on their lives in terms of service delivery and public welfare.

5.2.3 Workers’ experiences of service delivery

In general, workers were able to describe the changes they had witnessed in their communities over the years since 1994. For example, they would usually say that local roads, schools and hospitals were getting better. It emerged from the interviews,
however, that satisfaction with the local government was generally predicated on the area in which workers lived in, as well as the circumstances of each individual with respect to wages and the pressures they felt on their wages. While some workers claimed that the cost of many of these services were beyond them, for example, others said that they could afford them. It was therefore clear that workers experienced an uneven level of development depending on their personal circumstances.

Temba, for example, is an artisan and therefore a relatively well paid NUM member. He lives alone in what he described as a ‘good’ three-bedroom house which he bought from Eskom. He argued that services in his area were generally very good because, he said, it was an area formerly reserved for white Eskom employees and therefore had a relatively high standard of infrastructure. Although he believes the housing subsidy should be raised, he is usually comfortable paying his bond repayments. Like many workers in the higher pay grades, he explained that he ‘cannot complain’ about service delivery and ‘could afford’ basic services, such as water and electricity. However, while he said on the survey that the local government was delivering in nearly all areas, he added that ‘I was not sure on some of these issues, for many comrades [local service delivery] is not so good’. He explained that he and other shop stewards were fighting to improve the housing subsidy because:

It is very embarrassing to see that most of the Eskom guys are staying in the shacked house, in the *njondolo* [shacks]. It’s not good. People should stay with their families in the big house because Eskom I believe is a big company and they have a lot of money.

**Q:** Is it common for workers living in *njondolo*?

A lot of them. You find that they do not shower in the *njondolo*, they come to shower here at work because there is a shower and you see that these people when it is raining they are tired because you find that their shack has got holes in the ceiling. The water is getting in and he is awake all night and when he gets to work he is tired….it’s not good. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

It was notable that workers were acutely aware of the disparities in living standards between them and, in particular, the variations in the quality of service delivery experienced in different areas. Even those that could afford to access these services
argued that the local municipalities were not ‘assisting’ the poorer people in the way they should. Tshepiso, for example, lives in a house but said that his friends and neighbours who lived nearby in poorer quality houses or informal dwellings ‘suffered’ because of the poor service delivery in the area:

I’m very not satisfied. I’m very not really very satisfied. Because where I stay you find that there are people staying there long time ago and they don’t have a toilet, they don’t electricity, they don’t have water. You see… [my neighbour] has to use my toilet because he hasn’t got a toilet. I can’t say its good. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

Tshepiso’s comment was fairly typical: workers would often talk about their standard of living and their satisfaction with local service delivery in relation to the broader community in which they lived, even if they themselves were not facing significant difficulties. Workers didn’t see themselves in isolation from their communities when appraising their standard of living, whether or not as an individual they could afford certain services, they often only recorded a marked improvement in their own standard of living if the community as a whole was receiving better services and if problems such as crime and unemployment in their area were being addressed.

A common complaint that arose on several occasions amongst workers in lower job grades who were living in certain areas with poorer infrastructure related to their dissatisfaction with the provision of very basic services like water and electricity. Often this related to the quality of the water itself as Mlungisi, a utility man in Duvha power station complained:

Sometimes you find that the water is brown when you open the tap it’s brown. You prefer to take water from here at work, maybe if you came here with a car you just get a bucket. That water you use to drink and to cook. The one that is at home we use it to wash ourselves only because you don’t drink that water because maybe you’re going to get diseases like those people at Delmas82. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

Like many workers, Mlungisi admitted that he often took water home in containers from the power station for drinking and that where possible he would shower in facilities provided by Eskom because of the poor quality of water at home. Workers would also,

82 This refers to an outbreak of cholera in Delmas documented by Bond (2003).
somewhat ironically, complain that their households experienced difficulty in paying for the electricity needed for heating, lighting and cooking.

However, workers’ experiences of the local infrastructure in their area, such as roads, sanitation and refuse collection were also affected by exogenous factors. Workers perceived that there was a large disparity in the competencies of each of the two municipalities in which most of them lived – Emalahleni (Witbank) and Steve Tshwete (Middelburg) – which greatly affected the standard of local service delivery. The comparison between the two municipalities was not unfounded if we consider the data from the National Households Survey contained in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of households with</th>
<th>Emalahleni</th>
<th>Steve Tshwete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living in formal dwellings</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>74.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in informal dwellings</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity for lighting</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity for cooking</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity for heating</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to piped water in dwelling</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pit latrines as main toilet</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse collected by local authority</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was far more common for workers living in Witbank to complain about local infrastructure and service delivery than their counterparts living in Middelburg. Paul, for
example, is a shop steward at Arnott who said that this disparity was mainly down to the
council and their capacity to deliver for residents. He lives in Middelburg and
hence explained that:

My standard of living is improving but only slowly but the improvement is there. To be fair, the
[local] service [delivery] is good because the refuse is on time, water is on time and is always clean.
I don’t know, because in other towns I know it’s not the same but where I’m staying in
Middelburg. I can say that the service is very good. (Interview with Eskom worker 21/12/07)

Workers would therefore single out their municipality, in the case of Witbank, as being at
fault for poor service delivery and they would sometimes apportion the blame for local
government failures on particular councillors who ‘didn’t care’ or were ‘out of order’.

By and large, these workers experienced some form of development in their local
area or could at the very least identify that their co-workers had had positive experiences.
The experience of local development was therefore uneven, and depended to a large
extent on the area workers lived in which, in turn, was affected by their pay grade and the
number of dependents they had to support. Workers were keenly aware of this disparity,
both in terms of the ability of some to afford basic services and also with regards to the
uneven standard of development between certain areas. As one worker explained when I
asked him about how his standard of living compared to that of other workers: ‘Let me
say because I am working at Duvha [power station] for my life yes I can say [my life is]
transformed but for other comrades [working here] still not. I can say [my life has
improved] … but for others [it’s] still like before [the end of apartheid]’ (Interview with
Eskom worker 12/12/07)

As I will discuss below, although workers were not 100 per cent satisfied with the
local government’s service delivery, they were nonetheless conscious of tangible
improvements being made to their or their comrades’ lives. Even workers who
complained about certain aspects of service delivery, because they faced individual
financial hardship or they lived in the ‘wrong’ area, would still argue that they had
generally experienced improvements in their lives since the end of apartheid. While
change was incremental, they would often say that things were improving at the very least. This, coupled with their experience of social welfare, has important implications for how they frame their relationship with both the ANC and with the post-apartheid state.

5.2.4 Social welfare: redefining workers’ relationships with the state

State transfers play an integral role in household livelihood strategies in South Africa and this owes a great deal to the establishment of universal state welfare provisions that are unprecedented in sub-Saharan Africa. The growth of social security in South Africa has a long history dating back to British colonialism (Lund 1993). Although a universal pension entitlement existed since 1922, black South Africans were rarely able to gain access to these pensions as this entitlement was deliberately poorly publicised by the apartheid government. After 1994 the ANC government expanded access to social welfare significantly (Seekings 2002; 2006a). The RDP set forward a vision of providing ‘a social security system and other safety nets to protect the poor, the disabled, the elderly and other vulnerable groups’ (ANC 1994: 15-16). Although the RDP itself was quite vague about exactly what this would entail, successive ANC governments have expanded the scope of state welfare and, as a result, there has been a significant shift in the allocation of public resources towards the poor population during the democratic era (van der Berg 2001).

Seekings (2002: 11) argues that the South African welfare system is ‘exceptional’ compared with other countries in the south, particularly because of its non-contributory pension system:

the South African pension system serves to redistribute from the rich to the poor to an extent unmatched almost anywhere else in the south; the only other countries with comparably effective pension schemes are likely to be the small island- or city-states such as Mauritius. …South Africa’s welfare system is exceptional in Africa in terms of its use of contributory insurance schemes (for working people), the reach of its court-ordered private maintenance system, and its use of means-tested, social assistance for the poor. Whereas provision for the elderly and children is the responsibility of kin in most developing countries, in South Africa the state has assumed responsibility…
He concludes that

This state role reflects in part the continuing exceptionalism of South African society and politics, in comparison with most other parts of Africa. It is not just that the urbanisation and industrialisation have created a politically powerful, urban working-class demanding public assistance, but also that this class is opposed to bearing the cost of supporting poor kin. (Seekings 2002: 48).

The unions have indeed been at the forefront of campaigns for the expansion of these ‘exceptional’ state welfare provisions, arguing that public, rather than private provisions, should be used to support the elderly and unemployed. More recently, COSATU has played a leading role in the Basic Income Grant (BIG) Coalition alongside churches and other civil society organisations. While the ANC government has maintained its opposition to the idea of the ‘income guarantee’ proposed by the proponents of in the Basic Income Grant (Barchiesi 2007: 566-567), its recent election manifesto has promised to further expand existing state assistance in the areas of health, housing and welfare provisions (ANC 2009). This is indicative of the South African government’s tendency to buck global trends, and even its own conservative macroeconomic framework, by increasing state-led social assistance in recent years (Posel et al 2006: 840; Seekings 2004: 308).

The welfare provision of the South African state is thus far more extensive than that of its neighbouring countries, giving it the scope to have an unprecedented direct impact on the economic livelihoods of its citizens. Despite providing an incomplete safety net, several case studies have found that extension of state welfare, particularly the relatively generous old-age pension, has had a significant impact in terms of poverty alleviation and has also been the most effective way of reducing inequality in terms of its direct impact on the Gini coefficient (Leibbrandt et al 2001: 76). The primary aim of the pension is obviously to provide direct support for pensioners themselves, but the benefits of the pensions are often felt by members of the extended household. Pensioners often share their pension with their kin and in many cases they are ‘pooled’
with wage incomes as part of a broader livelihood strategy for supporting the extended household. Pooling resources in this way results from the normal pressures of familial and kin responsibilities, but it often also represents the only practical means of securing the relations of reciprocity that provide both themselves and family members with economic security, reflecting what Ardato describe as ‘sense in sociability’ (Ardato et al 2004: 26 see also Sagner and Mtati 1999: 402).

Combining and ‘pooling’ such incomes is often employed as a coping strategy to meet the challenge of supporting workers’ extended households, even if they do not physically reside in the same residential unit. There were many instances of workers who supported their networks of dependents through combining their wages with state transfers. For example, Bhekisisa is an unmarried mother who lives with her three children. She lists six people dependent on her wage including her deceased brother’s two children and her mother. She lives with her daughters in a small house which she rents from Eskom and her mother lives in a nearby township with her brother’s two children. After her brother died (his wife had also passed away earlier), his orphaned children went to live with Bhekisisa’s mother and together they pool their income from her Eskom wage and the mother’s old age pension. Bhekisisa is in a low salary grade and without the pension, she explains, ‘my wage is not good enough, especially when you are a single parent’ and that it would not be possible to support her extended household as well as her own immediate family. With the help of her mother’s pension she is able to support her brother’s children. She explains that the pension helps the children to live with her mother while she supplements this with her wages:

My mother has a big responsibility and definitely I’m going to help to assist her especially with the educational, the clothing [of the kids] because the pensioners’ money is not that much. [The children] also need to enjoy their social life like all the other kids, get what the other kids are getting like a better education and the like and the pensioners salary alone well, they need some help, it’s not that much. Especially with clothing. So what is happening to my kids, I would feel it would be unfair if they get the best when there are also other kids who are staying with my mum who won’t be getting the same as my kids are getting. I don’t feel good about that [so] I am trying to balance the two but it is not easy.... Having three kids and they are all in education and you need good living, schooling and all this.” The prices they are rising very fast and I bought a house
from them and I need to pay the bond, we need to eat, they need to get food, they need to get to school and they need to get a proper education…. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

Workers would regularly describe how the pension eased the burden on their wages when they were trying to support their households. Often, like Bhekisisa, pensions were used in combination with their wages in order to meet the cost of living. In return, workers often said how they offered care and assistance to older relatives and, in many cases, a place to live. Gwede, for example, combined his wages with a chunk of the pension his mother-in-law received who lived nearby. Some of the cash from her pension supplemented his wages to support his immediate family but also to help with the added cost of supporting his brother-in-law who was unemployed and now living in Gwede’s house. He said that his mother-in-law helped to look after his two children when he was on shift and his wife was working. In return, the two of them supported her and would give her transport, look after her at times of ill health, and were also in the process of preparing her space in their house for her to move in if she became too frail. Gwede’s situation was a fairly common one in which workers used state transfers to supplement their household income in order to allow them to meet the costs of supporting an extended network of dependents found in their extended households.

Why might workers’ reliance on welfare transfers be important for understanding their changing relationship with the state and, as a consequence, their political loyalties? Analysts have argued that the ANC’s record in office has been extremely mixed, making it difficult to define the ANC state as simply ‘developmentalist’ (Southall 2007; Lodge 2009). Overall, poverty and inequality have become deeper and more entrenched since 1994 (see Aliber 2003; Carter and May 1999; Leibbrandt et al 2001; Schwabe 2004), unemployment has grown (Bhorat 2004) and, as we have seen, the real wages of those who are in employment have often declined in the face of inflation and spiralling debt

---

83 Another element of this was that older relatives would be required to assist with child care if workers had young families. This, they said, allowed them to work longer hours if necessary and was also essential for workers who worked peculiar shift patterns, which was quite common.
(Barchesi 2005; Hurwitz and Luiz 2007). Furthermore, despite some achievements in the field of service provision (Butler 2007; Freund 2006), the government has faced great difficulty in meeting its own targets for service delivery (Hemson and O’Donovan 2006) and various commentators have argued that the ‘commodification’ and ‘neo-liberalisation’ of service delivery have severely impaired the affordability of such services for the poor (see McDonald and Pape (eds) 2002).

In his summary of the ANC’s record Southall (2007: 2) concludes that: ‘Triumphs there are and have been, but … despite the government’s best intentions the African National Congress’ state is more dysfunctional than developmental’. In a similar vein, Lodge contends that although there have been noteworthy achievements, the ANC government’s failures in areas such as health and education severely challenge the ANC’s ability ‘to make serious claims about its developmental achievement’ (Lodge 2009: 260).

However, while these assessments of the ANC government’s developmentalist credentials are extremely valuable, for the purpose of this thesis, it is important to understand exactly how workers assess the ANC’s performance and how their experiences of its developmental initiatives and its extension of the welfare state impact upon their political loyalties. The presence of state transfers, whether child support grants, disability grants or the old-age pensions, was clearly important to workers who acknowledged the role the state was playing in supporting them. Workers regarded the extension of state welfare programmes as a ‘victory’ of the democratic era and they regularly expressed a sentiment that ‘we had nothing of this before’. Furthermore, as was discussed above, although workers were acutely aware of the shortcomings of local service delivery, workers were nonetheless aware that the very fact that a government was attempting to provide such services led them to perceive the state to be a benevolent, albeit dysfunctional force in their lives.
It is important, therefore, to interrogate how we understand the relationship between the ANC state and South African citizens, particularly its core black constituencies. Several left wing analysts argue that the neo-liberal direction that the ANC government has taken, including the manner in which it has ‘commodified’ or ‘neo-liberalised’ service delivery has opened up an ever-widening gulf between the ANC government’s neo-liberal objectives and the aspirations of its core constituencies (see Bond 2003; McDonald and Pape (eds) 2002). This is partly responsible for provoking the formation of a plethora of social movements challenging the government over its developmental record (see Ballard et al (eds) 2006) which potentially reflects the birth of a new class-based politics characterised by ‘class struggles’ against the elitist nationalist project of the ANC government (Bond 2000; 2010; Alexander 2002; Saul 2005).

However, while the government’s macroeconomic policies are undeniably neo-liberal in character, there is an important nuance to the ANC’s programme that should not be overlooked. The ANC state is not simply the tool of an elitist nationalist clique (Lodge 2002: 25-29), nor is it simply hostage to the structural forces of the global economy. Instead, the ANC state has ‘relative autonomy’ - in the Gramscian sense (1971: 182) - from any single social grouping and from structural forces. As a result, the ANC’s policy agenda might best be described as an awkward compromise between neo-liberal and social democratic prerogatives, more closely resembling the ‘Third Way’ position of Britain’s New Labour (Giddens 1998) than that of a monolithically neo-liberal government (see Taylor and Vale 2001). Therefore, as we have seen, although workers remain deeply immersed within South Africa’s broader crisis of social reproduction, and continue to experience hardship and severe inequalities as a result, they have nonetheless experienced the positive impacts of the ANC’s expansion of social welfare and its developmental efforts. This has important implications for how workers viewed their relationship with the state and, by extension, the ANC government.
5.3 The interplay between the ‘two dimensions’ of workers’ support for the ANC

5.3.1 No ordinary party

The manner in which Eskom workers identify the ANC as the leader of the liberation movement has important implications for how they appraise the ANC government’s development efforts. Workers would often describe the ANC as the ‘light’ that was bringing them not only democratic representation, but also material improvements to their lives. For workers like Tholamandla, who had worked at Eskom for over twenty years, this link between the ANC’s liberation heritage and what he perceived to be its continued commitment to work for his community was essential:

Since you know very well that the ANC was fighting for us all, I’m proud to be there [voting for them]. Immediately when you tell the ANC guys your problems they will take it further unlike joining the other guys [parties], like UDM, we don’t know where they are coming from or some other Christian parties. We must consider the one that was involved in the struggle. We know that we were running from the police a long time ago because of the ANC. When they saw you they would think ‘oh this is an ANC member’ and they would shoot you and kill you. When they bury a member they say five minutes – they give you 5 minutes to bury them. Then the ANC rose up and said ‘no no no’. We all fought for that party. And since we all fought for that party we cannot turn around now. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

When asked why he supported the ANC, Tholamandla explained that it was because they had ‘struggled together’ and he recounted tales of when the ANC and SANCO used to hold secret meetings in the townships or within union structures. He argued that he continued to support the ANC because it was still ‘taking itself’ to the black communities, as it had during the apartheid era:

It is because of the ideology that the ANC brings with it, the programme that the ANC has to change the living conditions of our people in South Africa. I think from a childhood I’ve been supporting ANC. Basically for the reason [that] there’s no other party that came through that [apartheid struggle] with us and one that will work for the community and uplift us and make sure that the government initiates the ANC programme. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

Tholamandla’s statement reflected a broader sentiment among workers that the ANC ‘understood’ working class black communities because ‘it comes where we come from’ and, they claimed, was always ‘on our side’.

185
For many workers there were continuities in the ANC’s role in resisting the indignity of apartheid and its current role of trying to tackle poverty and underdevelopment in the post-apartheid sphere. George, a machine operator and ANC activist remarked that although he was critical of his local municipal council, which was run by the ANC, he was still a ‘supporter’ of the organisation ‘for life’ because:

Yeah The ANC according to me for me, since 1994, when Mandela comes out from the jail it changed many things because before that time of apartheid life was very hard. They changed everything. They are [now] looking after everybody, that’s why I am supporting it. (Interview with Eskom worker 18/12/07)

It was regularly expressed that the ANC government had ‘started from nothing’ and was ‘trying’ or ‘struggling’ for black constituencies. Bhekisia, the mother of five who combined her wages with her mother’s pension in order to support her household, said that despite her material hardships, she would certainly continue to support the party in the future because:

What draws me to the ANC is ANC as an organisation. I’ve got love for it because of their policies, and another thing is because of them taking themselves to the people because previously we did not have such things happening to the communities, especially to us blacks. The ANC brought that light to us and they made us to be able to participate in our living and to better our lives as such. (Emphasis added. Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

This sentiment is significant and was regularly conveyed in similarly emotive language: that the ANC was the bringer of light, the ‘messiah’ and the ‘father’ providing for its people. The ANC’s record was usually measured against the yardstick of apartheid and many workers perceived that it was the ANC that had, for the first time, made the state a force for good in their lives, even if their experience of service delivery did not always meet their expectations. This yardstick is obviously problematic, and what it indicates is the manner in which the ANC is judged in a relatively unique way, not simply against the relative merits of the socio economic policies of rival parties or a hypothetical workers’ party.

What this highlights is that the ANC’s discourses of the ‘National Democratic Revolution’ that is still being fulfilled by the ‘liberation forces’ appears to hold great sway
on the ground. It would appear that party loyalty is still, to a large degree, driven the symbolic/ideological affinity with the ANC that ‘rational choice’ models cannot predict. Indeed, it can be said that the manner in which these workers assess the ANC’s performance is itself affected by the historical association of the ANC as the party of national liberation. As Mattes and Piombo (2001: 107) acknowledge, while important in affecting voting behaviour, assessments of government performance continue to be shaped by racial identities and, on this note, Ferree has argued that:

[R]acialized party images play a critical role in shaping South African voting behaviour: they interact with evaluations of the incumbent party’s performance to influence African support of the ANC… and may even shape performance evaluations in the first place… performance evaluations matter, but they are intimately related to voters’ beliefs about the racial credentials of parties. (Ferree 2008: 814)

Workers’ evaluations of the ANC government’s performance were heavily influenced by the Party’s historical symbolism. In short, although workers would assess the ANC’s performance, and were acutely aware of its shortcomings, such evaluations were conducted sympathetically as they were skewed by the historical affinity these workers held with the party. The two dimensions of the ANC’s support – both symbolic/ideological and tangible/material – therefore coalesce and form a self-reinforcing relationship: the experience workers have of incremental improvements to their lives serve to legitimate the ANC’s ‘liberation discourses’ of being the sole legitimate champion of liberated South Africans, while these discourses and the historical imagery of the ANC in turn refract ‘rational’ evaluations of its performance in government.

5.3.2 The sacrosanct ANC

Workers were not entirely uncritical of the ANC and its performance since coming to power. However, if workers complained that service delivery was lacking in some shape or form in their area, they would nonetheless interject that they knew it was better
elsewhere and, without prompt, when complaining about service delivery in their community would frequently clarify that ‘I’m not saying the government is doing nothing’. While the failings of individual councillors or municipal governments were criticised, workers nonetheless associated the ANC government with at least incremental improvements in their lives as a whole, because the presence of the state at the local level, whether through the provision of state transfers or local service division, however uneven, was something that they were at pains to stress they had not experienced before. It was therefore common for workers to name individual ANC councillors, for example, who were letting them down, only for them to reassert that they supported the ANC ‘as an organisation’.

Let us return once more to the example of Bhekisisa, the single mother who supported her three children, her mother and her late brother’s orphaned children. While Bhekisisa describes herself as struggling to get by, unable to provide the life for herself and her children that she had hoped for, and disappointed by the failure of local service delivery in her community, she acknowledges that the local government is present in her life. It gives her mother the pension that she combines with her own income to support her extended household, and local development, while slow, is recognisable. Thus, the experience of the local state leads her to insulate the ANC as an organisation from her daily struggle to get by. When asked about anti-government service delivery protests elsewhere in the country, she argued that this ‘anger’ should be directed against the appropriate authorities and certainly not against the ANC itself because:

We can’t say everyone is ANC. [We must ask] who are the people assigned to the job to come and give us a service because we cannot say [everything] is the ANC. Because what I believe is [that] there are structures, there are people who have been sent to cater for the regions, the suburbs, the locations, you name them. So they are the people who are supposed to be giving the service to us but not the ANC itself. So if we don’t get the services we need we cannot say that the ANC doesn’t deliver, we must be specific – who are the people who are not doing their job – not the ANC as such… the individuals assigned to the job are the people failing the organisation… if we can only get the people that have that loyalty to service us as they are supposed to be servicing us according to what ANC is working for, their manifesto and other things, I think I am in the right party and I’m prepared to go forward and work for that party. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)
Workers would often direct their frustrations at the relative competencies of their local municipality or they would single out a local official in their area who was not meeting their responsibilities and was therefore seen to be failing the ANC as an organisation. Danisani, for example, is a ‘fitter’ in the power station. He was extremely critical of the local (ANC) municipal government because, he said, they had built poor quality houses and the roads and other infrastructure in his area were ‘falling to pieces’. While he complained about the municipal government, he did not blame the ANC or the ANC government who, he said, were ‘trying’ for them:

I support the ANC but they must look at the people in the [local government] offices. [Are] they doing the right job? Some of them you see they are not looking after the people here. You know the government is throwing a lot of money here at the problems but the people down here [in this area] are still suffering. You can’t say it’s the ANC, its certain individuals who does those sorts of things. Now if they can get inspectors who can come and see and say ‘yes, nothing is happening’ I think things can be better but without doing that … they will keep spending money but these people are not doing anything and the things stay the same as they were before 1994.
(Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

When asked about government at the national level, workers often corrected me if they felt I had ‘slipped up’ by conflating ‘the government’ or the failings of a particular individual with the ANC as an organisation. I asked a shop steward how he felt about how the ANC’s policy of GEAR, for example, and he responded ‘the ANC has never had a policy of GEAR, that is the government policy of GEAR and it is made by those who are not listening to the ANC and following the instructions of the party’ (Personal communication with NUM shop steward 11/02/08). In short, as chapter 7 will further elucidate with reference to the national ANC leadership, workers believe that the failings of individuals and the government do not reflect an irredeemable ideological shortcoming of the ANC itself as an organisation. ‘Rational’ evaluations of the government’s performance do not, therefore, necessarily impact on workers’ loyalties towards the ANC as a party, which problematises the assumption that party loyalties in South Africa are entirely premised on the performance of the party in government, as is more widely the case in Western liberal democracies.
Conclusion

The historical symbolism of the ANC as the figurehead of the liberation struggle endows the party with a unique form of political capital which differentiates it from its rivals. As we have seen, workers’ political identities are heavily influenced by the legacy of apartheid, and support for the ANC is often rationalised through personal narratives of being ‘freed’ and empowered by the ANC and its leaders. This status is continuously reconstructed by the ANC through its ‘liberation discourses’ with which it seeks to discursively reaffirm its (self styled) natural monopoly regarding the ‘legitimate’ political representation of liberated South Africans.

According to some, such attachments will gradually wither and there are limits on the extent to which the ANC can ‘cash in’ on its history in this respect. Rather than understanding this historical symbolism as a finite resource that can one day be spent, however, we should understand it as a form of political capital, that can be reinvested so as to sustain its potency. Taken alone, ‘liberation discourses’ might not be enough to protect the ANC’s unrivalled position in South African politics today. The evidence presented here suggests that the ANC, like any liberation movement, can bolster these symbolic/ideological claims through tangible/material improvements to the everyday lives of its core constituency. Although their salaries have become an increasingly inadequate means of improving the standard of living of themselves and their families, these workers do not perceive themselves to be among a broader ‘betrayed’ population that has experienced little material improvement in their lives since the transition to democracy. The ANC government’s macroeconomic strategy is certainly founded on neo-liberal prescriptions, but its ‘Third-Way’ social democratic ethos has meant that, while a thoroughgoing attempt at economic redistribution has been deferred, if not foregone, the state’s continued extension of access to public welfare and its developmentalist agenda ensures that the South African state plays an active (and tangible)
role in the everyday lives of its citizens. Change might be incremental and, at best, uneven, but these workers experience the state and, by extension, the ANC government, as an important player in their communities and in supporting their individual livelihoods.

These findings highlight the complex relationship between the politics of national liberation and the politics of class. In Zimbabwe, the manner in which ZANU PF has commandeered the language of the ‘third chimurenga’ to construct its land reform polices as part of the ongoing ‘struggle’ to defend and entrench ‘the revolution’ through socio-economic transformation is indicative of the way in which liberation discourses can blur the distinction between a nationalist agenda and the discourses of a class-based politics (Raftopoulos 2004). Similarly, the ANC regards itself as a movement, rather than a party, engaged in a continued ‘struggle’ to ‘re-organise economic life’ (Lodge 2004: 216). The crucial difference here, however, is that ZANU PF’s liberation discourses have been less effective in the face of recurrent economic crises (Dorman 2006: 1098), leading the party to resort to ever more extreme attempts to discursively defend its position through ‘patriotic histories’ (Ranger 2004; Kriger 2006) and also to the use of state machinery to violently suppress the opposition (Kriger 2005). The ANC government, on the other hand, has an unprecedented capacity, in the southern African context, to intervene in the lives of its citizens through its ‘exceptional’ welfare provision (Seekings 2002) and its broader developmental capabilities. This capacity reinforces the ANC’s discourses of being the political organisation with the legitimacy and ability to defend and advance ‘the revolution’ and helps to close out the space for any political challenger to emerge.

As this case study has demonstrated, the ANC maintains an unrivalled presence, both ideological/psychological, owing to its historic symbolism, and material/tangible owing to its tangible intervention in workers’ lives. It thus appears at once as the heroic
champion of democratic rights, freedoms and dignity, and, at the same time, the contemporary torchbearer of working class aspirations. To these workers at least, the ANC is no ‘ordinary party’, judged against the relative merits of opposition parties and their policy programmes; it occupies a unique space in South African politics and one that is not easily assailable by any would-be challenger to the left of the party, precisely because of the blurred distinction between nationalist and class based discourses. The very ambiguity of the ANC’s claims to be the sole legitimate champion of ‘the liberated masses’, and the open-ended nature of its ‘National Democratic Revolution’, exemplifies this blurring. This makes the contest for control of the discursive ‘mantle of liberation’ not only an essential aim for any class-based challenger to the ANC, but also a far more elusive one.

As the next chapter will argue, this all has important implications for how workers frame their engagement with the post-apartheid state. It is an engagement that is not captured in binary conceptualisations of civil society as being either a theatre of unproblematic participation or one of polemical resistance to neo-liberalism. Instead, it is informed by a relatively complex understanding of the combination of multiple repertoires of engagement that reflects their position in the South African economy as a class that has notably benefited from the expansion of the post-apartheid state, but one whose aspirations for a better life after apartheid have still to be met.
CHAPTER 6

‘BUILDING SOUTH AFRICA’: HOW ESKOM WORKERS RATIONALISED THEIR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE POST-APARTHEID PERIOD

Introduction

This chapter builds upon the conclusions reached in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4 it was argued that workers believed the Alliance was the best way of ensuring that their interests were represented in the national legislature rather than pursuing an oppositional posture in relation to the ANC. As the last chapter demonstrated, this is partly due to the deeply rooted and complex affinities that workers have with the ANC. An important element of this ongoing support for the party is their understanding of the post-apartheid government being a relatively benign and benevolent force in their lives which was ‘struggling’ on their behalf to improve their livelihoods and to develop their communities.

The conclusions of these two chapters hold one important theme in common: workers do not perceive the ANC government to be a monolithically ‘neo-liberal’ entity, entrenching a new ‘class apartheid’ which necessitates a ‘return to arms’ in the form of class-based resistance to the ANC itself. Instead, workers’ attitudes towards the Alliance and their continued loyalty to the ANC are grounded in their strong bonds of identification with the ANC and also a rational calculation of how best to improve their lot in the radically altered social, political and institutional context of the post-apartheid period.

This chapter will build upon these conclusions by analysing the ways in which workers rationalise their individual political engagement within the post-apartheid
context. In particular, it will analyse how and why workers frame certain forms of individual and collective agency as ‘acceptable/rational’ and others ‘unacceptable/irrational’. These attitudes towards working class agency, it is argued, reflect sophisticated understandings of both the state and civil society, and not simply the ‘false consciousness’ of an organised working class led down the wrong path by a bureaucratic union leadership.

The first section of the chapter will review some of the literature analysing the relationship between the post-apartheid state and civil society and the impact this is purported to have on the way the organised working class will (or should) engage with the ANC government. The position of the organised working class in post-apartheid society is often depicted in binary terms. According to Seekings, workers represented by COSATU affiliates are a privileged labour aristocracy who have increasingly used their institutional access to protect and defend the existing economic and political status quo which serves their interests (Seekings 2004). Another view posits that workers ultimately form part of a broader working poor whose aspirations have not realised in the post-apartheid era. This highlights the need for them to take on an adversarial political strategy with respect to the ANC (Bassett 2005; Ceruti 2008a; Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Ngwane 2003).

In the second section of the chapter it will be argued that such readings of organised working class agency offer an extremely limited and unnecessarily polemical picture of their political engagements. The manner in which workers frame their engagement with the ANC and also their relationship with other civil society organisations is informed by a sophisticated and critical understanding of their relationship with the state. They have developed a complex understanding of what they believe constitutes ‘acceptable’ forms of agency in the post-apartheid period. This involves critical engagement with the state through local ANC structures. While for some
workers this is framed in proactive terms as part of a wider political narrative of sustaining ‘working class leadership’ within the party, for most workers this is a reactive strategy: the ANC’s local structures are framed as a problem-solving ‘open house’ within which they can raise the grievances of their communities as and when is necessary. Protest and direct action are not ruled out as a possible strategies, but they are framed as a ‘last resort’ once engagement within the channels of the party have been exhausted. Once again, these findings highlight the importance of understanding working class experiences of the post-liberation society. It is the complexity of these experiences that lead them to reject simplistic binaries of what form working class agency ‘should’ take in relation to the post-apartheid government and the nationalist movement more broadly.

6.1 The state, civil society and organised working class agency

6.1.1 The ANC and civil society in the post-apartheid period

In the post-apartheid era the ANC, in keeping with the liberal tradition, defines the state as a neutral arbiter, impartially balancing the competing interests of society. As Johnson notes:

By virtue of its impartiality, the democratic state is seen as the only legitimate expression of the interests of the whole nation, becoming coterminous with the “national interest” or the “public will”. At the same time all other demands or proposals for social change emanating from outside the state are viewed as partial, subjective or sectarian, regardless of the legitimacy of the demands. (2003: 218)

Civil society was expected to adopt a depoliticised, ‘watchdog’ relationship with the ANC government and, in doing so, to eschew the militant activism they displayed in the struggle period (Seekings 2000). Rather than challenge the status quo, civil society was tasked with the role of cooperative partner in the consolidation of the new democracy. Bompani, for example, argues that:

The dominant idea of the democratic process produced by the ANC discourse was that the end of apartheid coincided with the end of political mobilization…. The tone of the political discourse is much more similar to the rigid response of a liberation party than to that of a democratic party. Alternatives to the central discourse are not admitted and a continuous call to unity is perpetrated. These are the real challenges to the process of democratisation in a continent
where the liberation movements themselves have failed to negotiate their own transition to a complete democracy. (2006: 1147)

These continuous appeals for unity reflect the organisational traditions of the liberation movement developed during the liberation struggle, traditions that continue to influence the movement’s relationship with independent civil society organisations once it has become a party of government as the party attempts to exert control and maintain its hegemony (Dorman 2006; Melber 2003).

A long-standing debate within the ANC has indeed centred around whether or not it should eschew its identity as a liberation movement and adopt the identity of a political party, such as that of Labour Party in Great Britain or the Swedish Social Democratic Party (see Darracq 2008: 431; Lodge 2004: 215-216). Kader Asmal, a former ANC Minister, summarises this debate succinctly:

When we wrote the ANC constitution, there was a hot debate: if we call ourselves a political party, it means that we are an elite-driven structure; if we say we are a national liberation movement, it means we are a movement for and led by the masses. The latter proposal won, with a nuance: ‘We are a national liberation movement involved in electoral politics.’ (Quoted in Darracq 2008: 438)

A 2007 ANC discussion document reaffirms the party’s position in this respect, arguing that the ANC must retain it’s status as a ‘mass movement’ because:

The ANC cannot conduct itself as an ordinary electoral party. It cannot behave like a shapeless jelly-fish with a political form that is fashioned hither and thither by the multiple contradictory forces of sea-waves… In essence, the ANC is faced with two options: either to act as a party of the present, an electoral machine blinded by short-term interest, satisfied with current social reality and merely giving stewardship to its sustenance. Or it can become a party of the future, using political power and harnessing the organisational and intellectual resources of society to attain the vision of a national democratic society. (ANC 2007)

The manner in which the ANC has deployed the ‘exclusionary language of liberation’ to distinguish itself as the only legitimate right to speak on behalf of ‘the nation’ (Dorman 2006: 1092) provokes concern among some commentators about whether the party is unwilling to allow for an independent, critical civil society to emerge. In this respect, Habib has noted a tendency of the ANC to try an determine the ‘rules of the game’ for civil society by rewarding compliant, uncritical groupings while attempting to marginalise those that challenge the governments’ agenda (Habib 2005: 687; see also
Ballard 2005; Ballard et al 2006; Bompani 2006; Johnson 2003). Ballard suggests that ‘[t]he state thus seeks to construct certain expressions of citizenship as more legitimate than others and thereby pull the rug out from under its most vociferous opponents who attempt to operate in spaces it cannot control directly’ (Ballard 2005: 80). Some authors have documented how the ANC, for example, has stigmatised independent civil society groups who are critical of its economic record with the label ‘ultra leftists’ as a means to marginalise these struggles from public influence (Bond 2000: 140; Calland 2006: 146-147; Desai 2002; Gumede 2005: 264).

However, it is not only the ANC that has constructed binary formulations of the relationship between state and civil society in the post-apartheid era. As I will now discuss, some scholars have (somewhat ironically) reinforced the binary distinction between a cooperative, developmentalist civil society and a state-civil society relationship which is characterised primarily by antagonism.

6.1.2 Polemical approaches towards civil society and subjectivity in post-apartheid South Africa

Some analysts have raised concerns that the ANC governments’ discursive construction of a polarised civil society have to some extent been reinforced by academic readings of civil society (Habib 2005; Oldfield and Stokke 2007). Mohan and Stokke (2000) point to a degree of convergence in approaches towards the role of civil society in both the neo-liberal ‘new right’ and the neo-Marxist ‘new left’, as both conceptualise civil society as an essential element of post-apartheid democratisation and development (Mohan and Stokke 2000). What both approaches share is the belief that the civil society activism, which was instrumental in bringing about the end of apartheid, can now be harnessed to consolidate democracy and development in South Africa, whether through ‘cooperative’ participation in the new democratic institutions (in the ‘new right’ case) or through
resistance and the creation of alternative development paths (in the ‘neo left’ case) (see for discussion Habib 2005; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Oldfield and Stokke 2007).

According to Oldfield and Stokke these binary representations of civil society as either a theatre of resistance against neo-liberalism or as a depoliticised developmental partner of government conceal more than they illuminate because:

The clash between policies for economic liberalization and struggles for socio-economic justice generate local and national politics that cloak everyday civil society activism as either engaging with the South African transition or in opposition to it... Polemical readings of urban politics, supported by binary conceptualizations of neo-liberalism and anti-neo-liberalism struggles, reinforce the polarization of civil society organisations and actors from the state. This polarization and polemical rhetoric increases antagonism between liberal promoters of governance and engagement and anti-neo-liberal activists prioritizing issues of justice... Grounded analysis of community organizing demonstrates, instead, that community politics include strategic and relational collaboration with and opposition to the state. Theorizations of civil society and of state-society relationships need to reflect this complexity and the plurality of urban politics in practice, building from a mediation of the empirical with the conceptual. (Oldfield and Stokke: 152)

According to Habib, the plurality of civil society should be celebrated, and polemical readings of civil society are unhelpful because:

The absolute and categoric character of their visions makes them inappropriate models for a contemporary state-civil society relationship. Implicitly, these visions imagine a homogenous civil society. They project a single set of relations for the whole of civil society. Is civil society, however, not plural by its very nature? And, should not this plurality infuse our understandings of state-civil society relations in contemporary South Africa? (2005b: 672)

On this note, Oldfield and Stokke note that ‘the contestation of such initiatives by trade unions and social movements contain a plethora of issues and strategies, with diverse and reflexive combinations of engagement and disengagement with economic and political actors in different localities and at different scales’ (Oldfield and Stokke 2007: 144; see also Ballard 2005: 80).

6.1.3 Where does the organised working class fit in?

As was discussed in previous chapters, some scholars have argued that the organised working class is deeply immersed within South Africa’s broader social crisis of reproduction (Barchiesi 2005; Torres 2005). According to some commentators, it is only a matter of time before workers and their unions adopt an adversarial position with
regards to the ANC government as the latter’s economic policies have put the on ‘collision course’ with the trade unions (Buhlunngu 2005; Gall 1997). According to Ngwane, in response to their members the unions will be forced to forge organic linkages with the broader ‘movement of movements’ resisting the ‘neo-liberal’ ANC once they ‘realise’ that their interests are fundamentally intertwined (Ngwane 2003). To date, it is argued that it is only the national union leadership and their narrow strategic outlook that has prevented the unions from forging alliances with South Africa’s burgeoning social movements (Bassett 2005; Bassett and Clarke 2008; Ceruti 2008).

An alternative reading is offered by Seekings who argues that this ‘narrow’ strategic outlook is actually in touch with the rank-and-file membership’s desire to preserve the political and economic status quo (2004). COSATU’s members reflect a relatively affluent layer of South African society – some of the ‘winners’ of the political transition – and that the trade unions have used their privileged access to government through the Alliance and various corporatist forums to protect their sectoral interests, even if this comes at the expense of the unemployed and unorganised workers (Seekings 2004; 2007b).

Other labour analysts, however, have dismissed this ‘labour aristocracy’ thesis and also the notion that COSATU’s members have been in some way ‘betrayed’ by the ANC government. COSATU members, they argue, have indeed experienced real material improvements to their lives in the post-apartheid era but their attitudes do not support the idea that they have become a selfish labour aristocracy (Cherry 2006). Instead, like other sections of civil society, the unions use both adversarial and cooperative strategies, combining mass action with engagement in corporatist forums and sending their representatives to parliament (Cherry 2006; Cherry and Southall 2006; Pillay 2006). As Cherry notes,
[W]orkers believe in engaging government and parliament as well as using mass action. They don’t see this as either/or but as complementary parts of the same strategy. Mass action brings the government to bear. (Cherry 2006: 44)

It is this more reflexive understanding of post-apartheid citizenship, civil society engagement with the state and trade union activism offered by the likes of Habib, Mohan and Stokke and Cherry which is of the greatest explanatory power when analysing the attitudes of Eskom workers towards these issues.

6.2 Eskom workers’ proactive engagement with the ANC

6.2.1 ‘You cannot be a shop steward and then just go home’: how NUM encourages its members to be politically active

COSATU affiliates have encouraged their members to become active members of the ANC. Both COSATU and NUM have standing resolutions to this effect. COSATU’s Eighth Congress, for example, resolved that:

COSATU members should be encouraged to participate in all structures of the Alliance as members of those structures. This means that they should be encouraged to join those structures so as to be able to influence positions and to build the ANC and SACP as well as SANCO. (COSATU 2003)

COSATU’s Ninth Congress in 2006 developed a more detailed strategy. Under a section titled ‘Advancing working class hegemony within the ANC’, Congress resolved:

1. That the Eighth National Congress resolution on swelling the ranks of the ANC must be based on the following guidelines:
   1. Working-class cadres must ensure that activities of the ANC structures (including meeting agendas) are dominated by working-class issues and concerns such as the pursuit of all the Freedom Charter demands, and not dominated by narrow BEE interests, tenders, factionalism etc.;
   2. Working-class cadres must contest for leading positions of the ANC to ensure that business personalities do not dominate the ANC;
   3. Working-class cadres must expose the post-1996 class project, its limitations and its crisis. This must not be done in a factionalist manner, but in a manner that encourages debate and discussion within the ANC structures;
   4. Working-class cadres must promote the unity of the Alliance and involvement of the Alliance in all activities of the ANC and visa versa.

There is, in short, a concerted effort on the part of COSATU and its affiliates to actively infiltrate ANC structures in an effort to influence the ideological direction of the party.
NUM is no different in this regard: the Union encourages its members to participate within the ANC and SACP. As Piet Matosa, the former NUM Chairperson for Highveld Region and now the Deputy President of the NUM, explained:

Look, we have decided long ago that we don't want to be a “helmet and gumboots” union. We have decided to be a union that is politically active. Now, to do that, we have to have members at the ground. Members that will ensure that we influence the policies of the ANC because policies of the ANC are influenced from the grassroots level to the regional level, from the regional to the province, and the province to the national. Now, the danger of not having our members not being involved at the branch level of the ANC is that we find the ANC being taken in another direction by another class of society. We want to maintain it being a working-class biased party. We can't do that of we are not active at all levels. (Interview with Piet Matosa 22/05/08)

NUM’s leaders are all engaged, at various levels, in the structures of both the ANC and the SACP (Interview with Frans Baleni 06/11/07). Piet Matosa, for example, is a long-standing member of the ANC – the former mayor of Delmas, in fact – and he is also active in the highest structures of the SACP. When I asked if NUM encourages its members to become ANC members he replied:

Yes, we've got political resolutions that we took as the NUM that each member of the NUM are encouraged to join the ANC and the SACP. Now our belief as the leadership is that most of our members are in fact ANC and [also] members of the South African Communist Party.

Q: How exactly do you encourage them?

Firstly, the slogans that we shout in our meetings are ANC slogans. Secondly, when we address mass meetings where the bulk of the members are, we encourage them to join the ANC and the South African Communist Party. Thirdly, in our meetings we invite the leadership from the ANC and the South African Communist Party to attend so that we assure the membership of the NUM is highly politicized. (Interview with Piet Matosa 22/05/08).

With regards to Eskom workers, Job Matsepe, the NUM’s national organiser for the industry, confirmed that: ‘We encourage all our members to belong also to the ANC and the SACP…. you can’t really be a member of the NUM and you don’t belong to the African National Congress’ (Interview with Job Matsepe 25/04/08). This encouragement came from all levels of the Union and reflected NUM and COSATU’s strategy to fight for ‘working class hegemony’ within the party.
6.2.2 Workers’ rationalisations of ANC involvement: ‘struggling for the working class’

It was clear that NUM was not entirely successful at ‘politicising’ its members, however. Although ANC membership was quite common among workers, by no stretch of the imagination were all or even most union members proactively engaged in their local ANC structures, nor were they in fact members of the ANC itself. There was nonetheless a sizeable activist layer of workers, particularly shop stewards, who were active members of either or both parties. I did not encounter a single shop steward, for example, who was not an ANC member. Some – but by no means all – were also members of the SACP, but the engagement within the ANC was by far the most significant form of political activism described by them. It was clear that the most active members of the ANC came from this activist layer of politically driven shop stewards. It was noticeable that this groups spanned several generations of workers and also included workers from widely different skills and class backgrounds: what they held in common was usually a shared background as a shop steward or former shop steward.\(^{84}\)

This activist layer framed their involvement in the ANC’s structures in different ways. For some, particularly the shop stewards who were more exposed to NUM’s ‘political education’, activism was framed within a broader context of ‘struggling for the working class’ in an attempt to hold the ANC ‘to order’. Lucky, for example, said that he attended his ANC branch every time it met, although this, he said, was quite infrequent at times. As a shop steward he said that he had been encouraged by NUM leaders to become active in the ANC. Lucky was typically able to frame his activism in a highly politicised manner. He said that:

It is important to advance the community issues in the local ANC structures. I think also as a worker you always want to shape the developments of the government so its basically for those reasons that as NUM [members] we should be active [in the ANC] in case we need to change, for

---

\(^{84}\) Although there were noticeably some older, less skilled workers that I spoke to who were also active in the ANC but who nonetheless had not been shop stewards. These workers were often said they had been ‘baptized’ into ANC politics during the apartheid era when their union or local community would hold clandestine meetings discussing ANC issues.
example, the legislation affecting the workers. We need to be involved so that legislation can suit
the workers and the government can advance what the workers want the laws to be. (Interview
with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

In a similar way, another shop steward at Arnot called Mthuli said that he
attended his local branch meeting every month and was also a member of his ANC
Branch Executive Committee (BEC), explained that:

It's important because it's the ANC which liberated this country together with the working class.
Now to participate in the ANC means that you are influencing the party now it is in power
because as ANC we still need the influence of the working class. Because the ANC is a very
broad church – you've got businessmen there, you've got opportunity there, you've got all
types of people. We've therefore got a lot of people that don't understand the plight of the
working class. That's why you now need the working class within the ANC to be the motive force
you know, to shift the balance of forces for the working class. So that is why it important to
participate in the ANC because we've voted the ANC into power, we have deployed them into
power as the workers, so we must make sure now that we keep them on their toes so that they
don't relax. There are policies that guide them to implement so we must get them to remember
those policies and we must hold them accountable. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

Shop stewards like Lucky and Mthuli then, would appear to fit the mould of the ‘model
cadre’; as leaders within their local union they frame their commitment to engaging with
the ANC using well-refined and articulate forms of expression that in some ways quite
clearly echo what they have been taught through NUM's political education. For them,
engaging within the ANC reflected an essential part of the Union’s strategy of ensuring
working class 'leadership’ within the party.

The level of commitment that some of this activist layer displayed was striking: they devoted a great deal of time to street and ward committees and were able to give
details of recent meetings they had been to. Several senior shop stewards and Union
officials, as well as a few ordinary NUM members, also had experience of being a local
ANC councillor, or were members of their local ANC Branch Executive Committee.
Some were also involved in provincial structures. This activist layer of workers would
perhaps reflect what Schulz Herzenberg has described as ‘cognitive partisans’ (2009: 41).

85 In this context ‘opportunists’ is how workers label people who use the ANC structures for their own
personal gain.
86 I often asked them to describe the last meeting they had attended in order to try and verify whether or
not they were really as active as they claimed. In some cases, such as with regards to one of the shop
stewards quoted above, I attended their local ANC branch meetings with them, where we met with
other shop stewards and members of NUM.
Building on the work of Russell Dalton (1984), she argues that these partisans ‘have strong party attachments but are psychologically involved in politics even when party cues are absent’. This distinguishes them from ‘apartisans’ who are not attached to a political party, but who are cognitively mobilised, and ‘ritual partisans’ who have strong attachments to a particular party but who are not cognitively mobilised and rely on party cues to stimulate their mobilisation (2009: 41). This activist layer of workers not only display strong affinities with the ANC as a party, they were proactively engaged within it and they were able to rationalise this activism in a complex and an impassioned manner. For them, ANC dominance was not considered a danger to South African democracy, so long as ‘working class influence’ within the party itself was actively defended.

6.2.3 Workers’ rationalisations of ANC involvement: the ANC as a space of ‘responsible’ civic engagement

Workers who were regularly active in ANC branch structures often framed their involvement in these political terms. However, even those that expressed that this was their primary motivation for attending ANC meetings would admit that they often encountered problems, and even hostility, if they tried to force the trade union positions too strongly at ANC branches. This was in part due to the multi-class dynamics of each branch and the aversion that they said businessmen had if they tried to make an ANC branch meeting into a ‘COSATU meeting’.

Dumisani, for example, works at Arnot as an operator and is regularly involved in his local ANC branch.87 He recalled how COSATU members in his branch had experienced problems when they attempted to raise an issue on behalf of the trade unions. He said:

87 When I asked the full time shop steward about members’ political engagement, for example, he identified Dumisani as one of several NUM members at Arnot who were ‘extremely active’.
It is very difficult [to raise union standpoints], I think in one of our meetings 3 years ago there was a cry – even a condemnation – in one of our meetings that they don’t want to see our meetings to be clouded by COSATU. [This is because] there are people who are not involved in a trade union and they don’t understand that for us, to be an ANC member and a trade union member is one in the same thing, [We believe] that you have to work together so that you can advance both the community and the workers. Because a happy worker is a happy family man, he is a happy community person and if people are getting dismissed or they are unhappy in the workplace then what is going to happen in the community? (Interview with Eskom worker 18/12/07)

This was a typical account of the difficulties unionists faced if they tried to raise specific union agendas or wider Alliance politics in local branch structures. They often said that while they could influence broader politics in terms of ANC leadership changes, local ANC branch structures were not the place for wider political jostling between the Alliance organisations. When I asked a follow up question to Mthuli, for example, about whether he raised union standpoints during ANC meetings he answered:

It’s a mixture. We have political input but we don’t go deeper into politics because it’s not the same as before as in 1976 whereby you would be discussing politics because of the political situation at the time. Now people are more interested in bread and butter issues, the service delivery issues. If in the invitation to the [ANC branch] meeting that you’re gonna distribute, if there is no item there about service delivery issues people won’t come. You have to make sure that there is service delivery issues, that there is bread and butter issues that we are gonna be discussing because if you’re gonna discuss politics alone, they won’t come. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

Although the inability to raise union issues and Alliance politics was sometimes described in this way as a ‘problem’ by some of the active workers, they often claimed that their main purpose for engaging with local ANC structures was, in any case, primarily driven by a sense of civic duty rather than simply the directives of the union. The general sentiment among NUM members who were active in ANC branches was that those structures were first and foremost a participatory space in which local ‘bread and butter’ issues of development should predominate ahead of the ‘politics’ associated with the Alliance. One shop steward explained that he did not raise union positions at branch meetings or issues relating to broader political struggles. He explained that local branch discussions were

…not about politics, it’s about the development of the places you see? They bring all these things, not only the politic[s]. It’s local service delivery like building schools, building roads, giving guys or people better houses and how to prevent the accidents which are happening on our roads and all that. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)
ANC activists would regularly assert that ‘we don’t talk COSATU’ in ANC meetings and that work related issues would rarely form part of the agenda. They claimed that this was in part down to meetings primarily addressing specific local issues rather than broader policy debates which, they argued, took place at higher levels of the party’s structure, such as at the provincial level.88

These active workers would often frame their engagement in ANC structures as a form of civic responsibility to ‘build the communities’ or to ‘build our country’. For example, Jabulani is a technician at Arnot and a shop steward. He said had been active in the ANC since a branch was established in his area in the early 1990s. He also said that he was involved in a local ward committee and that this was all part of fulfilling his responsibility as a ‘leader’:

According to my knowledge and my understanding, when we are talking about the people as the community, we are talking about different individuals. We’re talking about employees, we are talking about students, talking about parents, talking about kids. You name them. So, if for instance [there is] me who is working in a community and I’m saying I can’t get enough services, especially water – because that is the source of our lives – or that we don’t have electricity, and I’m a shop steward, what am I to do? I should take action because I am a leader. I need to help those people who are suffering and not getting those services they are supposed to be getting because I know the rules, I know the law. … I am not just a trade unionist as such, because I’m an employee but at the same time I’ve got a family so I belong to that structure – the community as such – because I am a community member. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

These kinds of heavily normative rationalisations of ANC activism were common among this activist layer of workers, who often described themselves as ‘showing the light’ to the communities. As Mandla, a utility worker who was also an activist in his local ANC branch in Witbank argued, community members must make themselves ‘heard’ in the ANC because:

Whether you like it or not [what happens there] it effects you so I think what is important is to go and try to make change because it’s us, certain individuals who must go there because if it’s not you then who? If you don’t want to get up and make change then who will make change? (Interview with Eskom worker 18/12/07)

88 At the meetings I attended housing was overwhelmingly the primary topic of debate and conversation. There was distinctly little talk about the positions of alliance politics, even in and around the Polokwane succession.
These workers often framed their activism as a way of making sure the local branch addressed local problems and that without such activism the local and national government would ‘hear nothing’ from ordinary people. Workers who were involved in such structures framed this as part of their duty associated with being a ‘leader’ and they took a great deal of pride out of recounting experiences of ‘assisting’ their communities. Workers would recall setting up neighbourhood watch initiatives in their area, or they would recall how they had intervened to resolve disputes over housing lists, for example.

Although some of the more politically educated shop stewards attempted to rationalise their engagement with these structures in terms of the Union’s strategic interests, the overriding rationale for participating in these structures was therefore expressed in terms of it representing a form of responsible civic engagement and resolving ‘bread and butter’ issues in the communities. They were not, in short, looking upon ANC activism as some form of a broader working class ‘infiltration’ of the ANC on behalf of COSATU or NUM. Instead, local ANC structures were framed as the spaces through which ‘rational’ and ‘acceptable’ forms of working class agency could be pursued: supporting the ANC went beyond giving the party an electoral mandate every five years and entailed proactive engagement with its structures so as to bring positive changes to their communities.

6.2.4 Less actively-engaged workers: the ANC as an ‘open-house’

It was clear that ANC membership rates were not as high as first impressions might appear. In the majority of cases, workers would describe themselves as ANC ‘members’,

---

89 A common story that they would recount would be how they had foiled robberies in their neighbourhood by ‘mobilising’ the community. It was interesting how in this respect how vigilantism was widely condoned.
90 When I asked them about their support for Zuma in the branch, for example, they would say that they put forward their support for Zuma ‘as an ANC member’ and that they did not do so on behalf of COSATU, but because of their belief that he was the best candidate to ‘strengthen the ANC’.
but under closer inspection the reality was that most could not recall the last meeting they went to in any detail and they would often admit that ‘when I said I am a member I did not mean I was a card carrying member’. While the majority of workers could recall the details of their local branch organisation, such as where it met, they were less likely to put an exact date on when they last attended a meeting, however, with most offering a rather vague ‘in the last few years’ or simply admitting that they couldn’t remember. Workers would sometimes claim that this was because they had been members in the past and that they had simply let their membership lapse, or that they had lost touch with their local branch because of other commitments and changes in their family life.

Workers would often argue that their lack of attendance was down to the dysfunction of their local ANC branch: they would often complain that their branch was not in ‘good order’ because it did not hold regular meetings. Philani, for example, said that he had attended the local Arnott ANC branch in the past, which was located at the nearby mining compound. He was unable, however, to pinpoint exactly when he was last there, speculating that is was sometime ‘in the last year’. He said the reason for his inability to be involved was down to the local branch organisation because:

Lately I will be honest with you, it's just terrible. This branch is led by someone from the mine, a lady. We were just talking about it now [in the power station]. She is never available for the meeting even though she's the main person in charge. So nothing is organised. We have not met for a long time. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

It was often said that ANC branch meetings were infrequent and some branches often went for months without holding an official meeting. Workers were aware from their discussions with their colleagues that in some areas the ANC was better organised than in others. For example, Lungani lived in Middelburg and said he was active in his local ANC branch as well as regional SACP structures. As a shop steward he said that it was part of his task to encourage union members to become politically active but that this was practically difficult for workers who lived outside the towns and that these workers were generally less likely to be involved:
I think that the workers that tend to get involved are the workers staying in Middelburg where there are established branch structures of the ANC. I think also the type of residence is a factor in terms of not having ANC members because sometimes the ANC regional leadership doesn’t come and organise to a rural branch, they only look at the branches in the vicinity in the township or the town. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

Indeed, workers would often complain that because their local branch was dysfunctional, the only optional available to them was to engage in branches that were a long way from where they stayed which, they complained, was a time-consuming and expensive exercise. Such organisational shortcomings in branch level organisation have affected the party across the country (Darracq 2008b) and are also well known to the party itself (Motlanthe 2007).

However, it was not simply a practical problem that some branches were not in ‘good standing’ (to use ANC-speak). The more politically active shop stewards in particular often decried the passivity of ordinary members who were not engaged because they did not share the same sense of civic responsibility. As the full time shop steward for Gauteng remarked: ‘I’m not sure if maybe it’s because people feel like we have arrived [at the end of the road] because now the ANC’s in power they don’t have to engage in politics and that is a very dangerous game’ (Interview with John Radebe 14/05/08). Those that were active ANC members would often complain that other workers were too focused on themselves or even ‘didn’t care’ about being active members of the organisation. This was a charge regularly levelled at the younger, more skilled workers who, like with regard to their trade union engagement, were thought to be less interested in local politics and more concerned with their careers and ‘hedonistic’ lifestyles. Although some younger workers did display an apathetic attitude towards local politics, it would be erroneous to frame this issue purely in generational or class terms, however. From the data I have, it was clear that ANC activity was not significantly determined by differences in either age or skill levels, as can be seen in the demographics
of the activist layer of workers, comprised of young managers as well as less skilled shop
stewards.

An interesting insight, however, provided by the manner in which workers would
identify themselves as ANC members – not just ANC voters – even though they were
not officially paid-up members, is the manner in which it illustrates the strong normative
value workers attached to having an affiliation with the Party. When I asked the full time
shop stewards and organisers about this phenomenon of workers falsely claiming to be
ANC members, which was widespread, they explained that it was indeed something they
themselves had encountered regularly. One remarked that these workers would often
engage in the election campaigns, for example:

You do find people who are your members of the union [campaigning for the ANC] but you will
find some of those members are not necessarily members of the ANC but they support the ANC
and when you’ve got these types of activities they involved because they support the ANC.

Another said that

Many members will say they are a member of the ANC just because they vote for the ANC but
they are not really members of the ANC because they do not sit in the ANC’s meeting, they don’t
influence what is happening in the areas where they reside… but they just want to identify
themselves as ANC…. (Interview with Eskom worker 14/05/08)

Perhaps these workers fall into the category of voters Schultz Herzenberg
describes as ‘ritual partisans’ whose party loyalty is ‘almost a habitual activity’, and that
these are less well-informed supporters who are not ‘cognitively mobilised’ by issues or a
firm understanding of current affairs (2009: 41). This would fit with the party
identification model developed by theorists such as the Campbell who highlighted the
manner in which voters strongly identify with a particular party and that loyalty to that
party will override individual policy preferences or evaluations of government
performance when an individual casts their vote (1960). Such a label, however, suggests a
degree of passivity and ignorance among these workers - that they merely respond to
party cues to stimulate their involvement in politics - when, in reality, workers were also
able to rationalise their support for the ANC a range of relatively complex ways. As I
discussed in the previous chapter, workers’ attachments to the ANC were not purely informed by the historical affinity which they felt with the party, but also an assessment of the party’s performance in government. Although they were often unable to frame their support for the ANC in grand meta-narratives about a ‘national democratic revolution’, like their ‘politically educated’ shop stewards were able to, they nonetheless rationalised their support in relation to their understandings of democratic representation, mediation and accountability in the post-apartheid setting, as I will discuss further in the next chapter.

Furthermore, it was clear that although many workers were not formally members of the ANC, they expressed that from time to time, should the need arise, they would attend a local meeting or go and seek to their local ANC representative. They often referred to the ANC as an ‘open house’ or an ‘open door’ to the community. Although they were admittedly less active, these workers would describe how they would be welcomed at local meetings if they attended.

Indeed, the majority of NUM members were clearly not involved in local ANC branches on a regular basis but they nonetheless said that they would go along to meetings or consult local ANC representatives as part of an instrumental, trouble-shooting exercise when ‘community issues’ had to be addressed. Loyiso, a security guard, for example, explained that engaging with the ANC was a way of addressing community issues because, he argued, the ANC was an exceptional organisation:

If I have a problem and I have to handle this problem I can go to this office [ANC] to see and maybe this problem can be solved…. If you have a problem, if you are like me and you don’t know how to handle a problem you can go [to] this branch and you will see that maybe our problem can be solved. You see? Because you see the ANC, it’s our organisation, there is no organisation that is like it, anywhere, and I can change [it]. It’s not always simple to change [it] but let us fight until our things [are] right, solve it. (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07)

It was noticeable in this sense that workers would describe their local ANC branch as the first point at which to raise their problems, rather than the local offices of respective government departments or the municipal council. They would often say that ‘speaking
to the ANC’ was the best means of getting things ‘fixed’ or ‘attended to’ in their communities, rather than the supposedly neutral organs of the state or civil service.

To summarise, while a section of NUM’s membership are highly-engaged and well-informed members of the ANC, this was by no means a reflection of the majority of the workers at Eskom. However, what was common to both across the vast majority of workers which I interviewed was the sense of the local presence of the ANC: whether or not you were an official member, the ANC was, effectively, the first port of call through which to raise issues. Rather than an ‘ordinary’ party that receives its mandate every five years from these workers, the ANC was framed in relatively unproblematic terms as a movement ‘struggling’ to improve their lot, one which could (and should) be engaged with to keep the post-apartheid project ‘on track’. Engaging with the ANC then, for these workers, was framed in instrumental as well as normative terms. It was a rational form of participation that would bring about material improvements to their communities while also allowing them to play the role of a responsible citizen. This, I will now argue, was contrasted with the kind of ‘irrational’ and ‘irresponsible’ citizenship demonstrated by those who did not use ‘appropriate’ channels to voice their grievances and who engaged in what they framed as counter-productive protest action.

6.2.5 Workers attitudes towards independent civil society organisations

As I discussed briefly in section 4.2.3, workers were often extremely wary about their union forming links with independent social movements who were perceived as hostile towards the ANC. On an individual level, when asked if they supported protests over service delivery in their communities, workers were extremely cautious about offering their support. Workers would often want to clarify whom exactly I was referring to when I asked them about social movements or community groups protesting against service delivery, what their grievances were and whom their protest was directed at. Workers felt
uneasy if the protest/movement was considered to be ‘out of order’ because the tactics it used or the ‘slogans’ it shouted were ‘illegitimate’.

The expression ‘out of order’ was used widely its meaning is perhaps best illustrated by examining its day-to-day usage in Union meetings. The term was used to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable modes of behaviour in the meetings. Thus, a comrade who breached the meeting protocol by speaking out of turn was deemed ‘out of order’. However, the term also encapsulated a broader meaning beyond protocol. If a comrade was deemed to have spoken without a mandate or whose opinions were out of sync with the majority viewpoint they would be accused of being ‘out of order’. As one shop steward explained ‘you are out of order when your behaviour is unacceptable, [when] you have stopped listening and you are a law just to yourself and you are not representing anybody’ (Personal Communication with NUM shop steward 11/02/08).

In a similar vein, workers would describe street protests and social movements that were deemed to be behaving illegitimately as being ‘out of order’. A widely held belief was that the end of apartheid had given space for people to engage with their government for the first time and that as such community issues should be channelled through ANC structures or local municipal institutions. The attitudes of Million, a boiler worker at Duvha reflects this sentiment. He argued that the ANC was ‘our organisation’ was always there for him. He explained that if there were local service delivery problems, his reaction would not be to go and demonstrate but to go and ‘resolve the issues’ in local ANC structures, even though he was not himself officially a member. For Million, it was about constructively engaging in the ‘correct structures’ to help ‘develop the communities’ rather than just ‘lying around doing nothing’ or simply protesting when things went badly. He said:

I participate because we want to know as a community that they are giving us our water and services. If there is a problem, we don’t march [because] there is a person who has been
appointed to give the complaint to him at the [ANC branch] meeting where we can ask where is the water services, the electricity and all that stuff and tell them to take it to the man who is appointed, the councillor. Yes, you go along and if there is anything you don’t agree with [the ANC leaders say] ‘please stand up’…. [The aim is to] to build each other as far as the problem is concerned, not to fight against each other. (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07)

While militancy was still considered a legitimate option when individuals or institutions (whether in the workplace or the local government) were behaving unaccountably, workers would denounce the kind of direct action displayed by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). The SECC is involved in illegally reconnecting residents to the electricity grid if Eskom cuts them off for a failure to pay their bills (Egan and Wafer 2006) and while workers were extremely critical of the high cost of electricity and supported affordable electricity access for residents, they would often denounce the tactics used by the SECC as being ‘criminal’, ‘dangerous’ and generally ‘unacceptable’ or ‘out of order’. It was often said that if people could not afford to pay then campaigning and going through government structures was the correct path to take, but that direct action such as illegal reconnections was an improper form of agency when institutional channels were available in the post-apartheid era. One shop steward in Arnot power station reflected this broader sentiment when he said about the SECC’s tactics of illegal reconnections:

It’s criminal. You can’t do it, that’s crime. If you’re doing illegal connections that’s crime. People must know that it’s crime because you can’t get a service that you don’t pay for. If there is a protest to say that Eskom’s rates are too high then that I can protest but let’s mobilise - mobilise the whole country and say that Eskom was not correct. We understand that there are people in poverty but it’s better to debate these things somewhere and say ‘here are the old people, they don’t have money, and they do make some arrangements for these people which I think there is now – that a certain amount of electricity won’t be charged. … There is a right way of doing things and we cannot just allow things like that [reconnections] to happen because if we leave them to happen then everybody, even those who are working with money will do the same. … and we’ll never have control over the country. Obviously Eskom will run for free [laughs] there will be no maintenance for these machines and after a period everything will fall flat. We can’t allow it. It is criminal. The people doing it should be charged. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

91 Although as I mentioned in chapter 4, there was very little name recognition of the SECC among ordinary members and I usually had to explain what their cause and tactics were before they could state their opinions.

92 It should be noted that the SECC has attempted to engage with both government and Eskom itself over these issues. However, workers were critical of what they had heard about the SECC and, even if I explained their multiple strategies of engagement, their direct action was nonetheless almost always dismissed as being ‘reckless’.
The riots in Khutsong erupted over a demarcation dispute in which residents had protested against the township’s inclusion into the jurisdiction of the North West Province provincial government rather than the supposedly better-resourced and efficient Gauteng provincial government.
Workers regularly expressed the belief that democratic transition had opened up the institutional space for workers to engage with the government, whether through their union or in their communities through either the local government or by directly intervening in the local structures of the ANC itself. Workers would often express that ‘this is not the eighties’ and would ask ‘why are these people behaving in such a way when we have our government?’ They would often condemn movements that took direct action without, as they saw it, going through the ‘correct’ channels.

What this reflects is that workers appear to support a reflexive combination of strategies of engagement within the newly available democratic spaces available to them with ‘legitimate’ mass action as a means of holding their elected officials to account. The post-apartheid context meant, for these workers, that their relationship with the state was not one characterised purely in terms of antagonism and hence they associated the ‘illegitimate’ tactics of the SECC or the protesters in Khutsong as a throwback to the strategies of the 1980s which, they argued, were inappropriate in the democratic era. However, their engagement within ANC structures cannot be read as being purely cooperative and a reflection that they have uncritically internalised the ANC’s liberation discourses of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘illegitimacy’: they acknowledged the need to protest in certain circumstances – whether in the workplace or in the community - but what they rejected was what they saw as absolutist strategies of resisting the ANC government which, they believed, ignored the potential to shape local dynamics through the ‘correct’ channels. Whether or not such strategies have been successful is difficult to quantify, but the continued adherence of these workers to use these spaces of participation based on their own calculations of the merits of doing so suggests that they have experienced some positive outcomes as a result of their engagement, even if this was extremely sporadic and reactive, rather than proactive.
Conclusion

How Eskom workers frame acceptable/rational and unacceptable/irrational forms of citizenship and political agency do not correlate to polemical depictions of the post-apartheid agency of the organised working class. In short, they do not look upon post-apartheid citizenship in zero sum terms, as a choice between a renewed antagonism with the state or an uncritical cooperation with it. Instead, they favour a strategy of critical engagement with the ANC government, combining a reflexive use of cooperation in local ANC structures with the use of protest and resistance as a means of holding their representatives to account should they deviate from their mandate. As the last chapter demonstrated, they do not, after all, see the ANC government as an elitist neo-liberal reincarnation of the former apartheid government. Workers are keenly aware of the radically altered social, political and institutional context heralded by the transition to democracy and the new opportunities available to them and construct notions of ‘acceptable/rational’ citizenship in relation to these. The manner in which workers frame their relationship with the post-apartheid state and, by extension, the ANC government, reflects their position in the South African economy as a class that has notably benefited in the post-apartheid era, but also one whose aspirations for a better life have still to be met.

The engagement of Eskom workers within the ANC itself also reveals a great deal about their relationship with the party. The levels of participation in local ANC structures were extremely uneven amongst NUM members in Eskom. Among the politically active layer of NUM’s members ANC activism was rationalised in response to elaborate political discourses regarding the ‘National Democratic Revolution’. In short, among this highly significant activist layer of ‘cognitive partisans’, ANC activism was deeply engrained in their political psyches. However, of perhaps equal significance was the tendency of less active workers to nonetheless identify themselves as ANC members
which once again bears testament strong bonds of identification that they hold with the ANC. Furthermore, the manner in which workers who admitted that they were completely inactive described the ANC as an ‘open house’ within which community problems could be addressed once again highlights the unique space and unrivalled presence that the ANC maintains in the everyday lives of its core constituency, one that is not easily surmountable by any would-be political challenger.

The next chapter will expand upon this conclusion by exploring how workers understand political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa and how this leads them to look inside the ANC and Alliance structures when faced with the shortcomings of the ANC government, rather outside of it for the formation of a political alternative.
CHAPTER 7

‘WE ARE NOT ASKING FOR A MESSIAH’: ANC LEADERSHIP CHANGE AND ESKOM WORKERS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ANC

Introduction

In November 2007 around three hundred shop stewards filed into a large public hall in a Witbank township for the Mpumalanga COSATU’s regional shop stewards’ meeting. The atmosphere was upbeat, but tense. It was only a month before the ANC’s pivotal Polokwane conference and the shop stewards from across all the industries had come together for the sole purpose of discussing the implications the conference would have for COSATU and its future political strategy. As the debate crossed to the floor, several shop stewards stood up and declared their support for Jacob Zuma and his bid for the ANC presidency: ‘Viva Jacob Zuma, Viva’ they would often shout out, which was greeted by a similarly enthusiastic chorus of ‘VIVA’. A regional official from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) stood up, shuffled slightly awkwardly, and asked the hall ‘Comrades, what if our ANC delegates do not do as we wish in Limpopo? What can we do as an alliance? What is our plan B?’ A shop steward from across the room immediately shot up to his feet and bellowed out, with striking ferocity, ‘comrades, comrades, plan A,B,C through to Z is ZUMA ZUMA ZUMA’. The hall erupted into cheers as the shop stewards stood up. Soon enough, the familiar sound of Jacob Zuma’s trademark song, Umshini wam (bring me my machine gun) reverberated around the packed hall (Observations at the COSATU regional shop stewards council 31/10/07).

This incident gives us a snapshot of the widespread popularity of Jacob Zuma among members of COSATU’s affiliates, and their support for his bid to become the
ANC president at the party’s 52nd National Conference in Polokwane. This chapter will use qualitative interview data to provide a window through which we can understand why Zuma was so popular among grassroots Eskom workers and what this support reveals about their continued support for the ANC.

The conceptual framework of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau will be used to do this. It will be argued that Zuma has been labelled a ‘populist’ by commentators at all ends of the political spectrum, to the extent that the term has lost any sense of meaning. If we are to understand Zuma’s ascendancy in terms of it being a populist rupture (to use Laclau’s terminology), we can illuminate a great deal about workers’ continued identification with the ANC. According to this framework, populism should not be understood as a particular ideology or set of policy prescriptions, but as a process of social mobilisation through which social demands are articulated through the discursive dichotomisation of society between two competing poles: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, which has deprived the former of its sovereign voice (Laclau 2005a).

Hence, the populist rupture evidenced by Zuma’s rise to power is understood here as the process in which workers sought to reassert popular sovereignty in South Africa after a period in which workers experienced a deep sense of economic, social and cultural disenfranchisement, which they perceived resulted from Thabo Mbeki’s aloof and authoritarian leadership. To understand why workers chose Zuma as their political champion, it is essential to understand their expectations of political leadership, which will be analysed through a unique research tool – the ‘comrade exercise’ – whereby workers were asked what leadership traits distinguished a political figure as a ‘comrade’. Mbeki’s leadership style, it is argued, conflicted with workers’ expectations of representation and political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. Zuma’s trademark song Umshini wami (bring me my machine gun) therefore represented a metaphorical call to arms, as workers sought to reassert the sovereignty of ‘the people’ by supporting their ‘comradely’
champion who ‘understood’ their plight, and whose leadership style would ensure that their voices were heard.

The end of the chapter will explore what this populist rupture reveals about workers’ relationships with the ANC. For these workers, national liberation is not simply about introducing a narrow, representational democracy in which their elected representatives would be held to account every five years at the ballot box; it is altogether a broader and deeper form of representation and accountability that they demand. Deeper because these workers expect a greater degree of accountability than that traditionally offered by representational democracy, and broader because national liberation, to these workers, must encompass the significant economic transformation of society but also, and just as importantly, a social and cultural transformation as well. After all, NUM members did not just represent themselves as workers betrayed by Mbeki; they portrayed themselves as being part of a broader subjectivity – ‘the people’ - who had been deprived of their cultural traditions and social customs, as well as their class aspirations. Support for Zuma thus represented a far broader project of bringing the national liberation project ‘back on track’. This, it is argued, reflects the urgent need to ‘deconstruct and demystify’ nationalist struggles and interrogate what nationalism means to ordinary citizens in southern African (Johnson 2005: 17).

Two significant conclusions can be drawn from this. The first is that workers’ party loyalties are not driven by class alone, and that social and cultural issues were every bit as important a determinant of their support for the ANC. This problematises predictions that class-based disaffection with the ANC’s economic policies could/will serve as the most potent catalyst driving a new oppositional politics.

Second, the populist rupture evidenced by Zuma’s rise to power reveals a great deal about the potential longevity of ANC support. When presented with the ANC’s failure to deliver on some of these issues, these workers continue to look inside the ANC
to keep the broad national liberation project on course, rather than outside of it, for political alternatives elsewhere. This chapter will explore why it is that these workers believe that the ANC has a regenerative capacity, and that the failures of individual leaders or the government did not reflect an irredeemable ideological shortcoming of the ANC as an organisation, which they regard to be sacrosanct.

7.1 What is a populist rupture?

7.1.1 Why is Jacob Zuma labelled a ‘populist’?

South Africa’s newly elected President, Jacob Zuma, has been labelled a ‘populist’ by commentators from all sides of the political spectrum who raise concerns about the implications his populist leadership will have for South African democracy. These concerns can be loosely depicted within three fluid, and by no means distinct, groupings.

First, for those on the left, Zuma represents a false prophet for the poor who have lent him their support. The backing he received from COSATU in his rise to power and subsequent election campaign cannot be underestimated, and this strategy has been derided by left-wing analysts who lament what they perceive to be a dead-end strategy (what Desai (2002) calls a ‘populist cul-de-sac’) that failed to seize the momentum of a wave of strikes and unrest in the past few years that presented the opportunity for a more meaningful challenge to the ANC and its neo-liberal development project (Bassett and Clarke 2008; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008). Commentators like Patrick Bond thus refer to the shallowness of Zuma’s ‘populist’ appeal which, he argues, offers little hope of more thorough-going economic transformation (Bond 2007).

Second, for some of the business press and various industry spokespersons, the label ‘populist’ is applied to Zuma as a derisory term of reference, one that is loosely applied to express their concern about the prospects of the increasing influence of the ANC’s left-wing allies in macroeconomic policy-making. They fear that Zuma’s ‘populist’
leanings will entail unsustainable social expenditure, a heavy-handed interventionist approach to the macro economy, and an unwillingness on the part of the Zuma administration to take on his trade union allies in order to enact labour market reforms (see for example Paton 2007).

Third, there is concern among what might be called liberal quarters, particularly among academics and the press, about the implications a Zuma presidency might have for the rights and freedoms inscribed in the Constitution. For them, Zuma’s appeal to traditional leaders, his outspoken comments on homosexuals, his public flirtations with the idea of restoring death penalty, and his behaviour at his rape trial, all raise concerns over the erosion of the ANC’s ‘moral authority’ (Suttner 2009). For them, Zuma’s ‘populism’ reflects his tendency to kowtow to popular conservative sentiments and values at the potential expense of minority rights (Motsei 2007; Robins 2008; Suttner 2008).

The term ‘populist’ has thus become the standardised term of reference for Zuma in many different contexts with insufficient interrogation of the term’s conceptual core. Rather than a political concept, to be analysed and critiqued, it has become a vague, and ultimately vacuous, a priori label which obscures more than it illuminates. We must interrogate the conceptual core of populism, developed by Laclau and others, if we are to develop a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the ‘Zuma moment’ and what it tells us about workers’ attitudes towards the ANC. We can understand Zuma’s rise to power as a populist rupture because of the manner in which his rise to power came to signify - among Eskom workers - a struggle for popular sovereignty between a disenfranchised ‘people’ and an ‘elite other’ personified by Mbeki and his government.
7.1.2 Theorising the populist rupture in South Africa

The broad literature on the subject of populism offers starkly different ways of approaching the topic and a common lament that pervades much of the literature is the lack of clarity surrounding the term itself (including the lack of an operational definition), which in turn calls into question its usefulness for political analysis. As Margaret Canovan notes, the term is often vaguely applied ‘and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena’ (quoted in Stavvakakis 2005: 225).

The work of Panizza (2005), Mouffe (2005), Stavvakakis (2005) and, in particular, Laclau (2005a; 2005b), have sought to demystify ‘populism’ by stripping the term down to its conceptual core. This approach posits that populism can be exemplified in leaders and movements across the political spectrum and in an array of national contexts. In short, populism is not simply one ideology among others such as liberal, socialist, fascist and so on, nor does it represent a ‘brand’ or offshoot of any particular ideology. In short, populism cannot be defined by one particular and immutable set of policies or ideological positions, for example, with respect to redistribution of wealth, anti-immigration, crime etc (Laclau 2005a: 18). What is symptomatic of populism is the discursive dichotomisation of society between two competing poles; a disenfranchised ‘people’ and an elite ‘other’ that has deprived the people of their sovereignty. To briefly summarise Laclau’s somewhat formulaic account of a populist rupture, one could say that it is a process which begins when a variety of social demands voiced by different sections of society are not being

---

94 For example, populism is often referred to as being a brand of socialist ideology with a redistributionalist agenda at its core.

95 Thus, one can point to Hugo Chavez and his party’s discursive construction of the foreign oil companies, which have unscrupulously deprived the Venezuelan ‘people’ of their material resources and democracy, as an example of populism. However, one could equally point to the ‘new right’ leader Margaret Thatcher who famously asked ‘who governs?’ as she claimed to reassert the popular sovereignty embodied by the elected government over the ‘undemocratic’ power of the trade union elites which, she argued, were holding the country — and its people — to ransom (Hall 1979). More recently, the far-right in central and eastern Europe has positioned itself as the champion of the disenfranchised ‘indigenous’ people who have lost their voice and representation due to the transfer of sovereignty to the European Union, the corruption of incumbent regimes and/or the influx of foreign nationals (Arditi 2007; Mouffe 2005; Shields 2007).
fulfilled by the institutional system. These heterogeneous demands begin to be signified by what they lack: they might all be very different in their individual content, but they nonetheless begin to merge together as part of a new ‘fighting demand’ against ‘the ancien regime, the oligarchy, the Establishment or whatever’ (2005b: 38-39) which has failed (or refused) to meet these demands. A populist rupture is thus characterised by the dichotomisation of social space between two discursively constructed subjectivities: the disenfranchised ‘people’ and an ‘elite’ enemy. As Albertazzi and McDonnell neatly summarise, populism

pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007: 3)

Successful populist leaders are thus not defined by the ideological content of their policy prescriptions, but by the manner in which they (or their supporters) are successfully able to construct themselves as the ‘voice’ of the sovereign people juxtaposed against the incumbent regime that has disenfranchised them. In short, a populist leader attempts to assume the position as the voice of ‘the people’ incarnate.

I therefore use the concept of a populist rupture to draw emphasis to the process of social mobilisation that characterised Jacob Zuma’s rise to power. I will do this through an examination of workers’ understandings of political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. I will first examine what leadership attributes defined a political figure as a ‘comrade’ among these workers and I will then look in more depth at why Zuma, and not Mbeki, was identified as a ‘comrade’. Zuma’s ascent to the presidency of the ANC, it will be argued, embodied a populist rupture because of the manner in which these workers framed their support for Zuma as part of a broader struggle of ‘the people’ to reassert their ‘voice’ in South Africa after they had been ‘ignored’ by what they framed as the Mbeki administration’s elitist ‘arrogance’.
7.2 Eskom Workers’ conceptualisation of democracy and representation in the post-apartheid era

7.2.1 Union democracy in South Africa: transferring union democracy to parliamentary democracy

As I discussed in chapter 1 and again in chapter 3, South Africa’s Black trade unions developed strong traditions of democratic organisation during the struggle against apartheid, with a rigorous commitment to shopfloor democracy and accountable union leadership (Buhlunngu 2004; Friedman 1987; Wood 2003; Wood and Dibben 2006). These traditions were deeply rooted within the union movement’s organisational culture and, according to some labour analysts, remain clearly evident today (Hirschohn 1997; 2007; Wood and Dibben). The commitment to shopfloor accountability within the unions themselves is so intense that the SWOP survey team has identified the tendency of COSATU workers to transfer their understandings of shopfloor democracy – the structures of accountability between workers and their shop stewards in the workplace – to their understandings of parliamentary democracy:

Workers…expected their political party to display the same degree of representativeness and accountability as practiced by their shop stewards on the shop-floor. No less than 68 percent of respondents were of the view that their political party had to consult with its supporters on all issues, and when the party made decisions in parliament that affected its supporters it had to report back every time… (Maree 1998: 97; see also Cherry and Southall 2006)

It was quite clear from the interviews that these workers did indeed appear to transfer some ideas of shopfloor democracy to the government as a whole. Commonly expressed sentiments were that the government must endeavour to ‘come to us’, ‘let us have our say’ and ‘hear us’. It was widely believed that government ministers should attend union meetings and come down to the shopfloor to engage directly with the workers in order to ‘learn the issues’ from them so that they could be ‘called to order’ if they were deviating from their mandate. In the next section I will discuss how this demand for representation shapes the expectations workers have of their political leadership.
7.2.2 ‘Comrades’, ‘listeners’ and ‘arrogance’: what workers expect of their political leadership

In order to illustrate the expectations workers had of their political leaders, both in the union and in politics, I developed the ‘comrade exercise’. Workers were given a sheet of paper with a list of prominent political leaders from government, opposition parties, the ANC and their own union, and were asked to indicate next to each individual’s name whether or not they would address that person as a ‘comrade’. The political use of the term has its roots in the French Revolution, and later in left-wing political groupings across Europe. In southern Africa the term has been used by liberation movements throughout their respective struggles against colonial oppression and has endured in the post-liberation period as a stock salutation among political activists and leaders linked to the liberation movement, the trade unions and also other political organisations of the left.

The aim of this exercise was not to give a definitive answer to what the term ‘comrade’ actually means, but instead to illuminate the meaning regular rank-and-file workers attributed to the term, which in turn revealed a great deal about their desires and expectations of political leadership. Even though, as a salutation, ‘comrade’ is liberally applied during ANC and union meetings, even between individuals with acrimonious relationships, it is clear that the deeper understanding of what constituted a ‘comrade’ holds a great degree of significance: workers often spent a long time on the exercise and gave careful thought and consideration to the choices they made.

While no authoritative definition of a ‘comrade’ emerged out of the exercise, there are, nonetheless, distinctive themes that can be drawn out from the responses. First, to be considered as a comrade, the individual in question usually has to be identified as a member of the liberation movement that ‘fought for us’ during the struggle period. Opposition figures were, as I have already discussed in chapter 5,

96 See appendix for a copy of the exercise itself.
described as illegitimate in many cases; often in a way that portrayed them as remnants of the ‘old regime’. This is demonstrated by the hostile response Tony Leon and Helen Zille, leaders of the opposition party the Democratic Alliance, receive from workers who are almost universally not considered to be comrades.  

Workers would say, for example, that they cannot be trusted and that they want to ‘take South Africa back’ to the old apartheid regime.

However, although being associated with the liberation struggle is often a prerequisite for being considered as a comrade, it is not in itself sufficient. Most significantly, it is also dependent on the individual’s ability to live up to workers’ expectations of their political leadership. One of the main, recurring features of the interviews is that a ‘comrade’ is distinguished by an ongoing commitment to accountability, consultation, and representation in their position as leader, whether in the union, in politics, or even in business. This is usually expressed through the idiom of a ‘listener’ who consults with those he/she is representing. Reflecting a common sentiment, Manelesi, a boiler worker at Duvha, asserts that ‘a comrade is a person who can lead and associate with the people and try to understand our peoples, regardless of their background’ (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07). In a similar vein, Xolani, a mechanic and local ANC activist, explains:

I consider a comrade to be a person who hears the voice of other people. You see? If people want something then they listen to those people, then they take the concerns to the right people to solve the[ir] problems. (Interview with Eskom worker 13/12/07)

Like many workers, Xolani says that he struggles to get by in his everyday life, largely because of the number of people dependent on his wages. He also feels that the government was not ‘aware’ enough of the hardships people are experiencing. For Xolani, like many other workers, it is essential that a ‘comradely’ leader is able to ‘feel the

---

97 In one or two cases workers said that they thought they could be considered comrades because they were ‘struggling to build South Africa’ even if, they said, they did not support them personally.
pain’ of ‘the people’ and generally that they ‘understand’ and be in tune, so to speak, with the ‘suffering’ of people on the ground.

This expectation to ‘hear’ and ‘feel’ workers’ concerns clearly entails visions of a very direct form of representation to that provided by the institutions of formal representative democracy: this expectation is derived from understandings of shopfloor democracy within NUM structures. For example, with respect to their own union leaders, some are not identified as ‘comrades’ because they are seen to have failed to be accountable to the membership base. Thus, Bongani, an NUM shop steward at Duvha, explains why he picked former NUM leader Cyril Ramaphosa as a comrade, but not the existing NUM General Secretary, Frans Baleni, because he is perceived to fail to consult adequately with members and that he did not report back when taking decisions:

Frans is not a comrade because his background in terms of the union is not clear. . . . This guy is dicey; we don’t know where this guy comes from. It is their union now; we are no longer the union because I believe the union starts from the ground, upwards not upwards downwards. In Cyril Ramaphosa’s days . . . we would go on strike. There was not the issue of them putting something under the carpet. . . . they discussed in Committee then when he comes out they report . . . [whereas] now they sit in the office; they don’t release press statements. I never hear them. . . . (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

In what became a familiar distinction, union leaders, both local and national, are denied the identification as ‘comrade’ in cases when they are perceived to fail to consult adequately with members. This demand for representative and consultative leadership extends to the national level where workers dismiss certain members of the government as not being ‘comrades’, despite their association with the liberation struggle, because of their subsequent record in leadership. For example, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi is seldom identified as a comrade by workers and is routinely criticised for her failure to display the characteristics expected of a ‘comrade’ during her controversial role in the 2007 public sector strike. As Thulani explains, she was no longer a ‘comrade’ because:

You see the teachers and our kids; they were really struggling because of this person. She didn’t want to listen to the teachers and she didn’t want to care what is happening to the education of our kids. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)
Workers stress that a comrade is someone ‘together in struggle’ with them, someone that can be identified as being ‘on my side’ and ‘looking after the poor’.

Interestingly, this notion of ‘comrade’ seems to transcend class divisions, and also applies to business leaders. Businessmen Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa are regularly identified as ‘comrades’, and while their selection owes a great deal to their prominent roles in the liberation struggle, it also reflects workers’ perceptions of their record in leadership. Workers defend their status as ‘comrades’ by differentiating them from ‘typical’ management, stating that workers have a ‘platform’ with these leaders and that they would ‘listen’ to them, give them a fair hearing and perhaps even treat their workers ‘like management’. It was often said that these two figures would not ‘let us down’ and that they would always ‘hear’ and ‘consider’ the interests of their workers, even if these interests were sometimes overridden.

The comrade exercise illustrates the expectations that these workers place on both their union leaders and national political figures. Often framed as the demand for a ‘listening’ figure, a pervasive theme that emerged from workers’ responses is the expectation of a direct form of representation by their political leadership, entailing consultation, transparency, and accountability. Although an individual’s role in the liberation struggle remains a strong basis for identifying a ‘comrade’, it also depends largely on the individual’s ability to subsequently provide representation, whether in the union itself, or in the political sphere. In short, although a leader is revered because he/she had ‘fought for us’ during the liberation struggle, these workers, it would appear, demand that a ‘true comrade’ would continue to ‘fight for us’. As the next section will discuss, workers framed their support for Jacob Zuma in the succession battle as a means of overthrowing the ‘uncomradely’ leadership of Thabo Mbeki who, they argued, had disenfranchised the sovereign people of South Africa of the substantive democracy they had expected in the post-apartheid period.
7.3 Awuleth Umshini wami (bring me my machine gun): the ANC succession battle as a metaphorical call to arms

7.3.1 An ANC government ‘off track’

Throughout the interviews there was a clear sense that the ANC government, and the post-apartheid transformation project as a whole, had gone ‘off track’. The interviewed workers routinely criticised what they perceived to be their government’s failure to provide the standard of living they expected in the post-apartheid period. They bemoaned the slow and uneven nature of local service delivery, low wages, increasing levels of personal debt and inflation. These complaints were symptomatic of a broader sentiment that there had been no discernible change in their standard of living since the end of apartheid, and the emotive references to ‘apartheid salaries’ that were regularly expressed also reflected this perception.

Workers expressed a great deal of frustration but also betrayal that ‘their’ government could not ‘hear that we are crying’ and act to address their material deprivation and increasingly precarious livelihoods. A commonly expressed sentiment was that workers felt ‘let down’ or even ‘forgotten’ and this provoked a deep sense of estrangement and alienation from ‘their’ government. As Dumisani, an electrician at Arnot complained:

I think at this present [time] the ANC is pushing for the economy and forgot about the people so I don’t think this alliance is working as it is supposed to be because they were supposed to look at all areas, not just pushing the economy and forgetting about the people down here…. The ANC must come to workers at the floor level and not just look at the economy as such and look at their incentives and salary as such. It must increase change and come closer to workers. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

As section 5.2.2 discussed, many workers faced declining real wages, debt and a large number of dependents who are supported by their wages. The idea that the government was deaf to their ‘cries’ came up regularly and was often expressed as a direct critique of
Although this was by no means an uncontested sentiment and was described by the full time shop stewards and organisers as the ‘misinformed’ impression of members.
This sense of a loss of control in the household extended to issues such as abortion and marriage rights, where Mbeki was seen as introducing culturally insensitive laws and undermining the fathers’ traditional authority. Ntokozo, a father of three, complained that:

Mbeki has his own way of dealing with things….I like that from Mbeki because he does not like the corruption. But he also has his things which are not good that are out of order for me because he telling the kids these days of 12 years to make an abortion without the parents [consent]; that is out of order for me. And [also] you can’t allow my daughter at the age of 18 now to be married without my consent. That is out of context as we are African. In our culture the kids remain kids until he or she is married. Nowadays Mbeki says the kids can do whatever they like without the parent’s consent. That is not African. As an African, the way I have grown up, everything is from the parents… nowadays they don’t respect anyone, from my viewpoint it’s unacceptable… but as long as time goes on, with a new [ANC] leadership, something better will come. (Interview with Eskom worker 10/12/07)

The sentiment that Mbeki has ‘his own way of doing things’ was expressed on several occasions in different contexts. Eskom workers were implying that Mbeki was imposing an alien set of cultural norms and social practices that were insensitive to what they referred to as ‘our traditions’ that were ‘passed down by our forefathers’ and that Mbeki’s alien value system was unacceptable to them as ‘Africans’.

A common attitude expressed by these workers was that Mbeki’s long time in exile and overseas education had given him a foreign value system that was not suited to the South African context. This was a point made quite regularly, with workers commenting that ‘perhaps he’s too educated, he just doesn’t understand us!’ Workers regularly complained that his foreign education had made him ‘British’ or ‘American’, and he would sometimes be compared to the white politicians in the Democratic Alliance. Mbeki was perceived as being out of touch with concerns on the ground regarding HIV/Aids, for example, or with respect to their communities that were ‘overrun’ with criminals and the general failure of the government to create jobs for the unemployed. What was noticeable was that these attitudes towards social and cultural issues came up in conversations I had with workers from different skills and educational backgrounds. It would be erroneous, therefore, to dismiss these attitudes as those of an
'ignorant', uneducated, older generation of workers who were simply more traditional than their younger, more educated peers.\footnote{This is perhaps unsurprising, especially given that some of Zuma’s most ardent supporters during the rape trial were young men seen brandishing placards bearing slogans such as ‘burn the bitch’ outside the courthouse in Johannesburg. See Robins 2007.} Indeed, these issues were of great concern to many workers despite their skills, job role and their respective material circumstances.

The breakdown of democratic traditions within the ANC was made synonymous with the leadership of Thabo Mbeki. Sibusiso, for example, explained why he felt the Alliance was not functioning properly and why workers were not having their voices heard and represented. This, he argued, was the fault of what he perceived to be President Mbeki’s authoritarian style of leadership where ‘You can go to the [current] government with your opinions and they will just say ‘no go to hell’ because [Mbeki] is a man who is ruling himself’ (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07). Therefore, while Mbeki’s background meant it was difficult for workers to relate to him and they felt that this prevented him from understanding their situation, it was his perceived ‘arrogance’ – his tendency to impose his agenda without adequate consultation - that was significant to workers. For these reasons, Mbeki was often denied the identification of ‘comrade’. Sipho, a plant operator, who is an ANC activist and had been to provincial and national conferences recalled that:

> Our President of the country...he is hostile to us and he doesn’t listen to anybody. He believes that he is the only person that is right and therefore we would find it very difficult to associate with such a person because why did we fight so much to end the apartheid while when we have a government, we have a government that won’t even listen to us! Unemployment rate is high, poverty, all these things. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

As another worker explained, he could not identify Mbeki as a comrade because:

> A comrade is a person who can lead or associate with the people and try to understand our peoples view, regardless of their background.... [Mbeki] is not personable, he's not used to associating. I used to see him at the congress but you find him sitting alone as if he’s deeply thinking. He's intelligent but he can’t share his intelligence with anyone, it’s just for him. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

There was a palpable sense of estrangement from Mbeki and many workers felt that the ANC had deviated from its historic traditions. They would often refer to the
Mandela era and, on a handful of occasions, to the time when Oliver Tambo was ANC President, as examples of how they ANC had ‘lost its way’ under Mbeki. Workers therefore framed the need for change in terms of a need for a new, more responsive political leadership. As Mothudi, a boiler technician explained:

There must be change, there must. If there is not change [in the leadership] it means that our country go down, it is not continuous. It cannot continue. They can’t never change because people don’t like the leader … you must change to get the fresh mind in government and then they can face [and address] our issues. The ANC must come down to the people. Don’t say its just coming down when it’s campaigning and its just coming to get us supporting and get the election. (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07)

Workers thus framed the removal of Mbeki as a cleansing step, one that would reinvigorate the ANC and in doing so return representation South African democracy and get the post-apartheid project ‘back on track’ (Beresford 2009).

Returning once more to Laclau’s (2005a) understanding of a populist rupture, we can see how Thabo Mbeki’s government became associated with the un-fulfilment of a variety of social demands, be it for economic development, higher wages, ‘culturally sensitive’ abortion and domestic violence laws as well as fighting crime. By no means were all of these grievances shared by all workers and, indeed, many of them were hotly disputed. However, what united these grievances into a single purpose – overthrowing Mbeki – was the perception of his leadership being aloof and authoritarian and, ultimately, out of sync with the more substantive forms of representation they expected of their political leadership. It is partly for this reason that understanding this process as a populist rupture is so useful: rather than a focused, structural critique of capitalism or the ‘neo-liberal’ ANC government, the multiplicity of grievances aired by workers found common cause in overthrowing the ‘elite’ which they felt had disenfranchised them. This elite was personified in particular by Mbeki and his ‘arrogant’ and unresponsive government, and the antidote was expressed by workers in a demand for a ‘listening ear’ - a new leadership that would provide responsive and representative government. The next section will elucidate how Eskom workers framed themselves as part of a broader
subjectivity - the disenfranchised ‘people’ – and how they characterised Zuma as ‘the people’s’ voice incarnate.

7.3.2 Enter ‘comrade’ Zuma

In the days immediately after Zuma’s victory at Polokwane was announced, there was widespread jubilation amongst NUM members as they talked excitedly about the future and what implications the ‘victory over arrogance’, as many workers framed it, would have for the future of South African politics. Eskom workers were overwhelmingly supportive of Zuma (who was almost universally identified as a ‘comrade’) and at union gatherings his election was lauded as a success.

If Thabo Mbeki’s governance fomented a sense of estrangement amongst workers towards their political leadership, Jacob Zuma’s exhibits a far more personalised style of leadership, one involving a greater sense of connect between the broader population and their political leaders. A crucial attribute of the populist leader is the ability to connect with the ordinary people in order for that leader to effectively lay claim to being able to ‘speak for the people’ (Panizza 2005: 24). In this case, ‘the people’ refers to the popular subjectivity with which a section of the population identifies itself with, characterised in relation to its ‘other’ – the ‘elite’ - which has, wilfully or not, deprived ‘the people’ all of their sovereign voice.

If a leader is to represent ‘the people’ therefore, they must be able to identify with particular aspects of the leader as an individual. Panizza argues that in this way a populist leadership inverts the familiar feminist mantra and makes ‘the political personal’ as the leaders’ background, body, personal life and how he conducts himself all become symbols with which people relate (Panizza 2005). Zuma himself has consciously played up to this image of an unremarkable, straight-talking and down-to-earth man and his humble manner resonated strongly with workers who believed he would better
‘understand’ their plight. Zuma’s rise to power was often likened by workers to having someone ‘from your own village’ entering the Presidency. According to these workers, Zuma was a leader who understood the economic hardships that ‘the people’ were suffering, unlike the aloof Mbeki.

Such sentiments were expressed not simply in relation to their material impoverishment, however, but also to their sense of social alienation, particularly with respect to their gender position in the household. Some authors have argued that Zuma’s performance as the stereotypical figure of ‘Zulu’ masculinity during his rape trial, his overtures towards traditional leaders and the manner in which he has carefully positioned himself as someone sympathetic to conservative values, such as the death penalty have extended his appeal in both the ANC as well as its core support base (Suttner 2008 see also Motsei 2007; Robins 2008). Indeed, it was widely suggested by Eskom workers that Zuma, in contrast to Mbeki, was someone who ‘understands’ and could relate to these issues because of what they called his ‘traditional’ background. His election as ANC President, they argued, was ‘giving hope’ that their position as the male head of household would be restored because Zuma ‘understands this’ and that issues such as abortion and domestic violence would be handled once more in a culturally sensitive or ‘African’ manner. Mandla, for example, a boiler technician with two children, argued that Zuma could be considered a comrade because he understood ‘the way we have grown up’. This was contrasted with Mbeki, who, he said:

Mbeki, okay maybe he was a comrade but now he took all the ladies and wives and give them power and then forgets about us. Now you don’t have a control in your house. Once the kids are doing something is wrong you must say ‘aye, what you are doing is wrong or maybe you take a sjambok100 – it’s the way I grew up – you take a sjambok [and] you say ‘I don’t want you to do this thing again’. But nowadays no! If you sjambok a child according to this law when I take a sjambok your child is gonna go to the police station, you are going to get arrested while [all] you are trying to [do is] make the situation to be alright in your house. We don’t have the control over our kids anymore. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

100 A traditional heavy leather whip which is actually illegal in South Africa
Although these sentiments were not expressed by the majority of workers - and the NUM shop stewards and officials were quick to dismiss such views as ‘misinformed’ - for some Eskom workers supporting Zuma was framed as part of an effort to reclaim cultural representation and reflected a broader sense of alienation from the post-apartheid liberal-modernising project.

However, it was not simply Zuma’s background that workers identified with and the crucial factor that explains why Zuma’s populist appeal resonated so strongly among these workers was that his style of leadership appealed to the manner of political leadership and representation workers demanded of a ‘comrade’. What De La Torre describes as the ‘politicisation of everyday interactions’ in which ‘personal and political dignity (recognition) are inseparable’ was crucial in this regard (Quoted in Panizza 2005: 24). In contrast to the alienation workers felt from Mbeki, Zuma, because of his accommodating leadership style, was perceived as someone in touch with the ‘grassroots’. Workers would talk excitedly that Zuma would now be visiting townships and would thus be able to ‘learn the issues’ and ‘hear our cries’.

Bhekizizwe, for example, is a low skilled worker at Duvha who was not involved in local politics at all. He complained that political leaders never came to ‘talk to us’ on the shop floor or in their communities. He argued that Zuma, unlike Mbeki, would be a leader who would come to the factory and be able to comprehend the problems workers were facing:

> People are struggling and [Mbeki] is like these educated people [who knows] that the factory produces light and everything but he doesn’t know inside [what it is like]. If I was I was starting to build the country I would start with the guys in the factory and come and see what’s happening... You see Zuma will come and talk to people and see this is the problem, these are the things we can solve and these are the things we can handle and all those things. Then things will be alright and our South Africa will survive. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)

For these workers, this bore a significance beyond an instrumental expectation of what material improvements Zuma would now achieve: it was about restoring dignity. As one mechanic put it, in what was a common characterisation of the situation:
Look, let me put it to you like this. Working class people at the ground roots level were treated only as tools by the current state president [Mbeki]. But now that there is this new President people are very happy and saying that we are now going to be treated as human beings. (Interview with Eskom worker 08/12/07)

Workers expressed a sense of moral indignation towards Mbeki and betrayal that ‘their’ government was no longer representative and that, through Zuma, they would find redress because, as one shop steward remarked:

The people of the country cannot suffer while there is a government elected by the people of this country! We are a democratic country so what kind of democracy do we have when people are not being listened to? We want a person who will actually listen to us because the Freedom Charter says it’s a government of the people, by the people, and for the people and the people must be listened to[…]. There are weaknesses that President Zuma has, as an individual, as a person, but we are looking at the bigger picture, what he is able to do. (Interview with Eskom worker 14/12/07)

The ‘bigger picture’ for these workers was about regenerating the ANC, the party with which they emotively identified as ‘their’ organisation, that ‘fought for us’ against the apartheid regime and, in doing so ‘took us from jail’.

Workers rationalised their support for Zuma based on his past record, which they claimed offered evidence of a tangible difference in leadership style. This owed a great deal to his humble background but also to the way they selectively remembered Zuma’s previous displays of leadership. Workers highlighted what they believed to be Zuma’s accommodating leadership style in which he could bring together competing viewpoints and interests. They pointed to the fact that Zuma would speak to opposition groups such as the Freedom Front, his success in the early 1990s ending the violent hostilities in KwaZulu Natal between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC, along with his experience as a negotiator in the conflict in Burundi. Sakhile, an artisan at Arnot power station said that as a Christian, he was not in favour of Zuma’s social life, particularly his polygamy. However, he said that he still supported Zuma because:

You chose the things you believe are right [about a leader] and to me Zuma, in terms of what he stands for, his achievements in terms of unitifying people, in terms of bringing peace where necessary, in terms of allowing people to express their views. If Zuma can meet Freedom Front, if Zuma can meet Solidarity … then we can’t say that that person is somebody who doesn’t listen. He doesn’t necessarily go there to agree with them but he say “let me hear what you say, let me hear your views” (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)
Eskom workers were extremely vague about tangible policy outputs that they expected from a future Zuma administration. As Bandile, an engineer at Arnot, explained:

When [Mandela] gave the baton to Mbeki, everything went down. He silenced a lot of people, and we are not saying Zuma is this *ben*, this *messiah*, who will bring everything and who will do things that couldn’t be done during Mbeki’s era, but what we do expect is to be heard. (Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

The key expectations among these Eskom workers were thus not necessarily material rewards, but were instead expressed as the demand for a greater degree of representation for those that had been disenfranchised by Mbeki’s administration. The primacy of this demand was often rooted in their understanding of shopfloor democracy. From his interactions in provincial and national union forums, Joe Skosana, the NUM full time shop steward, argued:

On the issue of members having or putting a lot of expectations sort of on Zuma in terms of worker issues or whatever, you see for the trade unions and COSATU in particular we don’t want a *messiah*: we want a person that can be engaged. [pause] That’s all. [pause] Because we believe that any issue that we raise we’ve got reasons for it, we can motivate, we just want a platform where we can engage on these issues with people who are prepared to engage. It’s just like at the workplace if you’ve got management that is arrogant — it doesn’t matter how much work you put into your issues, it’s just not going to realize anything. So it’s better to have management that can listen to you, engage you, or be in a position at least to explain where they are coming from with whatever decisions that they want to implement. That’s all we want [from Zuma]. (Interview with Joe Skosana 16/05/08)

Understanding Jacob Zuma’s ascendency to power as a populist rupture is therefore a useful analytical tool for understanding how and why his populist appeal resonated so strongly among the rank-and-file. As we have seen, a broad range of social demands were unfulfilled by Mbeki’s government and workers framed themselves as part of a broader popular subjectivity of a people disenfranchised by the incumbent ‘elite’.

The overriding reason for Zuma’s support among these workers was the perception that his humble background and ‘comradely’ style of leadership would return political representation and the sovereign voice to ‘the people’. We are reminded once again of the way Albertazzi and McDonnell describe the manner in which populism pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. (2007: 3)
Zuma’s visits to the communities and workplaces thus became markers of political equality and personal recognition and became associated with the re-enfranchisement of these workers, making them ‘worthy’ political subjects. Although Zuma’s appeal as a ‘listening ear’ was fairly ambiguous, this reflected the diverse range of grievances that workers raised with Mbeki: the strength of Zuma’s appeal lay was to appear as the antidote to Mbeki’s arrogant leadership by offering, in Laclau’s words, ‘the promise of a fully reconciled people’ (Panizza 2005: 19). In the final two parts of this section I will further explore what this populist rupture tells us about workers’ relationships with the ANC.

7.4 The ANC as a regenerating party

7.4.1 Beyond class: the broad appeal of the ANC to Eskom workers

What does this insight into the populist rupture in South Africa reveal to us about the nature of workers’ relationships with the ANC? For one thing, it highlights how workers’ political identities are not forged solely on the shopfloor, in relation to class, but are instead rooted in multiple sites of identity formation including, amongst others, gender and the home. As the multifaceted disenfranchisement with the Mbeki administration highlighted, workers expected the ANC to provide forms of social and cultural representation as well as directly championing their material aspirations. In reaction to a general question about the ANC government’s performance, for example, issues relating to the home, to their communities and their ‘culture’ were often the first issues that were raised and reflected the manner in which these issues were of paramount importance to many workers.

This highlights the importance of Krista Johnson’s call for us to ‘deconstruct and demystify’ post-liberation nationalism in order to avoid falling into the trap of advocating
a ‘post-nationalist’ era for southern African politics without adequately interrogating what nationalism encompasses for ordinary southern African citizens. In her critique of the approach to class politics in post-liberation societies made by Bond et al, Johnson observes that:

The relationship between intellectuals and the post-colonial nationalist project has always been contentious. The new critics are not the first to expose nationalists as the new emperors without clothes. But their critique is not just of the failure of nationalist leaders to deliver in the post-colonial era but of the nationalist project itself, which they claim never really held the progressive goals of fundamental transformation and democratisation. In so doing, however, instead of deconstructing and demystifying nationalist struggles, much of the criticisms seem to dismiss nationalism and the nationalist struggles altogether, along with any progressive, anti-imperialist agendas that it might encompass. In its place a post-nationalist alternative is being proposed that is at present very undefined and does not take into consideration the actual demands emanating from the grassroots (or various other sectors of society). (2005: 17)

The literature that speculates as to whether the unions – and their members – will one day agitate for a breakaway formation to challenge the ANC does so under the assumption that workers consider their relationship with the ANC primarily through the lens of their socio-economic class and that disenfranchisement with the ANC’s ‘neoliberal’ project could be the catalyst for a new opposition politics. However, as Antonio Gramsci argued, one cannot overlook the importance of culture in understanding class relations (1971). One must be careful not to treat workers, therefore, as though they are isolated class subjects and thereby in some way disaggregated from the multiplicity of social and cultural contexts in which they are immersed in their day-to-day lives. In response to an open question about the ANC’s performance, issues of crime, domestic ‘order’, ‘traditions’ and HIV/AIDS were therefore every bit as likely to crop up as wages, working conditions, poverty and unemployment. It is thus more useful – and indeed more accurate – to understand their complex identification with the ANC and, indeed, their understandings of nationalism, beyond the shopfloor. That is, to understand them not simply as ‘workers’, but as parents, ‘traditionalists’, community members and so forth. This raises the question as to whether a new workers’ party would necessarily draw workers towards it just because it has a socioeconomic platform to the left of the ANC.
After all, the party remains the central figurehead of political representation for workers and embodies what might be termed a *party of aspirations*. These aspirations encompass issues of social and cultural representivity as well as those associated with traditional class identities, suggesting that workers’ identification with the ANC might well be more complex than an instrumental association of the party with their material interests.

7.3.2 *The sacrosanct ANC*

Another finding of the research is that the ANC is able to maintain its position as a torchbearer of workers’ aspirations because of the manner in which workers divorce their disaffection with individual political leaders and the ANC government from their support for the ANC itself. They understand the ANC *as an organisation* to be sacrosanct: the failures of the ANC government are considered to result from the inability of individual leaders to meet their expectations of representation, mediation and accountability within the post-apartheid democratic era, rather than any irredeemable ideological shortcoming of the ANC itself.

Section 5.3.2 analysed how workers acknowledged the positive, albeit uneven, impact that successive ANC governments had had in their everyday lives. Many workers explained that any shortcomings in local service delivery in their community were down to the individual shortcomings of a particular municipal government or individual leaders who were deemed to be failing to fulfil the mandate the party had given them. The same applied when they were evaluating government at a national level. John, who works as an instructor in Arnot power station explained that he was extremely disgruntled with the government. When I asked if he felt the government had met his expectations he had in 1994, he said that he felt there was little change because they were still receiving ‘apartheid money’, something that he blamed Mbeki for in particular. He explained, however, that he was a member of the ANC because:
I know where I come from, I know the policies of the ANC but certain people on top they don't implement correctly. They implement incorrect because they are on top, they have powers. .... because we have that feeling of ANC because I am aware of where we come from – from the struggle as a trade union – if you know what’s a trade union you know where you come from. That's why I feel shoulder to shoulder, toes to toes with those who understand this struggle. (Interview with Eskom worker 18/12/07)

John was also extremely bitter about corruption in local ANC structures. This was a problem in his local branch he explained, because local leaders were corrupt and ‘in it for themselves’. He framed this as the reason why he continued to engage and build the ANC structures because otherwise it would go ‘off track’:

We have the problem with our local wards. These people, they just want to enrich themselves, forgetting about the other people, which for me is not right. All they want to do is get luxury cars and what else To them, the branches are just like a larder to get what you want. And now you will see you have an election in 2009 – they will come – and then after that you will see nobody and you are going to see everyone frustrated....these people undermine the organisation. ....That is why I know where I come from, I know the struggle [so we] continue to build the ANC. (Interview with Eskom worker 18/12/07)

John is an interesting, but by no means exceptional case. Although he felt that the government had not provided significant improvements to his life since 1994, and he thought the local ANC structures were the site of a great deal of corruption, he nonetheless continued to support the party and, indeed, framed these shortcomings as a rationale for actively engaging with the organisation. For another example let us turn to the example of Vincent, a disgruntled boiler who felt that ‘the law’ was now totally ‘on the side of women’ and that, as a result, his authority was being eroded and that he felt ‘abused’. He described being ‘let down’ by the ANC government, which he clearly expected to be more sympathetic towards such ‘cultural sensitivities’. However, when I asked him whether his disappointment with the ANC government with regards to gender equality would lead to him supporting another party in the future, he adamantly attested that it would not, and he added that:

I encourage my friends and my colleagues to vote for the ANC because it is the party that has done the best for us and they fought for us that’s why we usually vote for them. It's the party that we like but eish, but with out President Thabo Mbeki ey, I can say I don’t like him because he's more concentrated on the women. ....But overall the ANC is doing their best, you see? As a party, we like the party and I hope they can improve on that. (Interview with Eskom worker 11/12/07)
As these examples, the comrade exercise, and workers’ attitudes towards the succession battle demonstrate, forthright criticism of individual leaders and government ministers was extremely common, but so to was these workers’ ongoing support for the ANC itself. The sense of disenchantment with an individual leader, whether locally or nationally, did not translate into disenfranchisement with the ANC as an organisation, which they deemed to be sacrosanct.

7.3.3 Jacob Zuma and the politics of reverse infiltration: the regenerating ANC

In many African countries a persistent problem for trade unions has been the manner in which their structures are ‘infiltrated’ by the governing party (see Schiporst 2001; Jaunch 2010; Werbner 2010). ‘Infiltration’ commonly occurs when a dominant ruling party impinges on the autonomy of the unions – or completely overrides it – when soliciting support from ‘pliable’ union leaders or in an effort to quell any political challenges that might emerge from the unions. In South Africa, on the other hand, quite the reverse has been the case. COSATU’s attempts at ‘infiltrating’ the ANC were most visible in the build up to the 2007 ANC conference at Polokane as Vavi and other COSATU leaders encouraged union members to join in the struggle to oust Mbeki and to support Jacob Zuma. Eddie Webster has described COSATU as the ‘elephant in the room’ at the Polokwane, not formally acknowledged but nonetheless a hugely significant player in proceedings leading up to the conference within ANC branches and then in the conference hall itself (2008). Southall and Webster (2010) have described the ‘determined infiltration of COSATU and SACP members into the branches of the ANC across the country’ and the gradual formation of a ‘coalition of the aggrieved’ formed against Mbeki and his supporters.

The successful infiltration of the ANC has, in the short term at least, offered vindication to the COSATU leadership and has set an important precedent; COSATU
leaders can lay claim that a blueprint for ‘reclaiming’ the Alliance has been created which the federation can follow again in the future. COSATU’s support for Zuma has been criticised by those who argue a Zuma presidency offers little prospect of meaningful transformation and would certainly appear to be a false dawn for the left (Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a) Zuma is portrayed by them as being a political chameleon, saying ‘yes’ to everyone and that his leadership is characterised by political expediency rather than ideological substance. As Beckman and Sachikonye have argued, while the Zuma episode has demonstrated that COSATU has been able to retain its ‘political clout’, they warn that it may be argued ‘such intervention carried few gains for the rank and file of the labour movement, whose authority was appropriated by a narrow stratum of ambitious union officials’ (2010: 10 see also Southall and Webster 2010). Zuma, they argue, is a deeply suspect as a champion of the left and Zuma is sometimes framed as narrow-minded and ultimately self-defeating strategy that reflects the failure of COSATU’s leadership to envision and embrace a genuine challenge to the neo-liberal development project of the ANC government (Bassett and Clarke 2008; Desai 2005). Informed by this understanding that the revolt against Mbeki essentially reflected ‘a grassroots revolt against neo-liberalism’, some left-wing commentators have highlighted a ‘reviving mass movement’ evident in the mounting unrest and protests in the townships in recent years, as well as the recent wave of strikes that resulted in some of the largest industrial action in the post-apartheid era (Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a). For them, COSATU’s support for Zuma reflects a missed opportunity in which a potentially broader revolt against the government’s neo-liberal development project has been channelled within the narrow and self-defeating confines of the ANC succession battle (Bond; Ceruti 2008; 2008b). Once again, COSATU’s strategy of retaining the Alliance with the ANC and battling to secure working class influence within it is seen as suffocating a genuine working class politics emerging to challenge the ‘neo-liberal’ ANC.
This analysis no doubt bears some weight, and the influence of COSATU’s leadership identifying and championing Zuma as ANC leader was not only paramount in ensuring his ascendancy to power, but was also extremely influential in shaping the attitudes and support among rank-and-file members. However, as I discussed in chapter 4, while workers generally supported the Union leadership’s strategy of backing Zuma, they rationalized this support in a range of different ways and also in relation to certain perceptions of Zuma that the leadership framed as ‘uninformed’ or even ‘unacceptable’. Thus, while COSATU and NUM leaders might have influenced workers’ support for Zuma, this was by no means universally successful and the diverse attitudes towards the succession voiced by the rank-and-file suggests that they were not simply ‘led’ in response to the political cues offered by their union leaders.

What is important for our discussion here is how workers framed the significance of Polokwane and what this demonstrates about their perceptions of the regenerative capacity of the ANC. One assumption held by the analysts mentioned above that must be challenged is that the COSATU leadership channeled a potentially broader revolt back inside the ANC and alliance structures at a time when workers might have otherwise looked outside of these structures to address their disaffection with the ANC government. As this analysis of Eskom workers shows, the logical step for workers is (and perhaps always has been) to battle inside the alliance first, a strategy rooted in the belief that the ANC has the capacity to regenerate.

The logical corollary of the understanding of the ANC being sacrosanct was that the ANC itself was not, as yet, a lost cause and could in fact be regenerated by reasserting control over the party and substituting in representative, ‘comradely’ leadership. Contrary to those that have presented the union’s strategy to back Zuma in a negative light, workers themselves framed it in positive terms: supporting Zuma was framed as part of a process of regenerating the ANC and alliance structures and, in doing so, restoring
representation to South African democracy and getting both the ANC, and the post-apartheid project as a whole, ‘back on track’. For example, Saki, a technician in the power station, explained that supporting Zuma was part of a larger project of regenerating the ANC by restoring its ‘traditions’ of democratic leadership practiced by its former leaders:

I’ve been a member of the ANC since a long time. The previous batch of people like Mandela and Oliver Tambo, those guys were really representing the poor people and people on the grassroots. But after the Mandela, when Mbeki took over, all this ended…. It is different from the time of the old man, Nelson Mandela, he was a great guy because he cares about every person living, not only about himself. He wanted service delivery and even a better wage for workers so that they can feel a part of the democratic dispensation. We hope for Zuma [to win at Polokwane] because he is coming from workers’ environment or from a rural point of view. I’m coming from rural where I have my own home so … now that scenario of Jacob Zuma [becoming leader] is good because the ANC it must respect where it’s coming from. (Emphasis added. Interview with Eskom worker 19/12/07)

As was discussed previously, it was now widely believed that both local and national ANC structures, as well as those of the alliance, would be able to function again once due process’ in terms of representation, mediation and accountability was restored. Consider, for example the following piece of dialogue I had with Million, an operator in the power station. Although he was a strong supporter of Zuma, he raised several criticisms of ANC leaders such as Mbeki and members of his government. When I asked him whether he would continue to support the party, he explained that:

I’m still supporting it, not the leadership but the ANC as a whole, because leaders can carry their own agenda but the policies of the ANC are good, the problem is with the people who must execute them. After Mandela left the leadership these policies of capitalism… Mbeki had that [policy of] growth – that GEAR – that thing we have a scenario where the contractors are exploiting the workers…. that scenario doesn’t benefit workers, it doesn’t benefit workers at all.

Q: But that was the policy of the ANC government at the time but people will still vote for the ANC even though some of the thing[s] [cuts me off]

Ya well they have the opinion say maybe the leaders will listen now [that Zuma is in charge]…. To me it’s good to have a change in leadership because to have a new guy like Jacob Zuma even if he will not change too much policies or practical policies of ANC or whatever, he will try and speak to us the poor which is most of them the workers. (Interview with Eskom worker 20/12/07)

The support of the trade union movement for Zuma, therefore, was not simply an example of a conservative, bureaucratic trade union leadership channelling a potentially class-based, post-nationalist politics from emerging out of the disillusionment and alienation workers felt towards Mbeki’s administration. Nor were their attitudes simply examples of workers regurgitating how their union leaders had rationalised this strategy.
Instead, this support for Zuma was rooted in a plethora of individual concerns pertaining to a range of issues, many of which were frowned upon by the union hierarchy. Supporting Zuma also reflected how, more broadly, workers perceived the ANC not to be a ‘lost cause’ but as a party with which they held a deep and complex affinity. It highlights the manner in which they believed the shortcomings of the ANC government were best addressed inside the ANC structures, rather than by forging a new working class politics with an antagonistic relationship with the nationalist movement.

Conclusion

Jacob Zuma has been widely labelled as a populist by commentators and analysts from across the political spectrum. However, it is far more revealing to analyse Zuma’s rise to power within Laclau’s conceptual framework of a populist rupture and the process of social mobilisation that it entails. In particular, it highlights the manner in which society becomes dichotomised into two camps: a virtuous ‘people’ who have been dispossessed of their sovereign voice and their enemy, the ‘elite’ which has deprived the people of their voice and aspirations. This is useful for understanding how Eskom workers framed themselves as part of a broader disenfranchised citizenry whose material, social and cultural aspirations were being unfulfilled because of what they perceived to be an unrepresentative ANC government under Thabo Mbeki.

Workers’ attitudes towards the succession battle are worth exploring in depth because of what they reveal about their understandings of what ‘national liberation’ should constitute and, by extension, the underlying reasons behind their ongoing support for the ANC. First, the manner in which NUM members framed themselves as part of a broader subjectivity – ‘the people’, rather than simply ‘the workers’ – who had been dispossessed of their social and cultural ‘traditions’ as well as their material aspirations, indicates that they expect the ANC to exhibit moral leadership on a range of issues; not
all of these relate directly to class. This reflects the manner in which they understand the 
transition to democracy to be about more than simply economic redress; many workers 
also perceive it to be about entrenching social and cultural representation, reflecting the 
need to critically examine what nationalism entails to working class constituencies before 
advocating a ‘post-nationalist’ politics which is out of touch with the sentiments of 
workers on the ground. As such, workers do not base their assessments of the ANC’s 
performance in government solely on class issues, as they identify the party as a 
torchbearer of a broad range of aspirations that extend well beyond those pertaining to 
class. This highlights the complexity of their identification with the party and the 
difficulty that a hypothetical workers’ party would face in trying to appeal to this 
constituency on a purely class-based platform more successfully than the ANC and its 
‘broad church’ politics. In short, while Bond et al might accuse the ANC of pursuing a 
‘narrow’ nationalist project because its failure to bring about radical socioeconomic 
transformation, to these workers at least, reducing their political aspirations to those 
emanating solely from their class is, in itself, a narrow framing of what the nationalist 
project means to them.

Second, while workers framed themselves as part of a broader disenfranchised 
‘people’ or ‘underdog’ that had been wronged by Mbeki and his ‘elite’ ANC government, 
they nonetheless sought to address this, and fight this elite within the ANC. The ANC’s 
succession battle thus became a symbolic call to arms. As the comrade exercise and 
workers’ attitudes towards the succession demonstrated, although they were extremely 
critical of the failings of individuals who had failed to live up to their expectations of 
political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa – be it at the local or national level, in 
the union or the ANC – these failings did not reflect an irredeemable ideological 
shortcoming of the ANC which was treated as sacrosanct. Hence, workers supported the 
idea that struggles for representative leadership in post-apartheid South Africa should be
fought out *within* the ANC structures because they believed that by restoring democratic norms and accountability to the movement that they would get the ANC and, by extension, the post-apartheid project as a whole, ‘back on track’. Such attitudes clearly pose a great obstacle to the prospects of a new independent class-based politics emerging with the support of workers at this time as they do not, as yet, appear to have turned their backs on the ANC.
Chapter 8

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF CLASS AND POST-LIBERATION POLITICS

This thesis has explored post-liberation politics in South Africa and, in particular, it has offered and alternative perspective on the relationship between class politics and nationalist politics in the post-liberation setting. The thesis highlights the importance of understanding South Africa as a post-liberation society, because of the manner in which the nature of the struggle for national independence shapes the politics of the post-liberation era. A great deal of attention has been drawn to the manner in which liberation movements, upon entering government, strive to maintain the unity of the movement which was essential during the struggle period (Dorman 2006; Melber 2003). Once in power, liberation parties have often sought to discursively reassert their legitimacy as the sole legitimate champion of the liberated population engaged in an ongoing ‘struggle’ to transform that society (Bompani 2006; Dorman 2006; Kriger 2006; Lodge 2004; Raftopoulos 2004; Ranger 2004; Southall 2009).

The ANC’s hegemonic grip on South African politics, coupled with its tendency to employ such liberation discourses, provoke fears among some scholars that South Africa’s ‘dominant party system’ could pose a threat to democratic consolidation in the future (Brooks 2004; Giliomee and Simkins; 1999; Jung and Shapiro 1995). From a left wing perspective, as long as ‘substantive uncertainty’ does not exist South Africa’s multiparty system, the goals of socioeconomic transformation and poverty alleviation will go unmet (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Habib 2005; 2009).
Nonetheless, prominent scholars such as Patrick Bond (2000), Peter Alexander (2003), Aswin Desai (2002), and John Saul (2005) have argued that the ANC’s dominance is now being challenged by a new, class-based politics emerging out of disaffection with its neo-liberal macroeconomic policies. These analysts have pointed to the growing number of civil society organisations resisting the ANC’s neo-liberal initiatives in communities and workplaces across South Africa which, they argue, could augment a post-nationalist era in which class becomes the predominant fault line of South African politics.

The trade unions, it is argued, could potentially stand at the forefront of this new class politics. Trade unions have, after all, often led resistance against colonialism (Berg and Butler 1964; Davies 1966; Freund 1988), neo-liberal structural adjustment (Beckman & Sachikonye 2001; Sibanda & Nyamukapa 2000) and they have also played a prominent role in the struggle for democracy across the African continent (Krause et al 2007). Habib and Taylor (1999a; 1999b; 2001) argue that COSATU will have to form an opposition party in order to introduce the ‘substantive uncertainty’ into South African democracy which is so desperately needed to resurrect progressive socioeconomic transformation. According to some, it is only the blinkered strategic outlook of COSATU’s leadership that is preventing the unions forging organic linkages with the growing mass movement of organisations resisting the ANC’s neo-liberal agenda (Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008; Gall 1997) or forming a workers’ party (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001). However, it has been argued that such a strategy could be extremely dangerous for COSATU (Eidelberg 2000), especially in the face of statistical evidence that its members continue to support the ANC (Buhlungu et al 2006b; Cherry and Southall 2006; Pillay 2006; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b).

This thesis has built upon the work conducted by the SWOP survey team by providing a detailed ethnographic insight into exactly how workers experience, and react
to, the radically altered social, political and institutional environment of post-apartheid South Africa. It analyses how these experiences affect their attitudes towards class and nationalist politics. In particular, it analyses: their relationship with their trade union, the NUM; their attitudes towards the Tripartite Alliance; the roots of, and rationality behind, their partisan loyalties; the manner in which they engage with the ANC; their understandings and expectations of nationalist politics; and, finally, how they frame ‘acceptable’ and ‘responsible’ forms of agency in the post-apartheid setting. Taken together, this broad range of issues offers a detailed insight into the current dynamics of class politics in the post-apartheid era, as seen from a grassroots, ‘politics from below’ perspective.

The conclusions drawn in the thesis address this range of issues, all of which centre around the overarching question: Are we about to witness a post-nationalist era in which class struggle becomes the defining feature of politics?

*What would a working class politics would look like?*

A question that seems obvious, but is rarely considered, is: If COSATU were to form a new workers’ party, what form would this take? On paper, there are large ideological differences between the ostensibly socialist COSATU and the broad nationalist church of the ANC, especially since the ANC government adopted its GEAR policy in 1996. However, these ideological differences between the two organisations have narrowed in recent years (Lehulere 2004; Van Driel 2004). As Steven Friedman (2007) argues:

> In the back of the minds of a lot of business people is the sense that somewhere out there is a seething Bolshevist mass [within the alliance]. Demonstrably there isn’t. Cosatu has a different perspective, which is important, but I would argue at rock bottom there is far more consensus than we realize…

Even after its successful infiltration of the ANC at Polokwane, COSATU has not sought to pressurise the party into adopting a socialist platform and despite rhetorical calls for the nationalisation of South Africa’s mineral wealth, COSATU’s demands of the ANC
government have been far more moderate than its critics give credit for. While the federation remains avowedly socialist, many of its affiliates have for some time adopted new strategies of coping with the pressures exerted by neo-liberal globalisation, rather than steadfastly resisting them (for example see Desai and Habib 1997). In short, one might question whether the ideological differences are, at the present time, as clearly distinct as they are often presented.

Beyond this policy analysis, however, this thesis demonstrates the importance of understanding the processes of class formation which have occurred since the end of apartheid if we are to comprehend what a new working class politics might look like. While the most obvious and well-documented forms that this has taken has been the growth of the so-called ‘black diamonds’ class of black business leaders, and the growth of a professional black middle class, this thesis has highlighted how processes of class formation are occurring on an everyday level in the workplace. The case study of NUM in Eskom highlights the manner in which Affirmative Action and Employment Equity policies – part of the new workplace institutional order - have augmented a class divide within NUM itself: while some workers have been able to grasp the new opportunities available to them, other sections of the workforce have been left behind by these developments. This has fomented mistrust and suspicion within NUM’s membership expressed through the idiom of a generational divide. However, this more accurately reflects an emerging class divide in the workplace between those with greater prospects for social mobility and those without. An aspirational culture is emerging among those workers with greater social and human capital who are capable of achieving promotions and, as a result, these workers are displaying greater levels of individualism than their less skilled peers.

NUM’s membership in Eskom has therefore become increasingly diversified in the post-apartheid era. These dynamics of class formation are by no means exceptional
and are evident in workplaces around the country. This trend towards the greater stratification of the working class has important political implications: as the working class gets more diverse, so too are the political impulses emanating from it. This makes it exponentially more difficult for the unions to articulate a coherent working class political platform that would unproblematically draw workers away from the ANC. The ANC’s attempts to create a black middle class through Affirmative Action and Employment Equity policies appears entirely in tune with the aspirations culture that is emerging among the more socially mobile workers within the organised working class. One might tentatively suggest that, as a party of aspirations, the ANC’s economic programme might well appeal to certain sections of the organised working class far more than a hypothetical socialist politics, in whatever form that might take.

*The unions in post-apartheid South Africa: drowning or waving?*

It needs to be considered whether or not South Africa’s trade unions are currently in a position to mobilise their members in an attempt to forge a radical new working class politics. Labour analysts have highlighted some of the great difficulties the unions have encountered as they have adjusted to the post-apartheid environment. Buhlangu (2010) argues that the paradox of COSATU’s ‘victory’ in helping to end apartheid is that while its influence has increased in the post-apartheid era, its internal organisation has been greatly weakened and, in some COSATU affiliates, is in complete disarray. He discusses how the increasing bureaucratisation of Union structures has encouraged oligarchic leadership tendencies, which have in turn led to the demobilisation of COSATU’s rank-and-file, undermining the potential for militant mobilisation (Buhlangu 2010; see also Bramble 2003: 189-191; Buhlangu 2002: 15; Desai 2008; Gall 1997: 206; Maree 1998: 35-42; Van Driel 2003: 78).
This thesis has highlighted how this trend towards demobilisation has been evident in Eskom with regards to NUM. This, however, cannot be attributed simply to the oligarchic tendencies of the Union’s leadership and is actually rooted in how the Union and also its rank-and-file members have adjusted to the radically altered context brought about by the democratic transition.

First, the thesis has highlighted how vital it is to examine how ordinary rank-and-file union members are experiencing the unprecedented processes of class formation in the post-apartheid era, and the impacts these have on trade union organisation. In particular, the emerging class divide within the union has not only led to growing levels of mistrust and division among workers; the manner in which more upwardly mobile workers are grasping at the new opportunities available to them is eroding collective solidarities and participation in NUM’s structures. The upwardly mobile workers are less reliant on collective solidarities to advance their individual livelihoods and they therefore engage in a far more passive and instrumental fashion with the Union, relying on it to protect them in the face of individual crises but not proactively engaging within NUM in order to strengthen its organisation and to fight collective struggles.

Second, the phenomenon of shop stewards being promoted into management has also contributed to demobilisation within NUM. The trade unions, much like other sections of the liberation movement (see for discussion Butler 2005; 2007; Cronin 2005; Lodge 2004; Motlanthe 2005; Seekings 1997; 2000; Southall 2008; Zuern 2001; 2006), have witnessed a ‘race to riches’ in which leadership positions have become stepping stones into political careers or lucrative private sector jobs (Buhlangu 2002a: 5; Lehulere 2003: 38; Maree 1998: 35). At the workplace level, this has taken the form of shop stewards being promoted into supervisory or management positions (see for example Von Holdt 2002; Webster 2001b: 197). This phenomenon can be witnessed in Eskom, where a small number of NUM shop stewards have utilised their positions as vehicles of
social mobility. Although this phenomenon is complex and difficult to accurately quantify, it is nonetheless having a deleterious effect on NUM’s organisation. While on the one hand this is seen by both workers and NUM leaders to bring benefits in the form of a more sympathetic management, at the same time it is also perceived by a large number of workers to threaten the very integrity of the Union’s structures by eroding workers’ trust in their shop stewards while simultaneously eroding the collective identity of the Union as a bastion of working class solidarity. As a result, many workers said that this was causing them to disengage from the Union.

A third issue contributing to the demobilisation of NUM’s rank and file in Eskom are the legal restrictions preventing strike action in the industry. These restrictions have opened up a divide between ordinary Union members and their national leaders, a divide which is fuelled by mistrust, rumours and conspiracy theories, which have once again eroded trust in NUM’s structures while further undermining the militant identity of NUM as a ‘union of strikes’. The result has been the widespread demoralisation of the rank and file and their resulting disengagement from Union affairs.

Clearly, however, Eskom is a relatively extreme example with regards to the legal restrictions preventing strike action. These legal restrictions were, however, only a contributing factor to a wider trend of the Union’s demobilisation, one that mirrors similar processes across other COSATU affiliates (see for example Bramble 2003; Buhlungru 2010; Kenny 2005). It is important not to attribute the responsibility for this demobilisation solely on a bureaucratic leadership stymieing union militancy, although this was regularly cited as a problem. What this detailed case study has demonstrated is that the reasons behind this demobilisation are many and complex, and these reflect the plethora of difficulties NUM, like other COSATU affiliates, has encountered in the post-apartheid era. They include a widening gap between members and union leaders but also: the breakdown of democratic traditions within NUM at particular worksites; the
individualism of the ‘younger’, highly skilled workers; the abuse of union structures by careerist individuals; and, finally, the loss of the Union’s core identity as the ‘union of toyi toyi’ and the despondency that has resulted. In short, this myriad of (often contradictory) explanations of union demobilisation, offered by workers and union leaders alike, highlights the manner in which NUM has attempted to adjust to the radically altered social, political and institutional context heralded by the post-apartheid era. Therefore, while NUM has adapted and ‘modernised’ within this context, the Union has, simultaneously, experienced a dramatic decline in its capacity to mobilise its members characterised by falling rates of participation in Union structures.

Labour analysts around the world have argued that if the trade unions are to be politically reinvigorated and take their place at the forefront of struggles against neo-liberalism, then strong democratic organisation is essential for forging a radical new, bottom up ‘people’s politics’ from below (Moody 1997b; Scipes 2002; Waterman 2001). For those advocating that South Africa’s trade unions engage in such a struggle against neo-liberalism, whether in alliance with social movements (Barchiesi 2005; Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008; Ngwane 2003) or by the federation forming a workers’ party (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002; Legassick 2007), these internal difficulties, which are not unique to NUM, call into question their capacity to do so. The case study evidence presented here suggests that while South Africa’s trade unions might be ‘hard wired’ for affecting political change within the elite corridors of power in Luthuli House, they are ill equipped to forge a new, radical class politics ‘from below’ with the genuine potential to transmogrify South Africa’s socioeconomic landscape.

*The current political trajectory of South Africa’s trade unions: have union leaders ‘got it right’?*

A widely held opinion of those scholars advocating the unions becoming involved in a new class struggle against the ANC’s neo-liberal development project is that the primary
obstacle to this at the moment remains the blinkered, conservative political strategy of the trade union leadership (Barchiesi 2005; Bassett 2005; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008; Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001; Harvey 2002; Ngwane 2003). This belief hinges around the assumption that an increasingly bureaucratic union leadership is either deaf to, or has consciously sought to suppress, workers’ natural militancy and hostility towards the ANC’s neo-liberal agenda. It is a standpoint most poetically captured by prominent activist and scholar Trevor Ngwane, who asserts that: ‘The leadership has captured the bodies of the workers but their souls are wandering around. One day they will connect with other bodies’ (2003). For some authors, the narrow strategic outlook of COSATU’s leadership is epitomised by the federation’s support for Jacob Zuma in the ANC succession battle. For them, COSATU’s support for Zuma reflects a missed opportunity in which a potentially broader revolt against the government’s neo-liberal development project has been channelled within the narrow and self-defeating confines of nationalist politics (Bassett and Clarke 2008; Bond 2007; Ceruti 2008a: 107).

However, the thesis supports the findings of the SWOP survey that COSATU’s political strategy is widely supported among the members of its affiliate unions (Buhlunger et al 2006a; Ebrahim 2002; Pillay 2006; Southall and Wood 1999a; 1999b) and offers a unique qualitative insight into the reasons behind this. Eskom workers are generally in favour of the Alliance and even those that are not nonetheless share an aversion to the idea of their Union spearheading a new political initiative. These attitudes are not informed by workers’ ignorance of the ANC’s policy agenda, as some authors have suggested (Habib and Taylor 1999b), and cannot be adequately summarised by some trite, catch-all concept of ‘false consciousness’. Workers do not simply take their political cues from their union leaders, nor do they demonstrate blind faith towards the ANC. What this qualitative case study demonstrates is the sophisticated understandings that workers hold of how best to advance and defend their interest within the democratic
polity. They survey the political scene and calculate, quite rationally, that their class interests need not be pursued in opposition to the nationalist movement, but through holding it accountable. Notions of ‘exhausted nationalism’ and a monolithically ‘neo-liberal’ ANC government leave little room for imagining alternative political strategies available to the working class other than adopting an oppositional posture towards the nationalist movement. In contrast, workers’ understandings of the political and institutional context of the post-apartheid era leads them to the conclusion that politics need not be played out in such binary terms, and that working class interests are best pursued through a more reflexive strategy of holding the ANC to account through critical engagement and the resort to industrial action where necessary, rather than entering opposition politics.

It is also noticeable that the politically active NUM members, particularly what I have identified as an activist layer of shop stewards, are among the strongest supporters of the ANC, and are capable of framing their support for the party in grand narratives about the National Democratic Revolution and the position of the organised working class within it. This activist layer of union members is significant because presumably any opposition party formed by the unions would require their support to galvanise it. At present, this layer of politically active workers displayed a deeply embedded cognitive attachment to the ANC and this crucial activist layer of union members were also extremely averse to the idea of an independent working class politics at this time.

Rather than following a singular trajectory, the experience of southern African labour movements in the post-liberation era demonstrates the variety of trade union engagements with nationalist parties. It is curious, therefore, that analysts such as Peter Alexander (2000) and Patrick Bond (2002) draw attention to Zimbabwe as the most likely example for labour politics in South Africa to follow. For these workers at least, the choice is not simply between subservience to a ‘neo-liberal’ ANC and the ‘Zimbabwe
option’; they prefer instead to continue along their current trajectory, for now, suggesting that their leaders might well have ‘got it right’ in terms of their political strategy. While Habib and Taylor (2001: 221; see also Habib 2009: 173) might be right in saying that we should not make a ‘fetish of the majority viewpoint’, ignoring the need to consider alternatives, it would be catastrophic for COSATU to not heed the sentiment of its members and launch headlong into a new political strategy at this time. The thesis suggests that in NUM, like in COSATU as a whole, there is neither the drive from ‘above’, among union leaders, or from ‘below’, among its rank and file, for such a move to be taken at the present time. The evidence presented here suggests that it is far more likely for any Alliance split to result from the fallout of another acrimonious ANC leadership succession contest, if COSATU were to back the wrong horse, so to speak, rather than as a result of some long-standing ideological differences or agitation ‘from below’.101

The mantle of liberation: understanding the ANC’s unique political capital

The thesis demonstrates that one of the primary reasons why workers are not agitating for their union to drive a new class-based politics is that their support for the ANC remains strong. The SWOP surveys have demonstrated that COSATU members remain loyal to the ANC (Buhlangu et al 2006b: 205) and this thesis has contributed to our understanding of exactly why this is by offering a qualitative insight into the underlying reasons behind workers’ continued support for the ANC.

The ANC occupies a unique space in South African politics. This is in part due to the enduring and deeply rooted identification that workers hold with the Party. Workers’ political identities are heavily influenced by the legacy of apartheid, and support for the

---

101 Although, COSATU’s leadership would undoubtedly offer this as a post hoc rationalisation for leaving the Alliance. This, of course, assumes that after such an acrimonious succession battle in which COSATU loses out, that the fate of the Alliance will be in COSATU’s hands alone.
ANC is often rationalised through emotive personal narratives of being ‘freed’ and empowered by the ANC and its leaders. The degree of this identification was highlighted not only by the high levels of ANC activism among Eskom workers, but also, and perhaps equally significantly, the manner in which politically inactive workers nonetheless identified themselves as ANC members, which illustrates the normative value attached to displaying a connection with the Party.

The importance of identity-based party loyalties was also evident in workers’ attitudes towards the DA, which was regularly dismissed as a reincarnation of the former National Party. Nonetheless, Cope was also dismissed by workers as being ‘illegitimate’, and workers rationalised these attitudes by explaining that Cope only emerged because its leaders were ‘opportunists’ and ‘cry babies’ who could not accept their defeat at the ANC leadership contest in Polokwane. Despite its best efforts, Cope could not, in short, usurp the ANC from its position as the undisputed figurehead of the liberation struggle whose unique credentials, for these workers at least, were caste during the struggle period. The thesis therefore highlights the importance of understanding the mantle of liberation – the unique form of symbolic political capital which a liberation movement is endowed with upon assuming power. Such is the importance of this symbolism, the discursive contestation over who can legitimately lay claim to the liberation mantle forms a major element of how a liberation party relates to opposition groups and visa versa, as each seeks to assert their credentials as the ‘true’ standard bearers of the revolution (see for discussion Bompani 2006; Dorman 2006; Kriger 2005; Raftopoulos 2004; Ranger 2004).

Liberation discourses and developmentalist discourses: crowding out the space for class-based politics?

An important element of liberation discourses is that they seek to perpetuate the liberation party’s position in government by discursively tasking the party with the social and economic transformation which they claim that they alone are charged to carry
forward. In the case of South Africa, the ANC frames itself as a ‘movement’, rather than an ‘ordinary’ political party, tasked with entrenching the ‘National Democratic Revolution’, an apparently unending mission to consolidate democracy, transform governmental institutions and to re-organise economic life (Lodge 2004: 216; see also Darracq 2008). This effort to materially transform the lives of the liberated population is extremely important. As Dorman notes, liberation discourses alone are insufficient to stave off challengers in the longer term, and the failure to sufficiently transform the lives of the liberated population open up space for political challengers to emerge and contest for the mantle of liberation, possibly claiming to be the true custodians the revolution and its values, or brandishing the incumbent party as ‘sell outs’ who have ‘betrayed’ the revolution (Dorman 2006: 1098). This thesis supports this argument and takes the analysis further, examining how the ANC is able to maintain its unique position in South African politics through its liberation discourses and, crucially, its ability to bring positive material/tangible improvements to the lives of its core constituency.

The thesis therefore offers a different perspective on the pattern of partisan loyalties than is offered by the mainstream literature on the subject: while some authors posit that support for the ANC is driven primarily, if not solely, by issues relating to identity, including race, language and religion (Friedman 2004; 2008; Horowitz 1991; Johnson and Schlemmer 1996; Welsh 1994), others have claimed that party loyalties are increasingly influenced by ‘rational’ evaluations of government performance and the fact that the ANC still commands such an impressive majority can be explained by the fact that its core constituency still identify their material class interests with the party (Schulz-Herzenberg 2009; Seekings 1997), especially given the lack of a left wing alternative at the present time (Habib and Taylor 1999; 2001). However, this case study of workers attitudes suggests that it is actually a synergy between the identity-based and material-
based dimensions of ANC support that reinforces the ANC’s unique position in South African politics.

The thesis has demonstrated that the ANC has reinforced its ‘liberation discourses’ with material improvements to workers’ lives, however limited, incremental and uneven these might be. This can only be understood through a detailed, qualitative insight into how workers frame their relationship with the post-apartheid state: far from a neo-liberal monolith, the ANC’s ‘Third Way’ social democratic agenda, and its developmentalist capacity allow it to directly intervene in the lives of its citizens in a way that is unrivalled in sub Saharan Africa (Seekings 2002). Workers were aware of the government’s shortcomings, but the ANC government was perceived as a benevolent (albeit dysfunctional) force in their lives because of its attempts to develop their local communities and its extension of state welfare. The ANC government is thus perceived, true to its word, to be continuing to ‘struggle’ on their behalf, continuing its historic role as the champion of their interests. As a result, evaluations of its performance are not conducted in an objective, rational fashion, but are instead skewed by the symbolic affinities workers held with the party.

The ANC’s liberation discourses thus blur and merge with its developmentalist discourses: the party is at once seen as the heroic champion of democratic rights, freedoms and dignity, and, at the same time, the contemporary torchbearer of working class aspirations. To these workers at least, the ANC is no ordinary party, judged against the relative merits of opposition parties and their policy programmes; it occupies a unique space in South African politics and one that is not easily assailable by any would-be challenger to the left of the party. Therefore, while scholars are correct to point to the growth of an emerging class-based politics in the form of the burgeoning civil society movements across South Africa, we must caution against any assumption that class politics will simply usurp nationalist politics once the ‘euphoria’ of liberation dissipates.
The blurring of the nationalist movement’s developmentalist and liberation discourses obscures the distinction between the nationalist agenda and that of any aspiring class-based challenger by obscuring the contours of class-based cleavages in society and discursively crowding out the political space from which a class-based challenge might emerge.

*Workers and the state: defining ‘acceptable’ forms of working class agency in the post-apartheid era*

An examination of workers’ understandings of the state also helps us to understand how they frame ‘acceptable/legitimate’ forms of individual and collective working class agency in the post-apartheid period. Workers did not perceive the post-apartheid ANC government as an elitist, neo-liberal reincarnation of the former apartheid government, leading them to frame their relationship with the state in purely antagonistic terms. Hence, workers were extremely critical of what they perceived to be the ‘irrational’ and ‘irresponsible’ ways in which groups like the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the rioters of Khutsong engaged with the state.

Nor, however, are these workers simply utilising their access to institutional influence within the state to preserve the status quo in what Seekings outlines as a somewhat Faustian ‘class compromise’ (Seekings 2004). These workers do not look upon post-apartheid citizenship in zero sum terms, as a choice between a renewed antagonism with the state or an uncritical cooperation with it. Instead, they favour a strategy of critical engagement with the ANC government, combining a reflexive use of cooperation in local ANC structures with the use of protest and resistance as a means of holding their representatives to account should they deviate from their mandate. They were acutely aware of the local ANC shortcomings, but they nonetheless argued that these were best addressed through the ‘correct’ (read ANC) structures rather than ‘howling’ or ‘burning tyres’ out in the streets. Protest was not ruled out, whether in the workplace or
community, but only once other avenues of engagement with the state had been exhausted. This reflexive strategy of engagement with the ANC and, by extension, the post-apartheid government, reflects the position of the organised working class within the South African economy as a class that has notably benefited from the expansion of the post-apartheid state, but one whose aspirations for a better life after apartheid have still not been completely met.

What expectations of nationalism do workers hold?

The thesis develops an understanding of what exactly national liberation means to workers, in terms of what expectations they have of their nationalist government and, crucially, how they would react if they felt these expectations were not being met. In this respect, understanding workers’ support for Jacob Zuma in the ANC succession race as part of a populist rupture (Laclau 2006) reveals a great deal about their understandings of post-liberation politics and also their relationship with the ANC.

The insight into workers’ expectations of political leadership developed in the thesis through the ‘comrade exercise’ demonstrates that for these workers, the transition to democracy should herald more than the limited form of representation offered by representational democracy: they expected their ANC leaders to ‘listen’ to them by constantly consulting the unions, local ANC structures and ‘the communities’. This was reflected in the manner in which they criticised the ‘uncomradely’ leadership of Mbeki who, they argued, was too ‘arrogant’ to listen to ‘the people’, and also in their expectations of Zuma – as a ‘true comrade’ – to ‘come down’ and speak with them.

However, workers expected to be ‘heard’ with respect to a whole plethora of issues: they thus framed themselves as part of a wider subjectivity – ‘the people’ - who had been deprived of their ‘rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007: 3). It was not simply that their class interests were being unrepresented
by Mbeki’s government; social and cultural issues were every bit as important to these
workers and, for some, these issues reflected the most acute shortcomings of the ANC
government since 1994. Clearly workers’ party loyalties are not driven by class alone and
they expect the ANC to exhibit moral leadership on a broad range of issues. This
illustrates the complexity of their identification with the party which is rooted in their
understandings of the democratic transition as being about far more than simply
economic transformation. It might be reductionist, therefore, to assume that a class-
based politics will automatically supersede the ‘narrow confines’ of nationalist politics.

To these workers, national liberation has never been simply about the fulfilment of class
aspirations, and a hypothetical workers’ party would face great difficulty in appealing to
them based on a purely class-based platform with greater success than the ANC’s ‘broad
church’ politics.

Understanding the potential longevity of nationalist rule: the sacrosanct and regenerative ANC

It is clear from these workers’ attitudes towards the succession battle that they do not, in
any event, believe the ANC to be an ‘exhausted’ nationalist party which is fundamentally
irredeemable because of its inability to meet the broad ranging expectations they have of
it. When presented with the ANC’s failure to deliver on some of these expectations,
workers continue to look inside the ANC to keep the broad national liberation project on
course, rather than outside of it, for political alternatives elsewhere. At present, this is
because workers perceive the ANC to be sacrosanct: the shortcomings of the ANC
government are considered to result from the failure of individual leaders to meet their
expectations of representation, mediation and accountability within the post-apartheid
democratic era, rather than any irredeemable ideological shortcoming of the ANC itself.

Thus, these workers perceive the ANC to have a regenerative capacity: in the face of
disillusionment with individual leaders, the ANC and, by extension, the broader project
of post-apartheid transformation, can be brought ‘back on track’ by restoring democratic, accountable and ‘comradely’ leadership into the organisation. Those hoping to witness the growth of an independent working class politics might thus take heed from these findings because if these attitudes are not unique to Eskom workers – and there is no reason to suppose they are - it would appear that the organised working class do not, as yet, appear to want to jettison the ANC as their political standard-bearer.

The wider significance of the findings: towards a better understanding of class and post-liberation politics

There are clearly limitations to the case study approach employed in this thesis and there is scope for more research into some of the areas outlined above, including comparative case studies that might well yield important nuances into the dynamics discussed in the thesis. Nonetheless, the trends illuminated in the thesis, in terms of the changing dynamics of trade union organisation, are identified in numerous other case studies discussed in the preceding chapters. Furthermore, many of the conclusions drawn from this localised case study confirm the national findings of the SWOP survey teams with regards to both union organisation and wider political issues (Buhlunungu et al 2006). There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the attitudes expressed by Eskom workers are unique, and we can thus treat the conclusions presented here as an insight into how, more broadly, COSATU members as a whole are engaging within their unions and how they rationalise (and act out) their partisan loyalties.

Rather than attempting to resolve questions about the relationship between class and nationalism in the post-apartheid era or, more broadly, the status of labour politics in the modern, globalised world, the thesis offers suggestions as to how we might challenge our presumptions about these topics, and points to the importance of empirically grounded, ‘politics from below’ approaches for developing our understanding of these issues. The thesis offers a unique, ethnographic insight into the manner in which South
Africa’s organised working class has experienced and responded to the pressures and opportunities created by the radically altered social, political and institutional context of the post-apartheid era. Moving beyond both elite level analyses of South African politics and the inferences made from statistical data of workers’ attitudes, the thesis provides a snapshot of politics from below.

The thesis can, therefore, offer a fresh perspective on some of the dynamics affecting the organised working class in the era of globalisation. This stratum of global society has experienced a marked decline in their political influence and a gradual erosion of their rights in the workplace during the neo-liberal era amidst the growth of what one author has identified as a transnational ‘market civilisation’ (Gill 2003). Authors such as Moody (1997), Scipes (2003) and Waterman (2001) have argued that in order to re-establish themselves and seize the political initiative, trade unions around the world will have to adopt a radical form of ‘social movement unionism’ involving radical trade union democracy, relinquishing their former ties with social democratic parties, and positioning themselves at the centre of the new politics emerging out of the ‘anti-globalisation’ protests; a burgeoning ‘movement of movements’ that Gill (2003), evoking Gramsci, refers to as the ‘Post-modern Prince’ resisting neo-liberal globalisation. This thesis, supported by the SWOP findings, argues that South African workers are not, at present, demanding such a political shift on the part of their unions and that instead, they continue to display deeply rooted attachments to the ANC. The thesis therefore highlights the need to understand the complex affinities that workers from around the world may hold for various nationalist or social democratic parties. The thesis also highlights the difficulties that trade unions, both within South Africa and beyond, might face in trying to galvanise a radically democratic form of ‘social movement unionism’ advocated by the likes of Moody et al. It does so by illuminating the need to understand both the variability and transformation of class structure in the era of globalisation, as
well as interrogating how individuals and their unions experience and act upon these changing class structures (Wright 1997). As the thesis has demonstrated, the processes of class formation in the post-apartheid workplace have had profound impacts on trade union organisation; effects that can be witnessed across South Africa.

The thesis therefore challenges mechanical, deterministic readings of class structure and class warfare which assume that the ‘fundamental relations’ between classes will one day mark the primary political fault line of South African society. The thesis problematises how we speak about South Africa’s organised working class. This crucial demographic cohort, which is often alleged to hold the key to South Africa’s political future is, at best, under researched in terms of time dedicated to fieldwork on the subject. And yet a great many generalisations are made about the propensity, or otherwise, of the organised working class to transmogrify post-liberation politics in South Africa and, indeed, for the transnational working class to challenge neo-liberalism on a global scale.

What this research highlights is the need to account for the diversity of the global working class and, in particular, South African ‘workers’, including the different ways they experience post-apartheid capitalism, how they engage in their unions, and also what informs their relationships with the ANC. Are we to understand all workers as potential militants-in-waiting who have been ‘sold out’ by the ANC government and stifled by a bureaucratic and conservative union hierarchy? This case study highlights examples of such workers, notably the less skilled, blue collar workers facing declining real wages, minimal service delivery in their communities and the very real threat of losing their jobs as Eskom outsources more and more jobs to external contractors. Some of these workers did indeed express displeasure and disillusionment with the ANC government and anger at their union leaders for their ‘corruption’ and lack of transparency. However, one is just as likely to encounter workers who faced equal amounts of hardships and yet hitched a ride on a bakkie after work to engage in their nearby ANC branch. One might
also encounter the well-educated, skilled worker who aspired towards a career in management and who saw little need in union or ANC engagement. In short, just as ‘honourable’ militant workers do exists, so too do apathetic, sexist, chauvinistic, xenophobic, individualistic… workers.

This thesis avoids advocacy or speculative crystal ball gazing. However, what this insight into the politics from below of South Africa’s organised working class can offer is the following conclusion: there is no immutable path which class politics will follow in a post-liberation society, either one determined by mechanical, economistic teleologies or trite cross national comparisons with other southern African countries. The complexity of South Africa’s post-liberation class politics, like that of other societies in the era of globalisation, can only be thoroughly understood through an understanding of politics from below. As such, any scholarly prescriptions regarding the path that the political agency of the organised working class ‘should’ take must be grounded in an understanding of the lived realities workers are facing, and be formulated with them, rather than on behalf of them.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


by Sakhela Buhlungu, John Daniel, Roger Southall, and Jessica Lutchman.
Cape Town: HSRC Press.
COSATU. 2003a. Central Executive Committee Political Dissuasion
COSATU. 2003b. Resolutions of the COSATU 8th National Congress.


Friedman, Steven, and Maxine Reitzes. 1996. Democraisation or Bureaucratisation?: Civil Society, the Public Sphere and the State in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Transformation 29:55-73.


280


NUM. 2007. Constitution


APPENDIX 1

Interview list

Lesiba Seshoka, NUM Communications and Media Officer 31/05/07
Paris Mashego, NUM Regional Secretary, Highveld Region 27/06/07
Frans Baleni, NUM General Secretary 06/11/07
Oupa Komane, NUM Deputy General Secretary 20/11/07
Mluleki Senene, NUM Regional Secretary, Gauteng Region 21/03/08
Job Matsepe, NUM National Full Time Official for Eskom 25/04/08
John Radebe, NUM Full Time Shop Steward for Eskom, Highveld Region 14/05/08
Joe Skosana, NUM Full Time Shop Steward for Eskom, Highveld Region 16/05/08 & 21/04/09
Phyllis Nkosi, NUM Women’s Officer for Highveld Region 21/04/08
Piet Matosa, NUM Regional Chairperson, Highveld Region 27/05/08

All interviews with regular NUM members and shop stewards were anonymised and pseudonyms were used in all cases. Job titles listed were also fictitious in order to ensure compete anonymity.
APPENDIX 2

A summary of basic interview questions

The interviews were semi-structured and some of the core questions put to workers are listed below, in no particular order. Overleaf is the ‘comrade exercise’ – a sheet of paper given to workers and initially used as an icereaker exercise (see chapter 7 for discussion).

Union issues

1. What are the most pressing issues facing the NUM at the present time?

2. How often do you attend NUM meetings?

3. Would you say attendance rates at NUM meetings are increasing or decreasing? Why?

4. What happens at meetings?

5. Are you satisfied with the feedback you receive from the Union?

6. Have you witnessed NUM shop stewards being promoted into management or supervisory positions? [If yes] How do you feel about this?

7. How do you feel about your working life?

8. What are your attitudes towards strike action?

National and local politics

1. Would you say your standard of living has improved since 1994?

2. What problems do you face at home?

3. Do you ever encounter financial difficulties?

4. Overall, how would you rate the ANC government’s performance since 1994? Has it met your expectations?

5. What is service delivery like in your community? Are there ever protests? Do you engage in these? Why? How do you feel about social movements that protest on such issues?

5. Which party would you normally vote for? Why?

6. Are you a member of a political party? How active are you? How often do you attend meetings? Why?

7. Would you consider supporting an independent workers’ party formed by COSATU?

8. Which of the following would you identify as a comrade (see overleaf)? Why?
Which of the following people would you refer to as a comrade?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nelson Mandela</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zwelinzima Vavi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Leon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo Sexwale</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frans Baleni</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blade Nzimande</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thabo Mbeki</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Zuma</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyril Ramaphosa</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Zille</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>