

**Fight for workers' democracy
in your trade union!**

**Fight for workers' control
of your trade union!**

**Workers of the world
unite!**

**For more information phone the
Casual Workers Advice Office
on 082 812 1934**



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Worker experience of trade unions

Trade unions these days sign up workers. But once they start deducting subscriptions from workers' wages, they disappear. Some union members have never seen their union organiser, ever. Sometimes when organisers do appear at the workplace, they head straight to the management offices for discussions with the bosses. Workers have no idea why their union organiser is there, and no idea what agreements are being made behind their backs. Where shop stewards do join these meetings, they often do so without taking mandates from workers and do not report back to workers.

Often, shop stewards themselves don't know what agreements have been made by the organisers and are not even given copies of such agreements. Some of these 'agreements' are completely illegal, for example, agreements to pay workers less than the Bargaining Council minimum for the sector, even though Bargaining Council agreements are legally binding on bosses. These so-called agreements often come about because of kickbacks being paid to organisers.

Organisers arrive at CCMA or bargaining council arbitrations without doing any preparation for the case, and sometimes without even meeting the member first. They make their own deals with the commissioners and company HRs, with workers ending up the losers either way.

Very few unions still have democratic constitutional structures through which workers can exercise worker control, and hold their organisers and other paid union staff to account. Joining a trade union therefore becomes a demoralising experience for workers. They lose confidence in trade unions and also in their own ability as workers to challenge the bosses and their profit-making system.

The job of a trade union is to defend workers and prepare them for socialism

Yet, the job of a trade union is to unite workers so that they can defend themselves against capitalist exploitation. United workers can fight the bosses for higher wages and better conditions of employment. This is the reason why workers all over the world have been building trade unions for more than 150 years now. Through their trade unions, workers build solidarity within workplaces, across workplaces, nationally and internationally.

More than this, trade unions also act as a 'school' where workers prepare to take control of production from the bosses in their industry. As part of the working class workers also prepare to take control of society by ending the exploitative capitalist system and replacing it with socialism.

How can union members rebuild the culture of worker control at work?

If you are a union member, get together with your fellow union members and agree on these steps:

- **Do not let your shop stewards meet management without your permission and mandates.**
- **Demand shop stewards and organisers give report-backs after such meetings.**
- **Don't allow the union organiser access to the company premises without your permission.**
- **Don't allow the union organiser to meet management alone without properly mandated shop stewards being present at all meetings.**
- **Don't allow shop stewards and organisers to make agreements that you have not mandated them to make.**
- **Demand a copy of your union constitution. Get a copy from the Department of Labour if the union refuses.**
- **Demand a copy of your union financial statements. Get a copy from the Department of Labour if the union refuses.**

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Also in 2018, the unions agreed to a national minimum wage of R20 per hour, with even lower minimum wages for farm, domestic and EPWP workers. This was a very low wage. It was also problematic because it was an hourly rate, and the government did not set a monthly rate.

Workers can't live on hourly wages, especially where they only get called to work for few hours per week. They need a monthly minimum wage. The unions did not even campaign for the new hourly minimum to be implemented! The Department of Employment and Labour has made no effort to force the bosses to comply with even paying the minimum. As a result, the wages of higher-earning workers has fallen down towards the minimum.

During Covid in 2020, the unions agreed to a Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) that excluded millions of domestic, farm and immigrant workers – the very workers who needed the TERS the most.

In 2021, the unions agreed the CCMA could close its walk-in dispute referral centres to save the government some money! This left thousands of low-wage workers, who unions refuse to organise, out in the cold with no way to access the CCMA.

In all of these examples, the trade unions acted in the interests of the capitalist class against the interests of the working class.

The unions are now a part of the capitalist system

The trade unions have now become a place where you can get rich. Union investment companies control billions of rands that are invested in big capitalist enterprises – the same capitalist enterprises that only make profits if they exploit workers.

Union staff (officials) earn 'market-related' salaries with lots of benefits. Corruption in the unions is now as rife as it is within big business and government. Co-optation of officials and worker leaders is common. Organisers and shop stewards are the first to win contracts from the bosses for all kinds of services at a workplace.



General secretaries and presidents are also given very large allowances for attending state and semi-state body meetings, in union time. Employers buy unionists off in various ways, including free gambling at casinos, access to corporate boxes at soccer matches and free, luxury holidays for union leaders and their families. **The trade unions are dead as fighting formations, but they are alive and well as defenders and reproducers of the capitalist system.**

The organising difficulties facing workers because unions have sold out

Workers know that trade unions are no longer fighting formations. But workers also know that they and their working-class communities are under massive attack from bosses and from the government. Workers know that this is generally a time of weak organisation and low levels of struggle, partly because of this attack.

These are difficult conditions under which to build new organisations. Workers are turning to everything available to defend themselves, including going back to the same unions that they have no confidence in.

As long as workers are going to join trade unions, they must try to connect their workplace struggles with the struggle to control their union shop stewards and their union organisers. Such control will not be enough to transform their trade unions into genuinely democratic organisations. But holding the shop stewards and the local organiser accountable will at least minimise the extent to which the trade unions are helping the capitalist class to exert and strengthen their control over workers.



Workers Democracy and Workers Control must come first in trade unions

To defend workers against capitalist exploitation, to advance workers' immediate needs and to prepare workers to overthrow the capitalist system, trade unions must themselves be democratic organisations, controlled by workers themselves.

This is why the slogans of 'Workers' Democracy' and 'Workers' Control' were the most important in the militant trade union movement that emerged in South Africa in the early 1970s. It is these militant trade unions that played a leading role in the defeat of Apartheid capitalism. The reason they could do so was because these trade unions rested on strong workplace organisation. These unions had a very strong culture of democratic participation by members in all activities of the organisation. There was complete accountability of leaders who only made negotiated or signed agreements based on the mandate they were given by workers. They always reported back to workers and were completely transparent in operating the union – all decisions, whether financial or organisational, including how the union used worker subscriptions were communicated openly to the workers.

South African trade unions have been smoothing the way for increased exploitation of workers

Today, the trade unions no longer defend workers against the bosses. Instead, the unions help the bosses to exploit the workers more than ever. For example, in 2018 the unions agreed with the bosses and the government that before any strike can take place, a secret, written ballot must take place. The unions agreed to do away with workers giving the mandate for a strike by show of hands in meetings. Since then, the number of strikes in the country has decreased. Yet, strikes are the main weapon that workers have to fight the bosses.