
The myth of a labour aristocracy in South Africa

By Dr Eddie Cottle

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Is the South African trade union movement in crisis because it is dominated by relatively privileged, better paid workers with permanent jobs? EDDIE COTTLE outlines the increase in worker militancy – across the board – since 2005, and highlights how structural changes in the economy have influenced trade unions. He argues that where reformism is seen within the working class, it is the trade union bureaucracy that is to blame, not the union membership.

In recent years the lack of a revolutionary movement and the persistence of reformism amongst workers in South Africa has led to disillusion and a claim that organised labour is a labour aristocracy. This claim has been made without substantiation,

often with vague reference to “higher paid workers”, “relatively privileged workers”, “permanent white-collar workers” and “permanent blue-collar workers” who make up the social base of trade unions to explain the reformism of the trade unions.

Bischoff (2015) argues that the Congress of South African Trade Union’s (Cosatu’s) composition changed from one that was blue-collar and working class to one that increasingly represents “lower middle-class” – white-collar workers (Bischoff, 2015: 233). In other words, the defenders of a labour aristocracy thesis claim that the reformism of sections of workers is because they are well-paid and largely white-collar and contrast this to the past where members of federations such as Cosatu were predominantly lower paid, blue-collar and militant (Lehulere, 2005: 12).

There are several errors with this line of inquiry and it is weakened in the face of substantive empirical evidence. This article will show that there is no historical evidence that workers who are well-paid and permanent are generally reformist and workers who are low paid are radical and revolutionary. I argue that to understand trade unions today one must account for the structural

changes of the economy, which altered the labour process and the skills composition of the workforce which in turn directly affected the composition of the trade unions. Finally, I will address the question of why reformism and conservatism persist despite opportunities for the working class to use their collective power to alter their social conditions.

It is well known that relatively well-paid industrial workers formed the social base of the Bolsheviks while low-paid textile workers were generally unorganised and were either apolitical or supported the Mensheviks until the beginning of the Russian Revolution. Throughout the 20th century well-paid industrial workers played a leading role in mass uprisings. In the US relatively well-paid workers led the struggles in auto, steel, rubber and other mass production industries, uniting workers regardless of skills and pay levels. The well-paid workers in trucking, auto, telecommunications, public education and postal services led the proto-revolutionary mass struggle in France, Italy, Britain, Portugal and the US between 1965 and 1975. In the Global South well-paid workers (in copper mining, metal and auto) in Chile,

Argentina and Brazil were the leading force during the 1970s and '80s (Post, 2010: 32).

The industrialisation of South Africa from 1939 coupled with the Great Boom of the 1960s saw the introduction of racial Fordist mass production technologies and divisions of labour requiring increased demand for semi-skilled and skilled workers to support the growth of manufacturing as the lead sector of the South African economy. By 1985, and in line with restructuring policies, the proportion of unskilled (which had been most of the workforce), semi-skilled and skilled was recomposed to 13%, 76% and 11% in manufacturing; 51%, 42% and 7% in mining; and in construction 19%, 65% and 16% respectively. The emergent black trade unions, including those in Cosatu, drew their membership mainly from *permanent*, semi-skilled and skilled workers (Gelb, 1991: 28) who adopted socialist ideas and formed part of the revolutionary movement to overthrow the apartheid capitalist state. The notion that *permanent* employment explains reformism is thus without empirical fact.

South Africa's post-apartheid neo-liberal model of growth moved from one that was predominantly based on manufacturing and mining (blue-collar workers) to one that is now dominated by the business services sector and public sector (white-collar workers) in terms of employment creation (Bhorat, et al., 2014: 3) which is fundamental in understanding the transformation of the composition of the trade unions. As any socialist would argue, the expansion and decent employment of workers in the public sector is central to the socialisation of the economy in the long-term struggle. It is rather perplexing that permanent employment, itself a product of

class struggle, is frowned upon by proponents of the labour aristocracy thesis rather than celebrated.

Statistics South Africa provides illuminating figures on income differentiation between different industries:

In 2019, the highest median monthly earnings were recorded among employees in the Utilities (R9 000) and Mining (R9 000) industries. The median monthly earnings increased in all industries except for Community and Social Services between the period 2014 and 2019 (StatsSA, 2019: vi).

The wage differential between blue-collar and white-collar workers (measured by sectoral median earnings) is surprising. The highest median earnings of R9000 are in the most strongly unionised (Department of Labour, 2019: 53 Fig 4.36) blue-collar industries such as utilities (including Eskom) and mining, not in the white-collar industries. The median earnings in both business and financial services and community and social services which are white-collar industries are much lower at R5000 per month. It could well be argued that the median wage of the public sector is distorted due to the recent inclusion of more precarious (intermittently employed) workers from the Expanded Public Works Programme in the figures.

Looked at differently the public sector has the highest trade union density rate of 69.2% compared to 24% for the private sector (Bhorat et al., 2015), yet the median salaries of public sector workers declined in real terms

between 2007 and 2019 (StatsSA, 2019). An analysis of collective bargaining outcomes between 2007 and 2019 in fact shows that on average, the outcome of strikes and collective bargaining in the public sector in terms of remuneration has been progressive and in favour of workers at the bottom end of the wage spectrum, providing real improvements of 1.9-3.2% compared with 0.6-0.9% at the top of the wage spectrum. Such collective bargaining outcomes, which favour the bottom end of the wage spectrum, do not correspond to a self-serving labour aristocracy.

If one breaks down the skills levels for the public sector, as opposed to just looking at occupational levels, the picture alters substantively. In 2015, the skills composition for the public sector was classified as unskilled (19%), semi-skilled (61%) and skilled (20%) (Bhorat and Khan, 2018: 10). Most public sector workers are therefore semi-skilled, white-collar workers. They are not lower middle class as Bischoff (2015) suggests but proletarian and disposable since they can easily be replaced. Except for agriculture, in all other industrial sectors semi-skilled workers make up 60-77% of the workforce. It is an error to use Fordist occupational categories to determine the class composition of workers instead of skill measures as neo-liberalism has diluted the skill, value and status of occupational categories.

The proponents of the labour aristocracy thesis assume that the permanent status of most Cosatu members implied secure and non-precarious forms of employment. On the contrary, the public sector in its entirety has been subject to restructuring with non-core activities being partially or fully outsourced ➤





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to private entities posing a constant threat of further privatisation (read retrenchments) and fiscal restraint leading to most industrial action being undertaken by public sector workers (288 strikes between 2000 and 2014).

In its 2021 Budget Review, the government planned to reduce compensation of employees by 9% in real terms over three years. On 4 October 2021, a headline in the *Sowetan* newspaper read, “Government records largest employment drop in the country” as the public sector shed 65,000 jobs, more than any other sector of the economy. Contrary to popular belief the average “relatively privileged” permanently employed Cosatu members (of which public sector workers constitute one-third) find themselves in precarious employment, a condition workers have resisted. Without guaranteed long-term employment and social welfare, which requires a high-wage economy, the material basis for a labour aristocracy simply does not exist. The reformism of the working class and organised labour lies elsewhere in the capitalist labour market.

Labour market competition

Most of the time workers act as individuals in competition with other workers to sell their labour power on the capitalist market. Their main

priority is their own reproduction and that of their families and not radical change or the overthrow of capitalism. The daily struggle for survival, long hours of travel, working time and the additional reproductive responsibility of female workers provide little time to engage in a day-to-day struggle against the exploitative conditions. As such, large sections of workers embrace reformist unionism with its routine industrial relations procedures and actions. The working class at the same time seeks to protect or advance their overall social reproduction through support for reformist parliamentary parties. The rapid pace of capital intensification in production since the 1990s led to a proportional decrease in the amount of employment required within the labour process. This process expands the reserve army of labour which in turn decreases the market power of labour. These conditions of high unemployment further increase competition between employed and unemployed, permanent and casual workers, men and women, foreign and local workers.

In such conditions sections of workers adopt conservative and even reactionary ideas such as those seen in the repeated spates of xenophobic violence or even the refusal to organise unorganised workers who appear as a threat to existing employment conditions. These processes never take a uniform direction and a section of workers maintains a consistent progressive outlook. Because of preconceived notions, academic and left activist intellectuals rarely pay attention to the detailed nature of strikes and the changes that are occurring within the labour movement.

Technological change and class struggle

The periods of changing class consciousness when workers adopt a more radical approach are episodic and correlate with the long-term

movements of capitalism where the general rate of profit declines and capital responds with the introduction of labour-saving technologies and cost cutting across industries. Such a period, an initial turning point in the level of class struggle, occurred in 2005 when the trade union movement led by Cosatu, under pressure from its rank and file members, began to adopt a more radical position. The 2005 strike wave was offensive in character with trade unions demanding wage rates double the rate of inflation of 3.4%, with an average settlement of 6.3% and with workers fighting against overall deterioration of working conditions.

Except for construction, the strike wave affected all industries with militant strikes from January to December that year. About 40% were wildcat strikes. Surprisingly, the turning-point strike occurred on 3 January when 2,200 Food and Allied Workers’ Union (Fawu) members embarked on an offensive national strike at Nestlé demanding an 8% wage increase. This was shortly followed by a strike at Delmonte on 19 January where permanent and casual workers demanded a 6% increase and expressed unhappiness about pay disparities between seasonal and permanent workers.

The strikes were qualitatively distinct from those in previous years. The national strike of 90,000 goldmining workers was the first in 18 years since the defeat of the 1987 miners’ strike. The strike at South African Airways was also a first. Several of the strikes were challenging changes to the labour process. The strike at Volkswagen was against planned outsourcing; at chrome mines it concerned job grading; at Fidelity Supercare workers were protesting against flexible employment contracts; and Zimbabwean workers at Maswiri Boerdery were protesting against changes in pay for piecework. Other distinct features of the strike wave were the entry of seasonal and casual workers in agro-processing at Nestlé,



Delmonte, Unifruitti citrus packaging and eight Western Cape fishing factories.

At several of the strikes, unions were attempting to unify workers by fighting disparities in pay between seasonal, casual and permanent workers and for higher increases for workers at the lower end of the wage spectrum. Workers at Solid Doors, a steel company in Mpumalanga, embarked on the longest strike in the history of South African labour relations (177 days).

The other unique aspect of the strike wave in 2005 was that it witnessed the emergence of multi-union strikes, like the municipal wage strike in July that was sanctioned and supported by the South Africa Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) and the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (Imatu); the X-Strata Alloys Lydenburg Works strike sanctioned by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and Solidarity; and the Electrical Cable strike also called by Numsa and Solidarity. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and Solidarity together organised a national strike in gold mines. This indicated new attempts at unity in the broad

unionised workforce in South Africa. Furthermore, there was a one-day national strike called by Cosatu against job losses and poverty (Department of Labour, 2005: vii, 1-7).

Overall, 2005 was marked by the participation of precarious workers in strike action, attempts by trade unions to unify standard and non-standard workers, widespread strike action across industries and importantly the recovery of mineworkers from the 1987 defeat. Strike waves after 2005 built on each other. The strikes were reminiscent of some of the most violent labour conflicts of the 1980s and were fundamentally a contest over the changing nature of work.

The year 2007 was illuminated by 608,919 strikers and 9,5 million days lost, both the highest in a decade. The high level of days lost is largely attributed to the wage demands of the public service strike, a "contest of power" that was offensive in character, lasted 25 days, and involved 10 trade unions and 332,074 workers. This extraordinary period involving all workers, permanent and casual, blue-collar and white-collar, unleashed a level of self-activity and

organisation that seemed impossible just a few years before. The competition amongst workers was breaking down and a working class "for itself" was beginning to ferment.

However, the trade union bureaucracy (noting the momentum of the strike waves that had united organised and unorganised workers during the 2005-2007 wave) held back this movement in favour of a short-lived political exchange within the Tripartite Alliance for a more "labour-friendly" Zuma government. The political exchange did not hold back workers' struggle, and in 2009 construction trade unions led a national strike of organised and unorganised workers with a common set of demands, including converting workers on limited duration contracts into full-time workers. The outcome of the strike set the pace for other workers with a real wage increase of 4%, extension of annual leave days, and a 40-hour week. The leadership ultimately backed down on the demand for permanent employment because of patriotism surrounding the 2010 FIFA World Cup and called off the strike.

In 2010 there were strikes in ➤

transport, mining, higher education, health, chemical, transport, municipal, metal, auto, energy, hospitality, retail and farming sectors. In many of these strikes the demand to end casual labour and labour broking featured prominently (Department of Labour, 2010: 3-17). The 9.5 million days lost in 2007 more than doubled to 20.6 million in 2010. However, most of the days lost were in the public sector where some 1.3 million workers came out on another militant strike. South African public-sector workers suspended their strike after nearly three weeks that saw some of the largest police attacks on labour since the fall of apartheid. Cosatu failed to carry out its threat of a general strike in solidarity and this put a damper on the momentum. Most strikes were successful, with workers across industrial sectors securing real increases comparable to the 1980s.

The trade unions united around the ousting of then President Thabo Mbeki, but as the level of class struggle intensified, tensions emerged in the Tripartite Alliance, which in turn increased divisions between more militant and conservative trade union leadership. This was most starkly visible in the fallout over the Marikana Massacre and the role of the NUM's leadership in sabotaging the strike. With the breakdown of political trust and the divisions between militant and conservative leaderships, Cosatu split. This was at a time when so much more was possible in harnessing the momentum of workers to achieve more substantive gains.

Conclusion

The material conditions for a labour aristocracy do not exist under conditions of neo-liberalism in South Africa. The current composition of trade unions is not a reflection of the policy decisions of a bureaucracy but is a reflection of structural changes in the economy and the growth of a service sector and a public sector. The historical

evidence provided on an international level and in South Africa show that there is no correlation between better-off workers and declines in the level of militancy. As I have shown, the public sector with predominantly white-collar workers is the most strike prone economic sector in South Africa. It is the trade union bureaucracy, not its membership, that is the foundation of consistent reformist practice and ideology within the working class.

The trade union bureaucracy has vested interests in maintaining capitalist relations. The professionalisation of trade unions, especially in the context of trade union investment companies, has created a new dimension of adopting business values in trade unions accompanied by systemic corruption. The trade union bureaucracy is a distinct layer, freed from the daily humiliation of capitalist labour process, and it has direct access to sources of power in the state and business to advance its individual lifestyles and careers. In this context, the trade union bureaucracy reduces change to parliamentary reform and institutionalised collective bargaining. It occasionally engages in militant action when reformism fails, only to hold workers back or sabotage workers' struggle, as at Marikana when the momentum of workers began to shake the established system.

The trade unions, including public sector unions, have made some progress in defending the interests of unorganised workers. Samwu, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union and the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers have started organising workers in the Expanded Public Works Programme and considerable support has been given to community healthcare workers for permanent employment (Mahlokwane, 2020). However, such initiatives may be short-lived unless the unions adopt new policies of de-professionalisation of staff and the dismantling of trade

union investment companies, the savings of which should be reallocated to embarking on a programme of unionisation of the unorganised.

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ENDNOTES

1. This article is an updated version of The Myth of a Labour Aristocracy in South Africa published in *Amandla* magazine in 2019.
2. See <https://businesstech.co.za/news/finance/350391/the-rise-and-rise-of-public-servants-pay-in-south-africa/>
3. See Forslund (2021).
4. *Fin24*, January 26, 2005. **NA**