

The New Contours of Class Formation in Post Apartheid South Africa: The Madalas and the ‘Youngsters’ in the National Union of Mineworkers

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While a great deal of attention has been drawn towards the formation of a new ‘black diamonds’ class of wealthy black business leaders in South Africa, this paper will examine how post apartheid capitalism is augmenting significant processes of class formation within the organised working class. Employing a detailed ethnographic approach to the subject through a case study of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), this paper will highlight the growing heterogeneity of South Africa’s organised working class. It will be argued that 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 as a result of Employment Equity and Affirmative Action legislation, 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’ within NUM, but what more accurately reflects a growing class divide rooted in unequal levels of social mobility between the (generally younger) relatively well-educated and skilled sections of the workforce, and the (generally older) manual ‘labourers’. The emerging ‘generational divide’ is perceived to pose one of the greatest challenges to the Union’s organisation as the ‘youngsters’ are argued to display a far more instrumental and depoliticised approach to Union affairs than older generations. This is framed as a moral shift between generations reflected in changing consumption patterns, individualism and the erosion of collective solidarities. However, although some of these perceptions are well-grounded, it is important to analyse these changes within the broader context of post apartheid class formation and to explore the implications these changes have in regard to our understandings of class politics in post apartheid society.