

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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Work in progress. Please contact author before citing

Abstract

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.

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Introduction

According to some authors, the African National Congress (ANC) government's 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). It has been speculated that this 'new struggle' marks the beginnings of a post-nationalist political era (Bond 2000: 250; 2003: 45; 2010; Saul 2005: 239) as that the ANC's 'exhausted' nationalist project will be confronted by an emerging class-based politics fuelled by the 'ineluctable logic of class struggle' (Alexander 2002: 182).

The question as to what role South Africa's powerful trade unions will play in these new political struggles remains unclear. 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. 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). Other authors suggest that COSATU must adopt a more critical posture vis-à-vis the ANC and forge linkages with South Africa's burgeoning 'new social movements' (Bassett 2005; Bond 2010; Ceruti 2008; Ngwane 2003) in the form of a 'social movement unionism' advocated by scholars concerned with the political and organisational regeneration of the global labour movement (Moody 1997; Waterman 2001).

This paper forms part of a broader study of the relationship between class and nationalist politics in post-apartheid South Africa, and the position of the organised working class within it. The paper is based on extensive qualitative research conducted over an eighteen month period, which included in-depth interviews with rank-and-file members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), their shop stewards, local branch committee members, and both regional and national leaders. Participant observation in union meetings, shop stewards' councils, shop steward training/education workshops, wage negotiations and local ANC branch meetings was

used to supplement these interviews in order to contribute a more detailed understanding of NUM's organisation and how its members engaged within its local structures and those of the ANC.

The paper analyses the relationship between generational change and the processes of class formation unleashed by the transition to democracy in 1994. 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 also 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 paper will illuminate the increasing stratification of the working class organised by COSATU unions through a case study of the NUM's organisation in Eskom power stations.

In particular, this paper will explore internal class cleavages within the unions that complicate, and potentially obfuscate, the prospects for a coherent 'working class' political programme becoming the 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 that 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 paper 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 social mobility between the (generally younger) relatively well-educated and skilled sections of the workforce, and the (generally older) and relatively low-skilled 'labourers'.

Second, the paper will explicate how it is widely perceived that these 'two worlds in the same organisation' – to use one official's term (interview with Job Matsepe 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: 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 paper 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 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.

Uneven equity: the stratification of South Africa's organised working class

The spatiality of work in Eskom

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 within it) 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.² 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-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 wear 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 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 are 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,³ 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 also expect to earn four or five times as much

² I'm using the terms used by workers themselves. When I began each interview workers were asked what their role was.

³ These figures are estimated using the collective wage agreement signed by NUM and the other unions in 2007.

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 in Eskom and their impact upon NUM's membership

Employment equity policies have contributed to the stratification of NUM's membership since 1994 as more workers are able to take on jobs in higher salary grades than would have been possible a decade and a half before. 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 policies, 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 black⁴ 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 parastatal⁵ 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

⁴ The act defines black people as Africans, Coloureds and Indians

⁵ A parastatal is a company that is owned and controlled wholly or partly by the government.

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 supervisory, management, senior management positions being filled by black workers (Interviews with Oupa Komane 20/11/07 and Frans Baleni 06/11/07). In short, employment equity policies have exacerbated inequalities among black workers, and within NUM's membership, in what was already a highly stratified workforce.

One of the unintended consequences of employment equity policies has therefore been the manner in which they have contributed to the diversification of NUM's membership in Eskom. A growing mobility divide within NUM's membership has emerged between a relatively skilled section of the workforce endowed with greater human capital (in terms of education, languages and training) and social capital (in terms of relationships developed with managers), and the relatively unskilled, manual 'labourers' who had relatively little prospects for upward mobility within the company. What this has created is a sense of *uneven equity* in which policies aimed at racial redress have benefited certain sections of the workforce in a disproportionate fashion.

Although this mobility divide reflected a growing class divide within NUM (as I will explain below), it is depicted by most workers as a 'generational' divide because this is perhaps the most easily recognisable characteristic of the differences.⁶ To an extent, the differences between the generations accounts for part of this mobility divide because, unsurprisingly, younger generations of workers entering Eskom have benefited from greater educational opportunities than their older counterparts. They are also far more likely to be more fluent in English (essential in the workplace for advancement) through their education, and also as a practical consequence of mixing more with multiracial peer groups than previous generations would have done.

⁶ 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.

Many older workers expressed a deep sense of alienation in the workplace with respect to their prospects for upward mobility. 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. A common perception voiced by workers was that better wages could be earned in the nearby mines where the workers were ‘living rich’ and ‘earning twice as much’ as workers in Eskom. For this reason, young workers claimed that they would be leaving Eskom in the near future. As Job Matsepe, NUM’s national organiser for Eskom, explained:

‘Look for example yesterday I was at the Grootvlei power station and I can see that the young generation, they are coming to Eskom because out there [on the surface] Eskom is a very good company, and internationally it is recognized as one of the biggest organizations. But once they come in, they start to understand what kind of a big dinosaur Eskom is[laughs] ...when they come in they discover that no, wages are not that good. Two months [later], they leave! Leaving behind the very same unskilled workers performing the very same jobs that they were performing long before. (Interview 25/04/08)

Jacob, a boiler worker in his fifties, explained that ‘Workers are running away from Eskom to the other factories that are paying more ... and people like me, an old person like me, I can’t go outside because I am already old and when you get there they say “I cannot hire you: you are too old”’ (Interview with Eskom worker 12/12/07). Those left behind, particularly the older employees, complained that they were marginalized from such opportunities and often described themselves as ‘trapped’. Whether the grass was indeed greener in the mines is a moot point: these narratives, through which older workers lamented their relative inability to ‘escape’ Eskom compared to their younger counterparts, became one of several ways through which a growing mobility divide was expressed in generational terms.

Older workers often argued that not only were they unable to leave behind the miserly wages offered by Eskom, they were also treated ‘disrespectfully’ within the power stations by being looked over for promotions and the training opportunities offered to younger workers. They would complain bitterly that they felt that Eskom would never consider them for promotions – even to supervisory positions – even though they felt their greater experience in the job made them more ‘skilled’ than their younger counterparts – particularly young females⁷ - because they did not ‘understand the job’ as well as they did. During one of the group interviews I conducted with workers who were all in their mid-fifties or older, they complained that

⁷ 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’.

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 counterparts. In general, 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 indeed common for the more skilled younger NUM members to recognise their relative privilege. Lindelani, for example, is a skilled worker in his early twenties with Matric qualifications and also a technical diploma. He was hired by Eskom a few years previously and, following his training, was already hopeful of achieving 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, depicting this as simply a generational divide is misleading. Workers and NUM officials tended to see the divide in these terms, but mainly because it was most easily recognisable along these lines. Scratching below the surface, however, reveals that what is really occurring in Eskom is a growing class divide which does not neatly follow along the lines of a generational split. Million, for example, is a twenty-something counterpart of Lidelani, whom he

is not familiar with. Million rarely crossed paths with Lindelani on a day-to-day basis, despite being the same age. He was asked what his job role was when the interview began and, in response, complained bitterly for some twenty minutes about his job title of 'Utility Man'. The job role involved performing various maintenance tasks across the station, which required no substantial prior training. The job title, he said, inhibited his chance for promotion or further training because it was too ambiguous, and the job was not situated at the bottom rung of a particular career ladder. He complained that he would be 'trapped' in this job 'forever' 'until the Union addresses this issue'. Million is not alone: there were many less skilled young workers who faced a great deal of alienation in the workplace, not least because Eskom has increasingly used external, independent 'contractors' to hire workers in roles that are deemed to be 'non-core' to the power station's functions; a trend that can be witnessed across many South African industries (Aliber 2003; Buhlungu and Webster 2006; Webster 2006). These jobs are almost universally low skilled, manual jobs. Young, unskilled workers therefore exist in Eskom: some work alongside their older counterparts, such as Million, while many of them are increasingly invisible in both the workplace and the union due to their less formal employment status. Therefore, while this mobility divide was framed as a generational one by workers themselves, it really reflected an emerging class divide characterised by unequal levels of social mobility and a growing sense of mistrust and animosity between workers with greater mobility prospects and those without.

The 'generational' divide in the Union and the changing culture of Union participation

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, as the largest and most significant challenge that NUM faces. The mobility divide discussed above had important implications for the nature of workers' participation within NUM's structures. In this respect, Job Matsepe, 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 Matsepe

25/04/08). Union officials at all levels agreed that the more skilled workers were generally⁸ 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.

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.

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 education⁹, they were also more likely to have White or Indian friends and to socialise in racially diverse settings such as shopping malls.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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:

⁸ 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)

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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 wear designer label clothing such as branded trainers ('takkies') and sunglasses.

¹¹ Something that is noticeable at union gatherings such as May Day but also in shop stewards councils.

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 them participating that much like the 1976 youth¹² [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. 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; Bocoock 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.

Once again, however, although this was framed as a generational divide, pertaining to difference the 'cultural values' that each generation held, it is equally important to understand the differences in workers' attitudes towards participation within the Union's structures as being determined by the differences mobility. For example, a commonly cited reason for the 'younger', more skilled sections of the workforce to not get involved in union affairs was that they generally had a more individualistic attitude. This can be partly explained by the fact that they are less

¹² 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.

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

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)

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 Nattrass 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 dependent on the kinds of collective solidarities that made this social mobility possible in the first place. 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.

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 Buhlungu, 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. They also demonstrated less discontent at the legal restrictions preventing the trade unions from striking in Eskom¹³. Older,

¹³ The reasons behind this are detailed in the thesis. In short, Eskom workers are prevented from striking because they are deemed an 'essential service' provider by the Labour Relations Act. This means that they are not allowed to strike unless there is a 'minimum service agreement' in place, whereby a certain section of workers can legitimately be allowed to strike to long as this does not jeopardise the output of the power station as a whole. At present, no such agreement is in place in Eskom.

less skilled members perceived 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. Past incidence of militancy in the 1980s and early 1990s were revered by many of the ‘old guard’, for whom the NUM’s identity as the ‘union of *toyi toyi*’ was a core reason for their continued membership. It was widely argued that the inability to strike was ‘killing’ or ‘paralysing’ the union. 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. The union was regularly described as being ‘totally paralysed’ and ‘impotent’ in the face of an employer that was persistently eroding job security, pay, conditions of service and union rights to mobilise. Direct action, in the form of strikes, were framed as the only way to hold Eskom to account because, it was argued, the company was ‘arrogant’ and would not give due consideration to their pleas. Although there were exceptions, while many older members would state categorically that they would strike even if this meant breaking the law¹⁴, younger, more skilled workers generally displayed less discontent at the Union’s inability to strike and were far more cautious when weighing up whether they would indeed break the law and risk their careers in order to strike.

Skilled and well-educated workers form an increasingly large proportion of the workforce represented by COSATU’s affiliates and that these workers 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 cars’ or other consumer items than they were to frame their day-to-day existence as being characterised by hand-to-mouth subsistence. As a result, shop stewards often said that the more skilled ‘youngsters’ engaged in the Union in a 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:

¹⁴ This was one of the standard questions I put to all workers.

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. These more skilled workers 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 time. 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 power station, 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.

Social mobility within Union structures

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 Paper 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, Buhlungu 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. (Buhlungu 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 (Buhlungu 2002a: 5; Lehulere 2003: 38; Maree 1998: 35). Buhlungu, 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' (Buhlungu 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.¹⁵ 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 shopstewards 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)

¹⁵ They are allowed to remain shop stewards even if this happens.

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 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 paper, 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 artisan¹⁶ 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 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:

¹⁶ Workers referred to as 'artisans' within Eskom were generally skilled manual workers, for example electricians, technicians or mechanics.

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)

It was clear, therefore, that while many skilled workers were disengaged from the Union and engaged with it in a passive, instrumental fashion, other more opportunistic skilled workers were using Union positions as springboards to aid their own personal mobility. 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.¹⁷ It also increased their 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

¹⁷ 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.

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.

The positive consequences of shop steward mobility

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.¹⁸

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

¹⁸ 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’.

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 [Xolani]. 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.

Q: 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 Skosana 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).

The negative consequences of shop steward mobility

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 NALEDI¹⁹ 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

¹⁹ A research organisation which conducts research on behalf of the South African labour movement and has close ties with COSATU

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 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 clever 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 in 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.

Towards 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, for example, 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 for 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 paper.

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 Arnot 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 when confronted with such attitudes.

It was clear, however, that some skilled workers were indeed using union positions for their own advancement and that this was undermining the organisational ethos of the trade union itself, potentially distracting it from its primary purpose. 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*. As I will now conclude, this has potentially broader implications for how we understand the relationship between class and nationalist projects as a new generation of young, aspirant skilled workers emerges within the ranks of the trade unions.

Conclusion

The differences between the manner in which different generations are engaging in their trade unions and other spaces of collective action in the post-apartheid period are clearly of great importance for understanding how young people, in the future, might transform the political dynamics of country as a whole. Younger people might well be expected to display less inclination towards being politically active due to the vastly different social and political context within which they have grown up. With many young people in their twenties having little or no memory of racial oppression, much less of the struggle against the apartheid government, it is little wonder that political activism is given far less primacy than one might expect to find among the older generations who have spent the majority of their adult lives experiencing such oppression. The findings from this case study suggest that there are notable differences between the different generations of trade union members: this is perhaps most pronounced in the emerging aspirational culture among young people, as they seek to express their identity through individualistic consumption patterns, rather than through engagement in collective activism.

However, we can clearly see that demarcating different attitudes towards collective activism along generational lines offers, at best, an incomplete picture of why it is that the nature of trade union activism might be changing in South Africa. While the end of apartheid radically altered the social and political environment within which young black people have grown up, which has no doubt helped to foster new forms of political attitudes and identities, the end of racial oppression has also augmented new processes of class formation which are impacting upon the nature of collective activism within the trade unions. In this respect, 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. Although young people have benefited disproportionately from the end of apartheid, in terms of greater educational opportunities and the chance to build a career relatively young, the class divides that have emerged are not traceable simply along generational lines and are instead present *within* each generation. The portraits of Million and Lidelani are illustrative of this. 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.

In short, the transition to democracy, and in particular the end of formal racial oppression, has had an important bearing upon young people's attitudes towards politics and political activism which can, to some extent, be traced along generational lines. However, understanding the processes of class formation that have accompanied this political transition is

every bit as important for us to develop a more holistic understanding of why trade union activism is changing in the post-apartheid era

The processes of class formation detailed above, and the manner in which these are impacting upon the internal dynamics of the unions, has wider political implications. They 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, NUM's membership base in Eskom has become an increasingly diverse and fragmented demographic. Although, as I have noted, the diversity of Eskom's workforce has always been something that distinguishes it from most other industries, it can be safely assumed that these processes of class formation caused by the deracialisation of capitalism are not unique to Eskom's workforce and are indicative of the increasing stratification of the organised working class as a whole (Cranshaw 1997). It is a class that has, in many ways, benefited from the end of the apartheid and some of the ANC government's policies (see Buhlungu et al 2006b), especially when compared with South Africa's 'underclass' of unemployed and rural poor (Seekings and Natrass 2005). But what this study has highlighted is the increasing diversity within this class that challenges the assumptions of those authors who posit that the collective politics of this demographic will be characteristically monolithic, either as resistance to the ANC and its 'neo-liberal' agenda, under which they have 'suffered' alongside the broader working poor (Bond 2003; 2010; Ceruti 2008; Gall 1997); or, alternatively, that it will assume the form of a Faustian 'class compromise' in which the trade unions contrive to maintain the political and economic status quo, under which they have unquestionably benefited (Seekings 2004). As this study demonstrates, the benefits of the political transition to democracy and the changing workplace order have been felt extremely unevenly among this increasingly diverse demographic. As the working class gets more diverse, so too might be 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.

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 in other cases 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. 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.