Review


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This edited volume on Cosatu workers’ political attitudes in South Africa has proved personally valuable for me in two respects. Firstly as a key resource in writing up my doctoral thesis on trade unions’ role in the formation of labour markets; and, secondly, as a teaching resource for my graduate course on ‘Globalisation, Trade Unions and Flexible Labour’. However the book and its various themes do not limit themselves to a narrowly labour discourse, and under the astute editorship of Buhlungu, the book engages in larger national political, social and economic discourses that are permeating through South Africa at the moment. Therefore this volume of work will find itself a comfortable home both inside and outside labour studies.

The book begins with an introduction by editor Sakhela Buhlungu that provides the context and purpose of the work. The introduction reminds us that the volume is an outcome of the third stage (2004) of a time-series study of Cosatu workers’ attitudes towards parliamentary democracy. The previous two stages of the study had been conducted in 1994 and 1998. Methodologically the time-series or longitudinal research in South African labour studies over a ten year period is a rarity and, as the book claims, no other studies have been conducted over the same time period using the same method as presented in this edited volume. It is this uniqueness and rarity that makes the various chapters in the volume such compelling reading. The book as a whole conclusively demonstrates the profound shift in the social composition of Cosatu’s membership. Some indicators that reflect this change in membership profiles include shifts in age, occupational category,
security of tenure, formal education and the year in which the member joined his or her union. As Buhlungu writes:

> On the one hand, these findings are consistent with those of earlier studies of black workers in general and unionised black workers in particular. On the other hand, these findings are more significant than previous ones because they point to a consistent trend of the fundamental transformation of the labour federation over the last ten years. (6)

The significance of the study’s findings has far reaching implications for both the ways in which unions organise and strategise currently and in the future. We are provided with empirical evidence that suggests that Cosatu is facing a new era in organising workers due to the changing profile of its membership. Remarkably though, despite these changing membership demographics and its potential to disrupt severely the relationship between the federation’s membership and leadership, there remains a strong cohesion between the attitudes of the leadership and membership. This is demonstrated through the various chapters, most clearly in Chapter 4 on Cosatu members’ attitudes to parliamentary democracy, Chapter 6 on attitudes towards Black Economic Empowerment, and Chapter 7 on economic policy, specifically knowledge of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme (GEAR).

This edited volume goes beyond a reporting of quantitative data on workers political attitudes. It travels through ten years of time, assessing workers’ attitudes. This lends the study a validity and reliability that allows it to stake its claims confidently. The findings presented in the book must be read against previous findings of the study fully to appreciate the methodology employed. Studying change over a decade long period is a daunting process but the success of this project to do exactly this allows not only for an understanding over time but also for comparison over time of the political attitudes of Cosatu’s membership. This takes place in each of the eight empirical chapters which report on the 2004 findings as well as comparing these findings to previous findings of the study. The effect of these comparisons is to show that unions are dynamic entities which contradict claims that they are organisational fossils. This dynamism can only be captured over an extended period of time as done by this study.

Apart from the immediate purpose of the book which is to examine the nature of Cosatu’s workers’ political attitudes in South Africa, the book also suggests that there is a broader development taking place in the South African labour market. This broader problem, involves workers outside the
relatively secure Cosatu membership. Webster’s chapter on ‘Trade unions and the challenge of the informalisation of work’ captures some of the broader labour market issues of informalisation and flexibility that are impacting on our labour markets. In a sense these developments throw down a gauntlet to Cosatu and unions in general. Simply put, despite the similar nature of the federation leaders’ attitudes with those of its membership, the rapid changes to the South African labour market (as a result of the double transition) raise new and more complex problems for the federation. The success of the federation will ultimately be judged against its response to these new neo-liberal fueled labour market issues. The book concludes with some suggestions for the way forward for Cosatu in our current political environment.

To reiterate, this is a seminal text in industrial sociology, sociology and politics written by experts. The writing style is simple (though not journalistic) and accessible (whilst still conveying complex ideas) which makes it suitable for both expert and non expert readers. It should be mandatory reading for students and researchers in the social sciences, as well as those who crave a clear and concise analysis of labour’s role in South African politics.