The sociology of upward social mobility among COSATU shop stewards

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… it was important for the steward that he embodied and acted upon the sentiments and morals valued by his members. The more complete his expression the greater his authority. He had to be free from the taint of personal ambition because social striving was not part of the culture of his members; he could not be a ‘rate buster’ or ‘money-grabber’ for that would separate him from the group ethic of the ‘fair wage’; he could not be on close and intimate terms with foremen and supervisors for that violated the morality of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and roused suspicions of betrayal. (Lane 1974: 199)

Although COSATU has made tremendous gains during the democratic breakthrough in South Africa, the transition continues to pose challenges for the trade union federation. Chief among the threats is the continuing departure of union leadership into government, leadership positions in political parties – mainly the ruling African National Congress (ANC) – the corporate sector, and junior and middle managerial positions in the workplace. COSATU has, over the years, lost thousands of its seasoned leaders who have left the labour movement for greener pastures.

Commenting on this phenomenon during the first eight years after the first democratic elections in 1994, Buhlungu (1994: 24) noted that ‘the opening of opportunities for senior positions in the public service, politics, business and non-governmental sector has seen scores of senior unionists leaving positions for greener pastures’. Ex-unionists such as Marcel Golding (former assistant general secretary of National Union of Mineworkers) and Johnny Copelyn (former general secretary of Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union) became wealthy businessmen ‘through their leading roles
in the investment companies of their former unions’ (Buhlungu 2002: 10). Prominent politicians and senior government officials such as Gwede Mantashe, Membathisi Mdladlana, Ebrahim Patel, Noluthando Mayende-Sibiya, Kgalema Motlanthe, Edna Molewa and many others are former COSATU leaders. The departure and upward social mobility of senior COSATU leaders into key government positions and the business sector has received much focus from labour movement scholars (Buhlungu 1999, 1999a, 2000; Buhlungu & Psoulis 1999; Friedman & Robinson 2005; Webster 2001). Yet, little is known about power struggles and politics of upward mobility amongst shop stewards in general and COSATU shop stewards in particular. Drawing from the 2008 COSATU Workers’ Survey and additional in-depth interviews conducted with current and ex-shop stewards of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the South African Municipal Workers’ Union (SAMWU), this chapter analyses the sociology of upward social mobility among COSATU shop stewards.

According to Buhlungu (1999, 2000, 2002) the position of shop steward has been used as a stepping stone for upward social mobility by some union leaders on the shopfloor. This has, in turn, resulted in intense shopfloor political struggles amongst workers for the position of shop steward, thus negatively impacting on worker solidarity. In certain instances, this has also weakened the organisational strength of some COSATU affiliates.

The point of departure in this chapter is that, should the ongoing COSATU leadership drain on the shopfloor continue in its current form, this has a potential to hurt the federation’s organisational strength in the future. This chapter discusses two modes through which COSATU shop stewards on the shopfloor exit the labour movement for greener pastures, namely, promotion into managerial positions in the workplace and deployment by political parties into local government as municipal councillors.

The exit and upward mobility of shop stewards has been made easier by the changing attitudes of union members to the phenomenon, particularly their willingness to accommodate the ambitions of shopfloor representatives. In the 2008 survey, nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of the federation’s members said they were not opposed to the promotion of their shop stewards into supervisory and other managerial positions. More than half (52 per cent) indicated that shop stewards had been promoted into managerial positions in their workplaces. The implications of these findings are discussed further below.