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Trade unions, internal democracy and social movement unionism: the case of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) locals in JC Bezuidenhout region

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Abstract

The relationship between trade unions and their members has been a perennial subject of social inquiry and political debate since the establishment of formal trade unions by skilled artisans in the nineteenth century. This study examines the aspects of union democracy (participatory and representative) in trade unions within the broader concept of social movement unionism. The case study for this research is the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) focusing in three locals in the region of Jack Charles Bezuidenhout (J.C Bez) namely: Johannesburg North, Kempton Park, and Tembisa. The main objective of the study is to examine the extent to which NUMSA conformed to principles of social movement unionism against the Michel's (1915) theory of "the Iron Law of Oligarchy" during the period 2012-2014, when it embarked on a process to withdraw its political alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). In 2014, NUMSA was expelled from COSATU after it took its decision to move out from the Tripartite Alliance in 2013. Social movement unionism is characterised by three features which are participatory democracy, forging of alliances (both with civic groups and political parties) while retaining union autonomy, and the broadening of its scope of action beyond workplace politics. While examining the research's main question, the study also looks at the extent to which union locals participated democratically during this decision-making process, which led to its expulsion from COSATU in 2014, and the focus of NUMSA as an independent union in post-2014 period. Methodological tools, which were used to collect data, include in-depth interviews and desktop research. The theoretical framework utilised in this study stems from Michels' (1915) concept of the "iron law of oligarchy." However, it should be noted that, this study tests the claim of the discourse (what Michels' (1915) postulates in relation to oligarchy in organisations) and the practice on ground in NUMSA. Key findings in this study indicate that NUMSA locals participated democratically in the decision making process that led to their ground breaking political moment in December 2013 when the union broke its alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The union has both characteristics of oligarchy and internal democracy (participatory and representative). In relation to aspects of political unionism and social movement unionism, the study found that NUMSA's decision to pull out from its political alliance with the ANC and SACP, its call for the establishment for the movement for socialism, and the establishment of a worker's party, could be indications of the union returning to principles of social movement unionism. However, there are other indicators that the union might be losing the opportunity it had of revitalising its leftist traditions at its 2016 congress in Cape Town. This is evidenced by its non-pursuance of issues relating to eco-socialism and its call to implement the Marxist-Leninist style of union governance.