

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research report is to investigate the impact of collective bargaining in an industry where workers have low bargaining power. It seeks to understand what collective bargaining has been able to achieve for workers in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) contract cleaning industry. Contract cleaning is one of the most precarious and poorly organised sectors in South Africa. Scholars contend that contract cleaning has re-introduced one of the many aspects that characterised the apartheid workplace. In investigating how collective bargaining has impacted contract cleaners and their view of the labour relationship, the history of the industrial relations system and the mechanisms that regulate the contract cleaning sector (sectoral determination and collective bargaining) are considered. Debates surrounding the usefulness of collective bargaining in the current industrial relations system and the operation of this mechanism in a triangular employment relationship are discussed. Though references are made to the sectoral determination for contract cleaning, the focus of the research report is on collective bargaining.

The data for this research was collected using both primary and secondary sources. In relation to the former, interviews were conducted with officials of the bargaining council and trade unions. Interviews were also conducted with workers in the KZN contract cleaning industry. In relation to the latter, documentary data that was relevant to the research topic, such as the KZN contract cleaning main agreement, the Decent Work Programme and legislation, was examined.

The findings of this study demonstrate that workers in the KZN contract cleaning industry lack voice and cannot have meaningful inputs in the workplace. A representation gap exists that is exacerbated by the division between unions. The implications of this situation are that wages are lower than those prescribed by the sectoral determination, the non-compliance of firms becomes a prevalent issue and strike action becomes inefficient. With the continuous labour unrest in the current industrial relations system in South Africa it is apparent that the current labour legislation has not been able to protect precarious workers found in new forms of employment.