

# Union organising

## the challenges

by THOBILE YANTA

**To survive in a changing environment, unions need new organising models and strategies.**

The NALEDI survey of union organisers focuses on the organising challenges facing COSATU affiliates.

Shopsteward structures are not functioning as well as they could and organisers' workload has increased. There are fewer women organisers, despite the fact that women are the fastest growing segment of the workforce and often occupy the jobs most needing union protection. These challenges reflect the need for a new organising model and strategy. Union structures also need to be reviewed, from shopsteward structures to union head office processes.

of workplace restructuring, which 80% of workshop attendees saw as very important challenge (not shown on table). Negotiating restructuring requires support, new skills, new organising strategies and access to information. These negotiations take time and increase the workload of the local organiser.

abilities of union organisers, who developed their skills and strategies organising unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Organisers say that the weaknesses of shopsteward structures is one reason for poor service delivery. The absence of active shop-

**Organisers have to address bread and butter issues as well as broader aspects of the socio-economic transformation of society.**

While the new laws create new procedures and give workers new rights, they challenge the organisers' skill and abilities. However, as one organiser put it "the law gives rights but limits worker action...our work is growing more difficult and complex".

stewards makes the work of the organiser more difficult.

### Support

Organisers need support from their unions. This includes planning, monitoring and evaluation of organisers' assignments in respect to their resource needs and capacities. Organisers say that the solution to their heavy workload is for them to become 'specialists' as opposed to 'generalists'. This is despite reservations by some that specialists may become too independent and easily leave the union and set up consultancies.

The new challenges facing organisers are to address the bread and butter issues confronting workers whilst simultaneously engaging with broader aspects of the socio-economic transformation of society. Training, development and skilling will help organisers cope with these demands.

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### Challenges facing organisers (organisers' responses)

	Not important %	Important %	Very Important %
Shoptsteward structure is breaking down		10	90
Organisers are overloaded with work.		10	90
Membership has changed – better skilled and better-educated workers make new demands on the union organiser.	4	26	70
The number of women organisers employed in the union is not proportional to the number of women members.	11	6	83
Labour laws are complex to implement.	13	30	57
Management is better resourced and they use consultants.	18	14	68

### The external environment

Organisers talked about their frustrations in dealing with workplace restructuring and the impact of labour legislation on their work. They say that taking up workplace issues is becoming more difficult and complex. This is a direct result

### The internal environment

Union members today consist of a large number of skilled workers, who have different needs from the member of the 1980s. They tend to be less trustful of union leadership and are difficult to mobilise. The new member challenges the