

OUR NETWORK



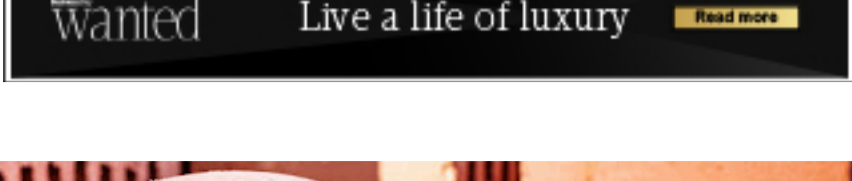
Neva Makgetla
Columnist



OPINION / COLUMNISTS

NEVA MAKGETLA: Boots and helmets make way for aprons and caps

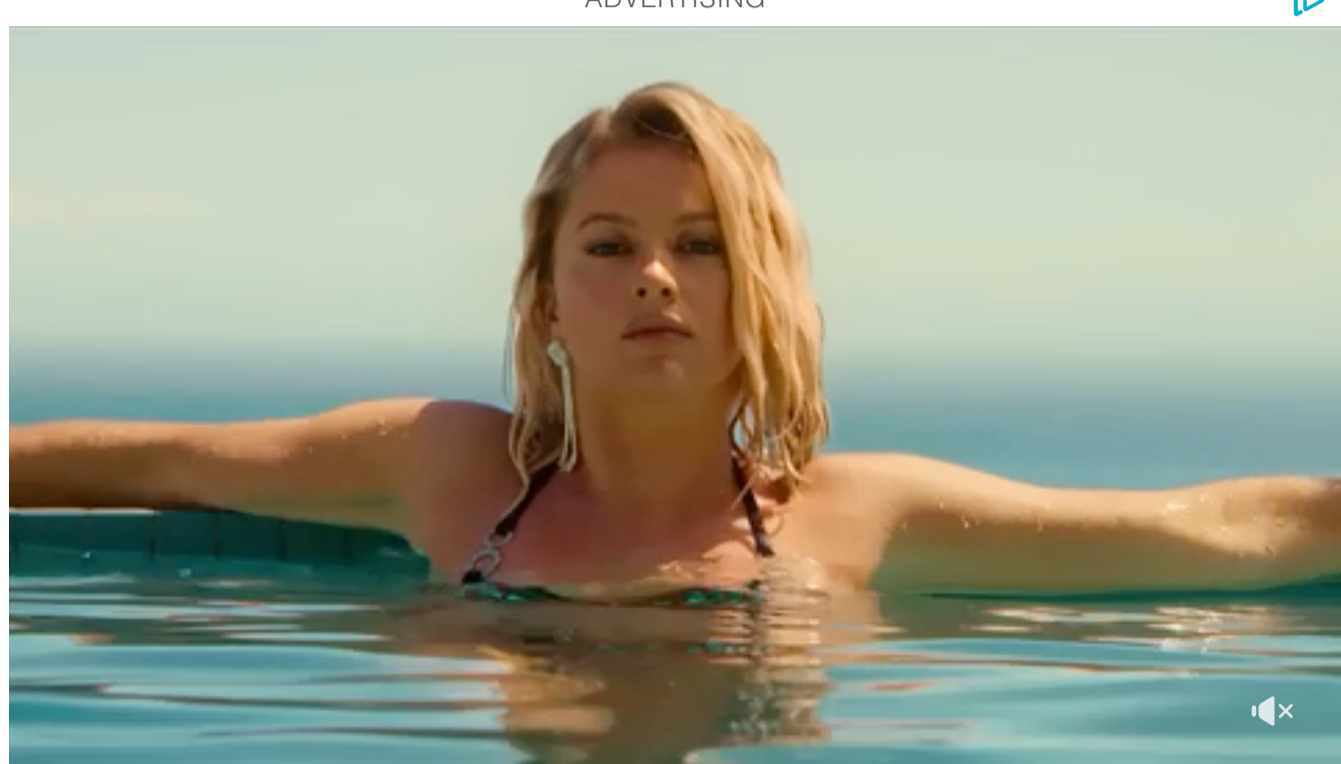
BL PREMIUM
11 JULY 2023 · 05:00



If a union member today wears work boots, it is more likely a fashion statement than an occupational safety requirement. Picture: 123RF

Unions remain central to SA's democracy and labour relations, with virtually no change in the share of workers who belong to unions over the past 20 years. But the average member has changed a lot. Above all, the rising share of formal workers in the public and private services brought a surge in women members and in education levels.

For the past 20 years, union membership has equalled about 30% of waged private-sector workers. Within each major industry, union density (that is, the share of workers belonging to a union) has also been stable. But the expansion in formal service jobs has profoundly affected union membership in the private sector. The share of factory and mineworkers in union membership dropped from 60% in 2002 to 35% in 2022. In contrast, service and retail membership climbed from 30% to almost 50%. Today, the majority of union members work in retail, business services or the public sector; have at least matric; and are nearly as likely to be women as men.



Ann Summers - Sponsored
Join Tasha in a perfect paradise with our Ann Summers 23 Swim collection
[Shop Now](#)



The shift mostly reflected changes in numbers employed rather than fluctuations in membership levels. About eight out of 10 miners are unionised, as are more than a third of manufacturing workers. In contrast, union members make up just under a quarter of formal private service and retail employees; a seventh of formal construction workers; and a tenth of farm workers.

But the share of mining and manufacturing in formal waged employment fell from more than a third in 2002 to under a quarter in 2020, with the number dropping from 1.8-million to 1.7-million. In the same period, the number of wage workers in the private formal services and retail more than doubled, climbing from 1.1-million to 2.5-million, or from a fifth to a third of formal waged work.

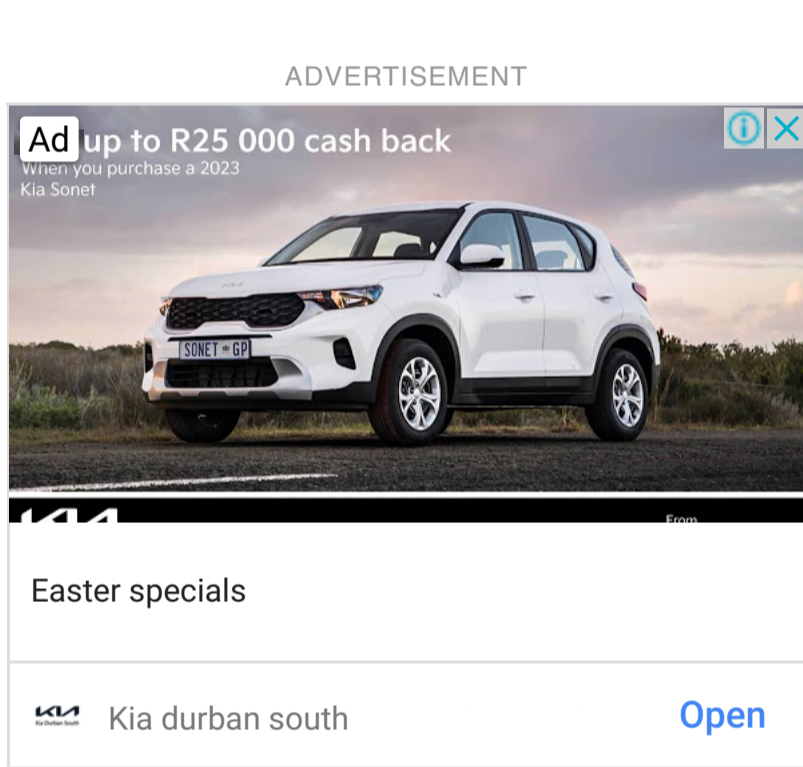
Stable union density also meant that historically low-wage industries remained largely unorganised. In 2022, domestic, farm and informal employees contributed a fifth of all waged jobs, but just 2% of union members.

In contrast to the private sector, the labour force surveys find that in the public sector union density has dropped. The data cover municipalities and state-owned enterprises as well as the public service. In 2002, 70% of public sector workers were organised; in 2019, just 65%; and in 2022, 60%. The reported share of government employees in union membership fell slightly, from 47% through the 2010s to 45% in 2022.

The shifts in employment over the past 20 years increased the share of women in union membership, from a third in 2002 to close to half in 2022. The trend tracked the growing role of women in waged employment, mostly in the services. Women make up half of workers in the private formal services and, in the public sector, almost 60%, up from about 50% 20 years ago. In contrast, only a third of manufacturing workers and a fifth of mining workers were women in 2022, despite gains over the past 20 years.

Growth in the services also brought more educated union members. In 2022, 20% of union members had a degree – almost all of them health workers or teachers – compared to 10% of non-members. Two decades ago, only 6% of union members had a degree, about the same as non-members. From 2002 to 2022, the share of union members who had not passed matric fell from 50% to 25%. For non-members, the figure dropped from 65% to 45%.

In short, if a union member today wears work boots, it is more likely a fashion statement than an occupational safety requirement. For the democratic order, the question is how that change affects unions as a key voice for working people. For economic policy, it points to the need to reconceptualise decent work outside its historic narrow focus on manufacturing jobs.



• *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

READ MORE BY NEVA MAKGETLA

- NEVA MAKGETLA: SA'S COMMODITY DEPENDENCY CONTRIBUTES TO INEQUALITIES**
We need to find ways to diversify the economy in terms of production and to create opportunities
OPINION 2 weeks ago
- NEVA MAKGETLA: THE EMPLOYMENT SHIFT SINCE THE PANDEMIC — AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**
Job losses disproportionately affected younger workers and less-skilled men and women
OPINION 4 weeks ago
- NEVA MAKGETLA: SA CAN'T TURN BACK THE CLOCK ON NATIONAL POWER SYSTEM**
The forces driving load-shedding show that radical reconstruction is unavoidable
OPINION 2 months ago
- NEVA MAKGETLA: STATE-OWNED COMPANIES SHOW A FORTUNE**
But it has been shown that private provision of basic services can also be problematic
OPINION 2 months ago
- NEVA MAKGETLA: MANAGING RENTS IN LOCAL COMMODITY VALUE CHAINS**
Should policymakers try to secure a more developmental and fair allocation among SA producers
OPINION 3 months ago

BDTV

[Read more →](#)



Next video

- WATCH: High Court orders SAPO's Business...**
31 mins ago
- WATCH: Postbank stands to lose R3.5bn as post...**
36 mins ago
- Market Report - 2023 | Business**
2 hours ago

Powered by ooovuu

BusinessLIVE Comment Policy

We welcome comments that are civil and considered. Any comments that are racist, bigoted or vulgar are not allowed.

Please read our Comment Policy before commenting.

[Got it](#)

0 Comments [Reg Rumney](#)

Start the discussion...

Share [Best](#) [Newest](#) [Oldest](#)

Be the first to comment.

[Subscribe](#) [Privacy](#) [Do Not Sell My Data](#) **DISQUS**

BusinessLIVE
News you can trust
Get it anywhere, anytime
R20 for the first month

- ### LATEST
- MATTHEW BROOKER:** Thames Water is still full of ...
OPINION
 - JAMIE MCGEEVER:** Early 2024 is the latest new dawn ...
OPINION
 - EDITORIAL:** Court doesn't let parliament off the ...
OPINION / EDITORIALS
 - DUMA GQUBULE:** Clearly, the ANC does not have an ...
OPINION / COLUMNISTS
 - TANA MONGWWE:** Eskom's better generation capacity ...
OPINION

Related Articles

Cosatu rails against Transnet 'privatisation' at Durban march
NATIONAL

Gautrain and Numsa sign 8% wage deal
NATIONAL / LABOUR

WATCH: Unions appalled by 3% pay hike for public office bearers
NATIONAL / LABOUR

Unions appalled by 'obscene' 3% pay hike for public office bearers
NATIONAL / LABOUR

Investors MONTHLY

Published by Arena Holdings and distributed with the Financial Mail on the last Thursday of every month except December and January.