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Abstract

Trade Unions in Transformation. An Assessment of Numsa’s Attempt to Develop Political and Organizational Independence 2012 - 2018

In December 2013, at its special National Congress, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) adopted various resolutions to assert its independence from the governing Alliance led by the African National Congress. The resolutions ranged from the extension of the union scope beyond the metal and engineering sectors to the creation of a united front of workers and community organizations, the exploration of the opportunity for a workers party and for the launch of an independent labour federation. The adoption of these resolutions inaugurated a period widely known as the »NUMSA moment«, it signalled a commitment to develop a new independent working class politics to be pursued in the sphere of production as well as in broader society.

The research is drawn on the literature on the South African labour movement and political economy and is based on qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews with key-informants. The paper evaluates progress made in the past four years regarding the implementation of the resolutions adopted at the NUMSA /Congress in December 2013. NUMSA has been transformed from an industrial-specific to modern general union, and, despite difficult economic conditions, particularly in manufacturing, has steadily increased its membership. Moreover, it has aimed to contest the public discourse from a class perspective and assert a presence in society. Despite the numerous challenges encountered significant progress has been made in achieving the objectives set during the December 2013 Congress: the union has made impressive achievements in terms of membership and in overcoming media isolation as well as in asserting its position in the public discourse, more specifically in spearheading the formation of a labour federation independent from government.

Nevertheless, further the union is still in the process of implementing the resolutions and further attention is needed in certain specific areas. In particular, internal unity needs to be strengthened and officials have to overcome divisive forms of factionalism. Secondly, NUMSA could consolidate further its societal power front, especially in relation to the establishment of sustained relations with working-class community organizations.

Di Paola, M., 2017, *Trade Unions in Transformation. An Assessment of Numsa’s Attempt to Develop its Political and Organizational Independence 2012 – 2016*, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/13638.pdf>