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Migrant workers and the future of trade unions in South Africa: The Case of SADSAWU¹

International migration is inevitable with the world increasingly experiencing the movement of people across borders in the form of political and economic refugees. Labour migration to South Africa is one of the key defining features of the southern African region and is animated by numerous factors which include socio-economic, political (Sachikonye, 1998; Taylor, 1981) and more recently climate change, medical needs including a rapid demand for skilled and unskilled labour in certain industries like engineering, medical and agriculture (see Segatti, 2013; Munakamwe and Jinnah, 2014). The study built on 1970s studies of the migrant labour system as its point of departure, and provided a fresh analysis of the transformation of the system and the impact of this on contemporary power relations; political subjectivities and trade unions revitalisation. The analysis was done through a case study of the South African Domestic and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) which has already begun to organise and recruit migrant workers in South Africa since 2014. Technical support for the organising strategy has been provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). SADSAWU has also established partnerships with migrant rights organisations (MROs) with the aim of complementing efforts whereby the latter assists migrant workers with legal documentation which is essential for the former's organising strategy. A key finding which draws from feminist theories of care work revealed that both local and migrant domestic workers' care labour is unrecognized, precarious and

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South African Domestic and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU)

undervalued which deleteriously affect organising efforts by SADSAWU. Nonetheless, migrant domestic workers have been very receptive to SADSAWU organising efforts. The study involved a combination of documentary analysis and ethnography, involving shadowing and prolonged participant observation and underpinned by life histories and key informant interviews. The aim was to produce detailed and rich data on the analysis of mobilisation, participation and representation of foreign workers in South Africa in a post migrant labour regime and how unions have responded to the question of migrant labour.