**Working Class Fragmentation, Party Politics, and the
Complexities of Solidarity in South Africa's United Front**

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Abstract

Recent scholarship laments the growing fragmentation of the working class due to flexible labor regimes and unemployment. This paper examines an emerging effort in South Africa to counter this fragmentation: the United Front project, initiated and led by the National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA). Drawing on 74 interviews conducted at two different NUMSA-led protests in Johannesburg, the analysis unpacks two sets of tensions. One set of tensions revolves around *class politics*, which pertain to the divide between unionized workers in relatively stable employment, and impoverished communities ravaged by unemployment. The other set of tensions revolves around *party politics*, including divisions with respect to the United Front's opposition to the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). Each dimension reveals both crucial sources of solidarity and potential obstacles, showing that forging a broad working class unity in the current period is complex, but not impossible.

Keywords

labor; community; social movement unionism; precariat; protest; political parties; class

Recent decades have been characterized by working class fragmentation. With the rise of flexible and insecure employment regimes (Standing 2011), and particularly within the Global South, the mushrooming of underemployed urban poor who must eke out a living through informal activities (Davis 2007), the traditional working class is being hollowed out. This process has gone hand-in-hand with assaults on organized labor. Under the weight of capital mobility, limited state protection, and flexible employment, national union densities have been in decline (Visser 2006). Some scholars even suggest that unions are becoming increasingly irrelevant to the growing ranks of flexible workers (Standing 2011). As the globe erupted in protest between 2010 and 2013, it is thus not surprising that commentators emphasized the role of the ‘precariat’ (Standing 2014) and ‘graduates without a future’ (Mason 2013), rather than unions and traditional working classes.

Despite these pessimistic assessments, however, organized workers continue to be an important social force, especially in the Global South (Ness 2015). One example of this is the United Front project in South Africa. In December 2013, the National Union Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) decided to sever its long-held ties to the African National Congress (ANC) – the ruling party since the democratic transition in 1994 – and resolved to build a ‘United Front that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities’ (NUMSA 2013). This decision took place against the backdrop of widespread community protests around issues of public ‘service delivery’, which are propelled by the casually employed, informally employed, and unemployed (Alexander 2010). The United Front project aims to link unions to these community uprisings, building solidarity between unionized workers and their more precariously situated counterparts.

As an explicit, union-led attempt to overcome working class fragmentation, the United Front project raises a number of questions. On what basis is it possible to forge unity between unionized workers, the casually employed, and the unemployed? What are the points of commonality, and what obstacles stand in the way? To what extent is each side interested in building common struggles? Focusing primarily on the views of unionized workers, I begin to address these questions by drawing from 74 brief interviews conducted at two different NUMSA-led protests in Johannesburg: a protest associated with a one-day ‘Strike for Youth Jobs,’ which represented the United Front’s first major public action; and a protest associated with a more traditional strike over wages by engineering workers.

The findings underscore crucial tensions within the United Front project, which manifest along two dimensions: *class politics*, pertaining to material divisions between unions and impoverished communities, and *party politics*, pertaining to the electoral sphere. For each dimension there are both important sources of emergent solidarity, and potential obstacles that may stand in the way of future progress. For class politics, common experiences of poverty and harsh living conditions hint towards solidarity between unionized workers and impoverished communities, but this solidarity is undermined by their divergent goals, targets, and tactics. In terms of party politics, for some workers opposition to the state and the ANC encourages solidarity with community struggles, while for others a fear of engaging the electoral arena encourages distance. In short, the analysis highlights the contingency of working class fragmentation and solidarity in the contemporary global political economy.

Politics of Class Formation

Studies of social movements have typically focused on questions of mobilization, seeking to understand why and how movements emerge and achieve their goals. While producing a tremendous amount of insight, recent critiques of this literature note two important shortcomings. One critique is that social movement scholarship neglects the political orientations of movements and their social structural roots (Walder 2009). A second, and related, critique underscores the ‘strange disappearance of capitalism’ from social movement scholarship (Hetland and Goodwin 2013). Taken together, these critiques call for greater attention to the way in which individuals develop collective interpretations of their material reality, and translate those interpretations into collective action. How might we understand this process?

Przeworski (1985) provides a useful starting point by highlighting two challenges for working class politics. One challenge is to define the working class, which may include, for example, the narrow category of manual wage laborers in stable employment, or the broader category of those who do not own means of production (48-59). For Przeworski (1985), struggles *about* class – over its definition and meaning – are logically prior to struggles *between* classes. The other challenge relates to the fact that representative democracy is ‘defined on the dimension individual-nation, not in terms of class,’ which forces political actors to shift ‘back and forth between an emphasis on class and an appeal to the nation’ (28-29). The two challenges are related, he suggests, because the narrow working class is not large enough to secure an electoral majority, thus necessitating alliances with other groups (23-29).

Building on Przeworski’s analysis, I propose to examine the politics of the United Front along two dimensions of working class formation: *class politics*, which revolve around material

divisions and their consequences; and *party politics*, which revolve around orientations toward the electoral arena. Unpacking these dynamics requires sharp attention to the inherently political, and thus contingent, character of class formation (Toscano and Woodcock 2015).

From Social Movement Unionism to the United Front

The United Front project is difficult to understand outside of the history of the anti-apartheid struggle. During the 1970s and 1980s, unions were increasingly involved in both the liberation struggle for a democratic state, and community-based struggles around issues such as evictions, rent, public services, and transportation (Webster 1988; Seidman 1994). Lying beneath this ‘social movement unionism’, however, was a heated debate between two divergent approaches: a ‘national democratic’ or ‘populist’ unionism, which prioritized opposition to apartheid/colonial rule and a fusion of workplace and community struggles; and a ‘shop floor’ or ‘workerist’ unionism, which prioritized opposition to capital and worker leadership in community struggles (Southall and Webster 2010).

The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 represented a compromise between the two traditions. But COSATU’s fusion with the popular anti-apartheid struggle suggested a turn towards the national democratic tradition. In the early 1980s the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), the bedrock of shop floor unionism, had rejected affiliation with the United Democratic Front (UDF), an umbrella body of anti-apartheid organizations and primarily community-based groups. FOSATU argued that the petty-bourgeois character of community groups would compromise their socialist orientation and create political divisions amongst workers (Forrest 2011: 330-335). Largely abandoning this

critique, after 1985 COSATU affirmed its alliance to both the UDF and the ANC (Seidman 1994:250-252).

Formed in 1987 through the merger of three unions, two of which were affiliates of FOSATU, NUMSA is steeped in the shop floor tradition. At a COSATU national congress in 1993, on the eve of the democratic breakthrough, NUMSA sought to reignite this tradition by calling for the labor movement to break with the ANC and form an independent workers' party. But the proposal was voted down. Subsequently, and as an affiliate of COSATU, between 1994 and 2013 NUMSA remained in a formal partnership – the Tripartite Alliance, or popularly, 'the Alliance' – with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). NUMSA's decision, in December 2013, to break with the ruling party, marked a return of the demand for worker leadership. It also re-ignited the historic division between the national democratic and shop floor traditions within COSATU. The former proved to be stronger, leading to the expulsion of NUMSA from the federation in November 2014.

This break created space for NUMSA to build new alliances, through the United Front, with community struggles that are highly critical of the ruling party. The two moves – against the ANC and for the United Front – thus went hand-in-hand. The United Front also represents an attempt to overcome the growing distance between unions and communities. Contrary to the legacy of social movement unionism, COSATU unions have been relatively absent from widespread community protests (Author 2015a, 2015b). Dinga Sikwebu, NUMSA's official national coordinator for the United Front, explained: 'we were not joining the dots between what was happening in the community, and what was happening on the shop floor; and we felt that it was high time that we joined these struggles together' (Singiswa 2015).

Seeking to build an organization that is ‘similar to the UDF of the 1980s’ (NUMSA 2013), NUMSA explicitly recognizes the United Front as an attempt to rebuild the working class unity of the late apartheid era. But the environment has shifted dramatically. Rather than sharply opposing the state, now many community residents identify with the ruling party. Further, with the growth of flexible employment and unemployment in the post-apartheid period, union members have become a relatively privileged section of the working class (Buhlungu 2010). In 1982, FOSATU president Joe Foster argued: “That FOSATU should be involved in community activities is correct since our members form the major part of those communities.” While this statement may have been a stretch, even in the 1980s, by the 2000s it was very far from reality.

These shifts generate new challenges for the problematic of worker leadership. On the one hand, the United Front aims to build alliances between unionized workers and more precarious layers of the working class, who have been at the forefront of recent community-based struggles. This foregrounds the question of relations *within* the working class, and particularly whether those with stable employment view those without stable employment as a kindred social force. On the other hand, the United Front aims to challenge the political and economic policies of the ruling party. This implies a struggle on the terrain of political parties and the nation. In short, the United Front must confront tensions with respect to both class politics and party politics.

Methodology

This paper provides an early window into the United Front project. The data are based on interviews conducted at two different NUMSA-led protests in Johannesburg. Conducted by a

research team of four people, including the author, the interviews were relatively brief, with the majority lasting between five and fifteen minutes each. In total the research team conducted 74 interviews, including 47 interviews at the first protest and 27 interviews at the second protest.

The two protests were very different. Taking place on March 19, 2014, the first protest was associated with a one-day national ‘Strike for Youth Jobs’ (hereafter ‘YJ protest’). This was the first major public action for the United Front. It was organized around opposition to the Employment Tax Incentive Act, which provides benefits to employers who hire young workers. The protest featured a march through the affluent northern suburbs to the offices of the National Economic Development and Labor Council, which is a corporatist bargaining institution designed to gather input from business and labor representatives on state policy issues. Taking place on July 1, 2015, the second protest was associated with the beginning of what would be a four-week-long strike by NUMSA workers in the engineering sector (hereafter ‘ES protest’). This was a more conventional labor struggle, aimed at employers, and revolving around wage demands. It featured a march through downtown Johannesburg to the offices of employer representatives in the metal and engineering industries bargaining council.

Each protest attracted different participants. The ES protest was comprised almost exclusively of NUMSA members working in the engineering sector. In contrast, the YJ protest included a wide range of participants beyond NUMSA. Most were there to support the broader United Front project. This support stemmed from NUMSA’s active efforts to include a wide array of forces in the planning process, which entailed weekly meetings between representatives from NUMSA and supporting organizations. The supporters included a wide variety of community-based organisations, left groups, and political parties. Two groups which had previously championed community struggles – the Democratic Left Front (DLF), a left-leaning

social movement, and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a recently established breakaway political party from the ANC – each brought sizable contingents (Author 2014).

Both protests included NUMSA members withholding their labor power. The YJ protest featured a one-day strike, including workers from across sectors, and the ES protest was the beginning of an indefinite strike by engineering workers. But they were political in very different ways. The YJ protest was oriented towards the state and a broader public sphere, whereas the ES protest was oriented towards employers and more confined to the domain of industrial relations. Participants in the YJ protest were also more knowledgeable about – and overwhelmingly supportive of – the United Front project, while participants in the ES protest were significantly less familiar with the United Front. Many of the engineering workers were unclear about exactly what the United Front was, and some indicated that they were waiting for the NUMSA leadership to provide more information about what it would entail.

The two sets of interviews thus provide two quite different windows into the NUMSA United Front. Whereas the YJ protest interviews effectively capture some of factors that are driving support for the United Front project, the ES protest interviews more effectively capture some of the reservations and challenges that it produces. It is also important to note that both protests took place during the relatively early stages of the United Front. At the time, the United Front had not yet developed robust organisational structures, and there was still confusion within the public sphere about the goals and strategies associated with the project. NUMSA leadership was also still in the process of communicating and explaining, to the rank-and-file, the major decisions taken at the December 2013 conference. This partially explains why some of the protest participants were unclear about the United Front.

The goal of both sets of interviews was to probe the views of the participants about the United Front concept, and more generally about the value and potential for building possibility between unionized workers and community struggles. We also asked about protesters' own participation in community-based struggles, and who they understand to be the 'biggest enemy' of the working class and the poor. This semi-structured approach allowed us to capture a great deal of information about protesters' political orientations.

Class Politics

Given high rates of unemployment and precarious employment in South Africa, union members may appear to be a relatively privileged section of the working class. This raises questions about the material basis for solidarity between unionized workers and protesting communities. NUMSA's Sikwebu (2014) explains:

We don't talk about the working class broadly in NUMSA, because we have an understanding of the fragmentation that has happened to that section of the community, and that we are struggling and exploring ways of finding connections between people who have a job and people who don't have a job. Our members, in the surveys we've done, you know, will have a medical aid [private health insurance], and we've found that 56% of people own their houses or they have bonds [housing mortgages]. And how do you link this with the shack dwellers [residents of informal settlement communities]?

The success of the United Front will depend on its ability to bridge this gap between unionized workers with a certain degree of economic security, and more economically insecure community members.

How to define the contemporary class structure is a matter of heated debate across the globe. Some scholars call for new categories to describe insecure workers, who frequently cycle in-and-out of employment, while others seek to incorporate them into a broadly defined ‘working class’ (Author 2016a). Noting that ‘workers’ and ‘the poor’ in South Africa have similar interests, especially in the long-term, Alexander and Pfaffe (2014:205) reject the notion that they are divided by ‘an antagonistic class difference.’ But stable employment and union membership are crucial material resources, and they shape how workers organize and engage politically. In this sense, the potential gap between unionized workers and those who are less economically secure is a matter of what I defined above as class politics. Bridging this gap is not about resolving an antagonistic class relation. Following Przeworski (1985), rather, it requires a struggle ‘about class’ to unite diverse groups in a common class struggle. This may entail an uneasy marriage between different repertoires and strategies of resistance, and even divergent short-term interests or political worldviews.

Elaborating on this tension in the South African context, Alexander and Pfaffe (2014:206) describe the worker/poor divide as a ‘hinged contrast’ between two distinct forces that are ‘linked to a single core.’ Underscoring the contingency of class formation, the hinge may tend towards being open (fragmentation) or closed (solidarity), and current conditions run in both directions. On the one hand, ‘intermingling, family loyalty, life style fluidity and shared experience’ encourage a closing of the hinge (Alexander and Pfaffe 2014:217). On the other hand, labor and community activists have different resources at their disposal, which lead to different styles and targets of protest. Perhaps most important, ‘for the poor, the capitalist lies beyond the state, and for workers, it is the other way around’ (Alexander and Pfaffe 2014:205). These factors suggest an opening of the hinge.

The class politics of the United Front revolve around this opening and closing of the hinge that connects unionized workers and impoverished communities. The protest interviews provide evidence for both tendencies. If on the one hand NUMSA workers highlight organic connections with poor residents of urban communities, on the other hand they emphasize the divergent goals, targets, and tactics of unions and community struggles.

Organic connections

The protest interviews reveal important material convergences between union members and the urban poor. Even if stable employment is a marker of privilege in the context of mass unemployment, union members are not necessarily immune from the hardships that unemployment produces. Workers are frequently called upon, for example, to support unemployed family members and extended social networks at the household level (Scully 2015). One NUMSA member, who had participated in community protests around water and sanitation services, thus expressed his support for worker-community collaboration in the following way:

If you do not have money there is nothing you can do in the family. You will end up eating each other in the house... Yes they [the community] can come and support [NUMSA workers] because if a man does not work, there will never be happiness in the family. For us black people, our families are big. You might find that I have to support six people, so when I am striking they support me a lot (NUMSA member; ES protest).

This account reveals a material basis for solidarity between unionized workers and their more precariously situated counterparts, showing that they rely on the very same sources of livelihood. Just as the unemployed may join the struggles of workers who support them, as the worker above

suggests, so workers may join community struggles that are potentially driven by unemployed family members.

In a similar vein, other workers spoke about living in the context of poverty, denying that they were immune to the deprivation that lies beneath community struggles:

We are affected by everything that is happening in the community. We sleep at home, and sometimes there is not money for electricity or for kids to eat. It is painful when you [are] from work, and you bought grocery for your kids to eat, and others do not have anything. (NUMSA shop steward; YJ protest).

This reflection suggests that even if unionized workers are relatively privileged, they may nonetheless live side-by-side with those who are less fortunate. It thus points to a sense of shared experience, despite varied employment situations and economic vulnerability.

Previous research on workers in formal employment reveals the prominence of precarious working and living conditions (Barchiesi 2011), implying material convergence with the urban poor. Similarly challenging the notion of a material divide, union members also noted experiences of community-based hardship. As one 20-year NUMSA veteran explained:

We are part of them. We also struggle getting water. There might be water at work, but if you get home and there is no water, it is a problem for you as a worker. For instance, like me, when I am at work there is water and electricity, so I have those services. But when I go home, it is a problem. We have to fight and barricade roads and all. (NUMSA member; YJ protest).

While acknowledging the potential benefits associated with the workplace, this worker describes the challenges they experience at home, particularly with respect to accessing water and electricity. Not only are these precisely the types of issues that underpin community protests, but the NUMSA veteran also argues that such protests are essential.

In addition to service delivery challenges, community protests also tend to emphasize problems of government corruption, and the incompetence and neglect of local political officials. These issues also emerged in the protest interviews with workers. In drawing a connection between corruption and poor service delivery, one worker expressed a sentiment that is familiar within township communities:

As NUMSA members, every day we come across challenges. They close water without notice, and we stay for five days with no electricity. The service delivery is very poor. The RDP houses that the government says it is building, they do not last....Those who work for the government are very corrupt, from the municipality, provincial to national. The government cannot control the money. These people steal a lot of money, 5 million or 10 million, just a lot of money that could have created jobs. (NUMSA ordinary member; YJ protest).

Rather than focusing exclusively on employers, this suggests that unionized workers share the critiques of the state that frequently underpin community protests.

While union members on the whole may be better off than their precariously employed or unemployed counterparts, it is clear that many are close enough to the realities of poverty and hardship to build meaningful solidarity. Similar to community protests, workers also articulate

their grievances in relation to the democratic transition, and the failure of the post-apartheid state to deliver on the promises of the national liberation struggle. Two NUMSA members explain:

I was involved in a protest for service delivery. We were fighting in the squatter camp [informal settlement], since they said they will build houses. Even today, they have not. The water is running, the toilets are bad...[so] people barricaded roads...The enemy is the government because it is not doing what it promised. It said it would build houses, but now it is not doing anything. We stay in shacks, they are leaking. So the government is ruining the nation... There is no hope in the ANC, all leaders are corrupt. That is why we are forming the United Front. (NUMSA member; YJ protest).

You know for the past 20 years the ANC has been promising us, and you find that there is no water, no electricity. They keep on promising but they don't keep those promises...The ANC has failed us...[Community protests] are a good thing. You know why I am saying that? Because its anger. All the time we are promised that we [are] getting water, electricity, and you know for the past 20 years that is too long. That is why we end up short tempered and illustrating our anger in terms of protest. (NUMSA shop steward; YJ protest).

These reflections illustrate that workers' frustrations do not simply pertain to workplace issues, but also extend into the community. They note the very same grievances around housing, electricity, and water – directed at the state – that are prevalent within community protests, and affirm the importance of such protests. Crucially, these grievances dovetail with opposition to the ANC, a theme which is discussed in more detail below.

Divergent goals, targets, and tactics

Despite these organic connections, the distance between unions and community struggles has grown markedly in the post-apartheid period. The protest interviews reflect a sharp awareness of the worker-community divide amongst NUMSA members. Whereas some sought to undermine it, others sought to reinforce it.

Simultaneously acknowledging and reifying the separation, some workers spoke to the logistical difficulties involved. Contemporary community protests are frequently propelled by unemployed residents, and often begin in the morning when workers must be on their way to work. This creates a conflict for workers, as several NUMSA members highlighted:

If where I stay they are protesting, then I have to take part. But if it's a day when I have to work, then I cannot take part. But I will support them in my heart. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

No, [worker and community struggles] cannot come together...They can help each other, but it is not possible for workers to join [community struggles] because they will be at work when the community is protesting. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

What makes it difficult? It's because the workers, if they can participate in the [community] struggle, they might forfeit their salary – maybe three days salary, one week salary – and here the people [that] are protesting, most of them are unemployed...that's what makes it so difficult to be powerful and joint. (NUMSA member; YJ protest)

These challenges, of course, reflect the fact that unions have tended to be absent from community struggles. Workers must therefore decide whether or not to skip work on an individual basis. But if workers were to collectively withdraw their labor to support community struggles, this could potentially reduce the consequences. The United Front could develop such a

collective response, though it will not be achieved easily. This is because workers in any given community are scattered across many workplaces, and workers at any given workplace are scattered across many communities.

Overcoming these logistical challenges will require unions to address the fact that many workers understand union struggles and community struggles as necessarily distinct. This view was articulated by two different NUMSA shop stewards:

To bring together the struggles of workers and of the community will be two different things...The community struggle is based on service delivery and we as workers, we are fighting for money and to be treated good at work. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

The biggest enemy to the workers, let me talk on behalf of the workers. It is the whites, the capitalists, they are filling their pockets. On the community side, [the enemies are] those people that eat the money, those whom we elected to go to the government. So they don't deliver while we elected them, so that they deliver and give back to the community in a rightful manner. But they are filling up their pockets. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

Emphasizing divergent demands and targets, these reflections are consistent with the argument that worker struggles tend to focus on employers, while community struggles tend to target the state (Alexander and Pfaffe 2014). Such divergence suggests that it will take considerable effort to break down the union-community divide.

Tactics are another major obstacle. Community protests commonly deploy disruptive or destructive tactics, such as barricading roads or destroying property, in order to attract attention from the state (Von Holdt 2014). As a result they are frequently portrayed as 'violent' in the media (Author 2015c). While workers are certainly not immune from these tactics and labels,

union marches and protests tend to be more formally organized. Unions are more likely to follow the law, and to secure official permission from the state. Keeping with this pattern, workers expressed the need to follow proper institutional channels:

It is my wish that we sit down and talk, and not run around in the streets... They should come together and talk, and fix where there is a problem, so that we do not take the law into our own hands... We are humans not animals. We talk about everything and put it on the table. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

Ours [union protest] is better, because [it] is not violent and that of the community is violent. When I am looking on television, they burn streets. Us, we just come and listen when [authorities] address us, and we go back home. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

Prioritizing formal engagement over disruption, these commentaries portray union struggles as superior to community struggles. Such condescending views imply a lack the respect for community activists, which may be needed to build meaningful solidarity.

Other workers expressed even greater concern about the militant tactics of communities. One long-time NUMSA member, who had been a shop steward for seventeen years and is also an active ANC member, explained:

If you are going to combine workers with the residents, that one can cause a problem, turning the country into chaos. Because youngsters are going to come with a military philosophy, they are not going to come with the intention of reaching a common goal. They will want a fight that is directionless and we end up having civil war. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

For this worker, joining with unemployed youth is useless because they are ‘directionless’, and will only take the country into civil war. One can see here the deep challenge that the United Front faces in building solidarity between worker struggles and community struggles.

While sharing this critique, other workers sought to teach community residents how to protest properly:

Truly speaking I am supporting [community struggles], but provided if they did it in a good way. Not about the violence and all those things. It’s not a bad thing to go to service delivery [protest]. But they should use the proper channels. They should elect somebody who is going to take all their grievances to where they are supposed to be...instead of to be violent, or burning, closing the roads, disrupting and all those things...I think if we can be combined with the community, I think everything can be okay. Because they will also learn what we mean when we talking about how to demonstrate. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

This shop steward supports community struggles. But they also want to discipline community members by showing them how to protest appropriately. In contrast to ‘violent’ approaches, this entails sending an elected representative to negotiate with the state.

These views highlight a potential obstacle to genuine solidarity between unions and community struggles. Whereas some union members may be fearful of reaching out to community activists, due to their different tactics, others may approach community activists with a patronizing or parental tone. The former view essentially eliminates the possibility for collaboration. The latter view could lay the foundation for tension and mistrust, rather than mutual respect.

Party politics

From the beginning, the United Front has been positioned as a left-wing opposition movement. Whereas the UDF of the 1980s was formed in opposition to the racist apartheid state, the new United Front is conceptualized as a weapon against the ‘neoliberal capitalism’ of the ANC government (NUMSA 2013; Jim 2014). This foray out of the ANC-led Alliance and into the broader political field has contradictory implications. If on the one hand it forges solidarity among those who are frustrated with the current status quo, on the other hand it alienates those who fear such an oppositional stance.

Common opposition to state and party

The protest interviews confirm the importance of an anti-ANC or anti-state oppositional stance for holding the United Front together. One NUMSA shop steward, for example, echoed the official union line, as articulated in the 2013 resolution (NUMSA 2013):

Yes I think it [the United Front] is a good strategy. Because if you can check our government, nowadays they are implementing neo-liberal policies, which are really deepening the poverty, inequality and unemployment in this country. That’s why we are here. That’s why we are supporting this march today. (NUMSA shop steward; YJ protest).

Others expressed more specific frustration with the fact that the current government and ruling party do not incorporate the views of workers and address their needs:

I think United Front might work because we need the voice that will represent workers in parliament and their needs. We feel like the current government does not address the needs of workers in parliament. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest)

We need to come out with an alternative, the United Front, representing the community and the workers as a whole, not a political organization like the ANC. ANC is a multi-class organization. You will find the capitalist, everyone is there...The reason to have this Tripartite Alliance was to overthrow the apartheid government...you remember that Freedom Charter that liberates everyone, especially the disadvantaged ones? The ANC diverged from that. They are supporting the neoliberal policies: that if you are poor you remain poor, and if you are rich you will then be rich...this ANC is taking its own route, and is forgetting about the people on the ground (NUMSA shop steward; YJ protest).

Having successfully dismantled apartheid, these workers argued that the ANC is now deviating from its support of workers and the poor, and moving towards support for capital. For them, a United Front is necessary to restore a pro-worker and pro-poor political direction.

Disaffection with the ANC grew steadily after 2009, under the leadership of President Jacob Zuma. Championed by COSATU as an answer to the capture of the ANC by capitalist interests, many workers expected Zuma to take the state in a pro-worker and pro-poor direction. But support for Zuma and the ANC was unstable. Poll results showed a drop in ANC support from 63 percent in November 2009 to 53 percent in November 2013, and in the latter poll, 51 percent of ANC supporters wanted Zuma to resign (Southall 2014:2). In addition to the Marikana massacre, during which police killed 34 striking mineworkers, Zuma's image suffered from the

Nkandla corruption scandal, which involved the use of R246 million in public funds to upgrade his personal homestead.

It is thus not surprising that some frustration was directed towards Zuma, as a symbol of ANC decline. This frustration crossed party lines. One rank-and-file NUMSA member, for example, who was also a member of the ANC Youth League, lamented:

The government doesn't want to give the money and we are making a lot of money. We have a right. It's been too long working, doing a lot of money, but we earn the change. But the government, like Zuma, is drawing and building [for Nkandla], while our brothers are dying in Marikana because of his carelessness. We want to finish such things. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

Another rank-and-file member who supported the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a new political party that split from the ANC in 2013, expressed a similar sentiment. But he went even further by drawing a distinction between Zuma and his predecessors, Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki:

We need change, so I think a new government can deliver. It has been twenty years under this government, and they are not doing anything for us. [We need] one that is going to work for the people...This one is not doing anything. Look at how beautiful Nkandla is. It is a small heaven while we are suffering. Look at Mandela's house and Thabo Mbeki, they are not the same. Back then, money was spent wisely. But under Zuma the rate of spending is very high. (NUMSA member for 20 years, now EFF supporter; YJ protest).

This worker was looking for change. Their commentary suggested that the ANC was doing a good job previously, but had taken a turn for worse under Zuma's leadership.

The sense of a growing desire for change was palpable among many workers. As one NUMSA member from the township of Sebokeng, south of Johannesburg, summarized:

A lot of people are against ANC. They do not want it anymore. So when they are talking they say ANC is gone with Mandela. So this is the death of ANC, the burial of Zuma. If they do not change Zuma in parliament, nothing will come alright. People do not want him. (NUMSA, ordinary member; YJ protest).

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of these sentiments when it comes to the formation of the United Front. As noted above, an important obstacle standing between workers and communities in the post-apartheid period has been their orientation towards different targets. While both have engaged in collective resistance, workers have largely targeted employers while communities have largely targeted the state, and the local state in particular. Worker opposition to the state and ANC thus represents a potential point of convergence with community struggles.

This potential is highlighted by interviews with non-NUMSA, community-based activists at the NUMSA protest for youth jobs. In speaking to the grievances that underpin community struggles, they highlighted similar issues and a similar frustration with the state and ruling party. The following reflection, provided by a community activist from Soweto, captured an especially common sentiment amongst community protesters:

[Our biggest enemy is] the government and the President. Because they promise us this and we go and vote, but at the end they do not respond... We want the government to know that we exist and we want these things. We do not have water where I stay, no electricity, we stay in shacks. But we voted. We stay with our grandmothers there, but they have been

voting ever since. They stay in leaking shacks. There is nothing I can say our government has done for us... (Member of the Operation Khanyisa Movement; YJ protest).

This critique of Zuma and the state mirrors those provided by workers, as shown above. Such common enemies may provide the basis for solidarity.

Other community activists spoke to issues of unemployment, illustrating further convergence. On the surface this would seem to be a divisive issue, with unemployed community members seeking employment, and union members seeking to protect their jobs. Yet because community activists directed their frustrations towards the ANC, they identified with NUMSA:

I'm from my community. They told me to come and support NUMSA. They did not give me information. They just said Fighter [member of EFF], let us go and support against ANC. Because I am against ANC...[The] ruling party is an enemy against people that are not working. Because it does not deliver, and it does not give the people what they want. (Member of Keep Left and EFF; YJ protest).

I'm a suffering man, because I am not working...For creating jobs, I blame the President always. He doesn't care for us the poor people. (Unemployed resident from Alexandra; YJ protest).

These commentaries suggest that community members will support NUMSA as long as the union expresses opposition to the ruling party. This convergence highlights the promise of the United Front project, which has the potential to forge an anti-ANC, or anti-state, oppositional unity between workers and communities. Such a project, however, is not without difficulties.

Fear of politics

While some workers were enthusiastic about NUMSA's new political direction, others were suspicious about the political ambitions associated with the United Front project. For some workers, this concern was primarily related to the United Front's anti-ANC stance. NUMSA was aligned to the ANC from its inception in 1987, and within the union, support for the ANC has remained fairly high throughout the post-apartheid period. According to a 2012 survey, two-thirds of NUMSA members indicated that they would vote for the ANC if the election were held in the following week, and more than 70 percent wished to remain part of the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the SACP (COSATU 2012:38). Many NUMSA members are also members of the SACP, which remains one of the ANC's most loyal partners.

Both union activists and community activists cautioned about the steep challenge of going up against the ANC, which has deep roots and still commands a great deal of support. One NUMSA shop steward explained:

Remember we still have people who are still indebted, in a sense, that they still feel they owe their loyalty to the ruling party currently. So we still have to conscientise them, and then give them a bigger picture [of] what exactly we are looking (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

Similarly, a community-based activist with the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC) noted:

I don't think it is easy to remove the ancestor of this country, ANC. They are no more a party, but ancestors now (TCC member; YJ protest).

These warnings underscore the difficulty of mounting a challenge to the politically dominant ANC, which has won every national election in the post-apartheid period. Not only does the ruling party have strong support within unions, but it also maintains substantial support within the impoverished black townships, where community protests are concentrated (Author 2016b). Uniting workers and community activists through opposition to the ANC is, therefore, a daunting task. If not entirely discouraged, United Front supporters were well aware of these obstacles.

Some NUMSA members were explicitly opposed to the current political direction of the United Front. As one member expressed clearly, he would prefer that NUMSA focus on improving the ANC's performance, rather than taking an oppositional stance:

I do not support it because [the] ANC is an organization for black people. I think the NUMSA should fight for the government to be good so that we can vote for it. (NUMSA member; YJ protest)

This is essentially an expression of desire for the status quo. It calls for NUMSA to continue pressuring the ANC-led government, while maintaining its formal partnership with the ruling party. This has essentially been COSATU's approach since the democratic transition in 1994.

Concern about challenging the ANC may have also underpinned more general concerns regarding a perceived NUMSA shift towards the political sphere. Some workers viewed the United Front project as 'too political', and thus divergent from the central mission of protecting workers:

Forming the United Front, it's not gonna do justice to the workers because...it's like forming a political party. Now the workers will not be taken care of in a way they are

supposed to be. They will now be focusing on a new agenda of which is political. To me I don't think it's necessary. (NUMSA shop steward; ES protest).

I don't have much to say about that going to politics. We as workers we are happy with what we [are] doing for workers. If we go to politics now, there's going to be a misunderstanding. ...I see no need because [NUMSA] is for workers, and now it will end up working for politics. (NUMSA member; ES protest).

These commentaries defend a narrow approach to unionism that focuses primarily on workplace issues. While echoing this perspective, another worker went a step further to suggest that the United Front project is largely about squabbles between political leaders:

United Front is alright but...I cannot recommend it and I am not sure how it will be, because sometimes they start something good and end up fighting among themselves. The leaders, they fight and point fingers, saying you did this and that. Some then break away and you find others opening their own parties. If they can support each other, then all will be well. (NUMSA member; ES protest)

For this worker it is crucially important for political leaders to be united. He thus suggests that NUMSA should remain in the Alliance, rather than 'point fingers' at the shortcomings of the ANC.

In sum, whereas some workers and community activists were drawn to the anti-ANC stance of the United Front, others lamented this position and more generally, NUMSA's deepening engagement in oppositional politics beyond the workplace.

Conclusion

Focusing primarily on worker perspectives, this analysis highlights two potential tensions within NUMSA's United Front project (see table 1). One tension pertains to *class politics*. This tension revolves around the divide between unionized workers in relatively stable employment, and impoverished communities ravaged by unemployment as well as casual and informal work. The evidence suggests that these two groups do share common material conditions, but that they have developed divergent political orientations, including different goals, targets, and tactics. This divergence stems from the unique resources that union members have at their disposal, such as access to collective bargaining, and the culture of union resistance, which tends to be more formalized and bureaucratic. A second tension revolves around *party politics*. Here there is a division between those who are inspired by the United Front's opposition to the ANC and the state, and those who are apprehensive about NUMSA's new political direction.

[table 1 here]

These tensions point to some of the challenges that the United Front is likely to confront as it continues to expand and develop coherence. Since NUMSA's official decision in December 2013, the United Front has gradually gained steam by creating township- and provincial-level structures, forming a National Working Committee, and more generally establishing itself in the public sphere. Yet persistent questions remain about exactly what the United Front stands for, and some community activists remain worried that NUMSA will return to the fold of the ANC-led Alliance (Sosibo 2015). Though initially slated for late 2014, the United Front has consistently postponed its official national launch conference, during which important questions about political direction – such as how the United Front will engage in elections – could be

debated and decided on. The class politics and party politics within the United Front, highlighted here, speak to some of the crucial tensions that likely underpin this hesitation.

At a broader level, the analysis has important implications for social movements and working class solidarity across the globe. Most significantly, it challenges pessimistic views about class fragmentation and the decline of unified class struggles. The interviews presented here illustrate a clear potential for building broad working class solidarity, despite the widespread expansion of flexible labor arrangements and unemployment. The findings also indicate that such solidarity is likely to be rooted in both a common experience of economic insecurity, and a common opposition to existing political regimes. If the United Front aims to realize the potential for broad working class solidarity, it will likely need to combine mobilization around these two axes. The power of such a combination has been evident in other recent protest movements, such as the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, where the demand for the fall of the Mubarak regime was fused together with demands around economic security.

If the evidence presented here calls for optimism, however, it also underscores the complexity of class-based movements in the contemporary period. Building broad solidarity requires overcoming substantial diversity with respect to organizational resources, goals, targets, and repertoires of struggle. Further, collective actors must manage the daunting terrain of electoral politics, which often has an unclear relation to class divisions. Such dynamics will necessarily vary across national contexts, where patterns of growing economic insecurity are refracted through particular histories of political and economic development. But the South African case, examined here, suggests that overcoming such obstacles requires considerable organizational and ideological work. Without such efforts, strong foundations for solidarity may

be lost in the midst of political squabbles, dashing hopes for social transformation on the rocks of fragmented resistance.

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Table 1. Tensions within the United Front project

	Fusion	Separation
Class politics	Organic connections	Divergent goals, targets, and tactics
Party politics	Opposition to state and ANC	Fear of politics