

Majority of South Africans want a workers' party as alternative to ANC

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 73 | Sibusiso Nkomo

Summary

Twenty-one years after the African National Congress came to power in South Africa's transition to democratic institutions and rules, a majority of South Africans would support the creation of a workers' party to contest elections and fight for workers' rights, according to findings of the latest Afrobarometer survey.

This level of public support for a new labour/workers' party comes as a surprise given the ANC's centre-left "tripartite alliance" with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), which professes to fight for the poor and working classes. It also seems to give credence to calls by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) for a "united front" to lead the establishment of a political party that would better represent working-class interests than the ANC-led alliance (Cloete, 2014).

Academics Webster and Orkin (2014) argue that the existence of a large industrial working class, an independent trade union movement, and strong civil society organisations could augur well for the survival of a workers' party in South Africa. To support their argument, they point to a 2014 Ipsos survey finding that one-third of adult South Africans believed that "a new political party, a workers' or labour party, will assist with current problems facing SA."

In addition to support for a workers' party, the Afrobarometer survey found that a majority of South Africans believe that COSATU leaders are more concerned about political power than about workers' interests.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys were completed in 2014 and 2015. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus94 Research interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August and September 2015. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2011.

Key findings

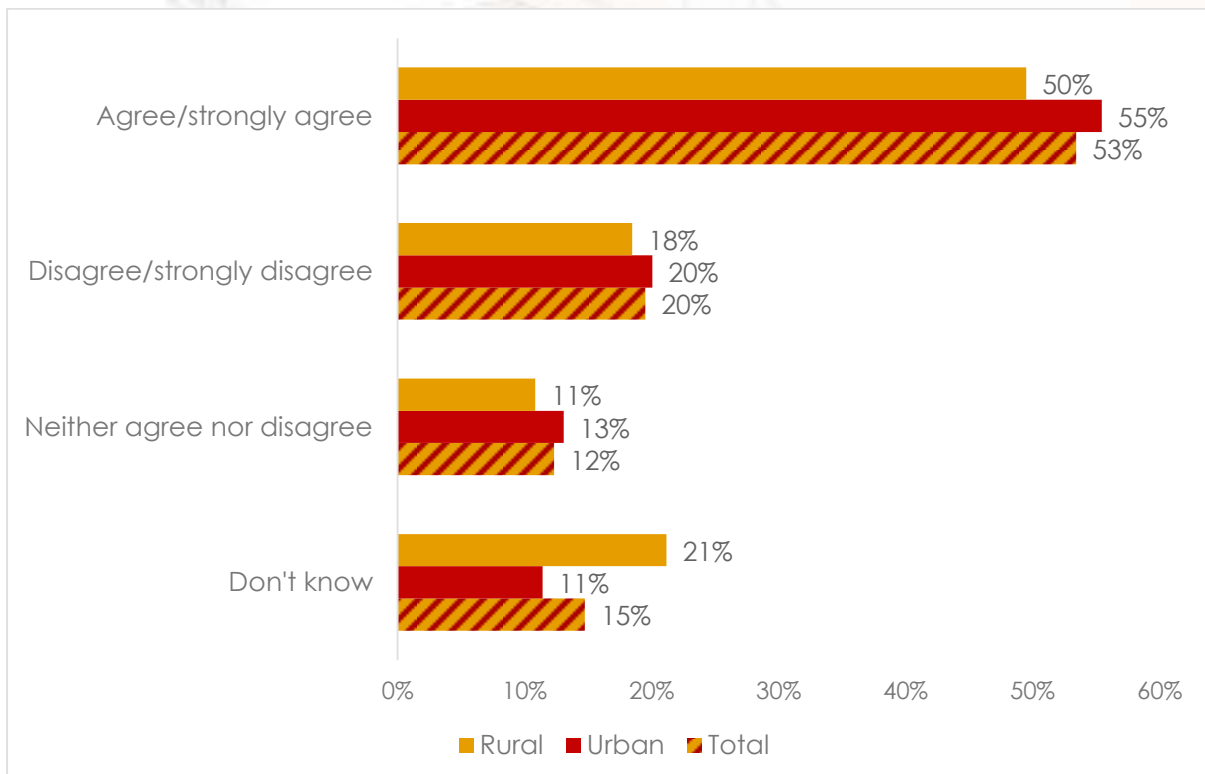
- More than half (53%) of survey respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" that South African needs a new labour/workers' party to defend working-class interests. Both rural and urban residents respond positively to the idea, with half or more agreeing.

- Support for a new workers' party is the majority position in five of nine provinces, led by Limpopo (73%) and Gauteng (63%), but drops as low as 20% in Mpumalanga and 36% in the Eastern Cape.
- Among those who have full-time jobs, six in 10 (60%) support the formation of a workers' party. Support is also strong among citizens who have a post-secondary education and those who are economically well off.
- A majority (54%) of citizens believe COSATU leaders are more focused on political power than on the interests of workers.
- A plurality (45%) of South Africans "agree" or "strongly agree" that to fully advance the interests of their members, trade unions should operate without any government influence or control.

South Africans want a workers' party

More than half (53%) of South Africans favour the establishment of a workers' party to protect the interests of the working class (Figure 1). Only two in 10 (20%) "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the formation of a workers' party.

Figure 1: South African support for establishing a workers' party | by urban-rural residence | South Africa | 2015¹

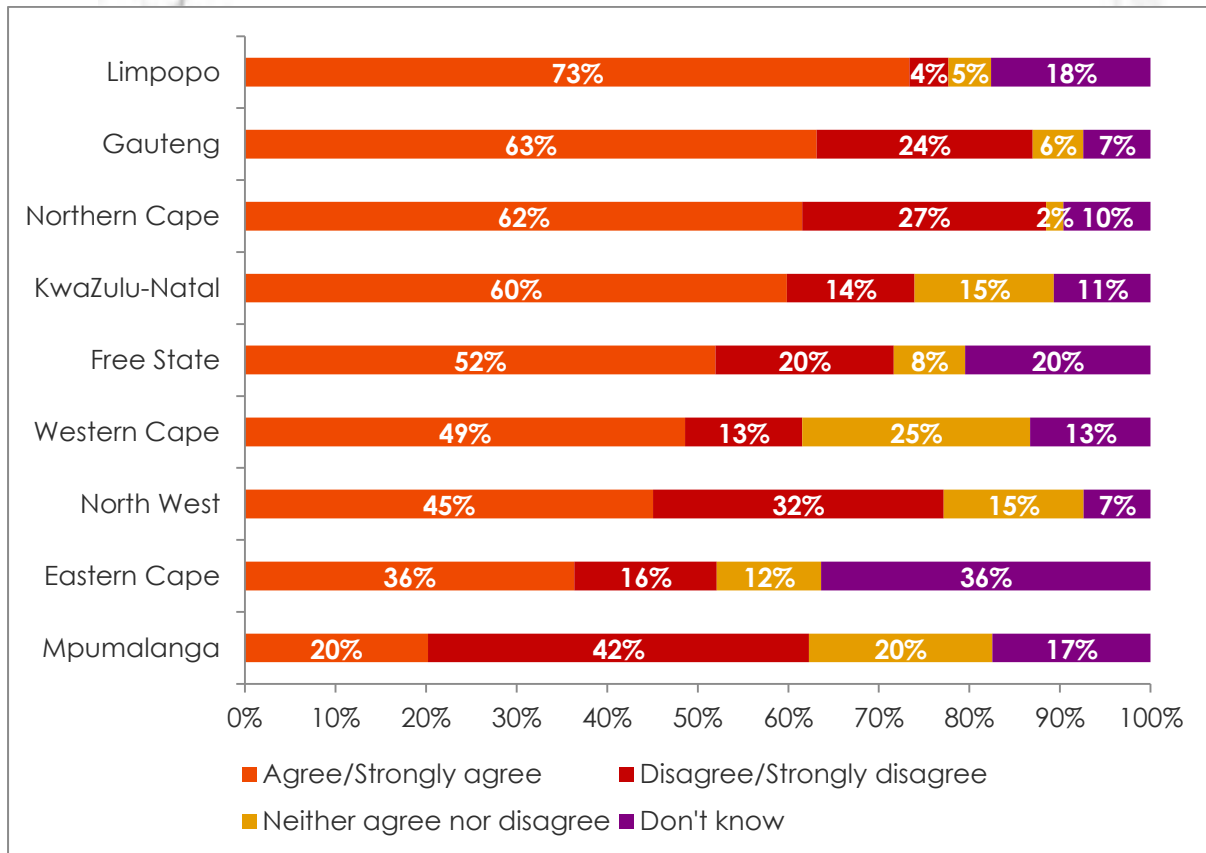


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?

¹ Due to rounding, categories in graphics may not always sum to 100%.

In five of South Africa's nine provinces, majorities "agree" or "strongly agree" with the need for a workers' party (Figure 2). Support is strongest (73%) in Limpopo, a mostly rural province, followed by the economic heartland of the country, Gauteng (63%). Support is also high in the Northern Cape (62%), KwaZulu-Natal (60%), and the Free State (52%). Though not a majority, support outnumbers opposition in the Western Cape and North West provinces. Rural Mpumalanga is the only province where a plurality (42%) disagree with the formation of a workers' party. The Eastern Cape, the country's motor vehicle manufacturing hub, shows equal proportions of agreement and "don't know" responses.

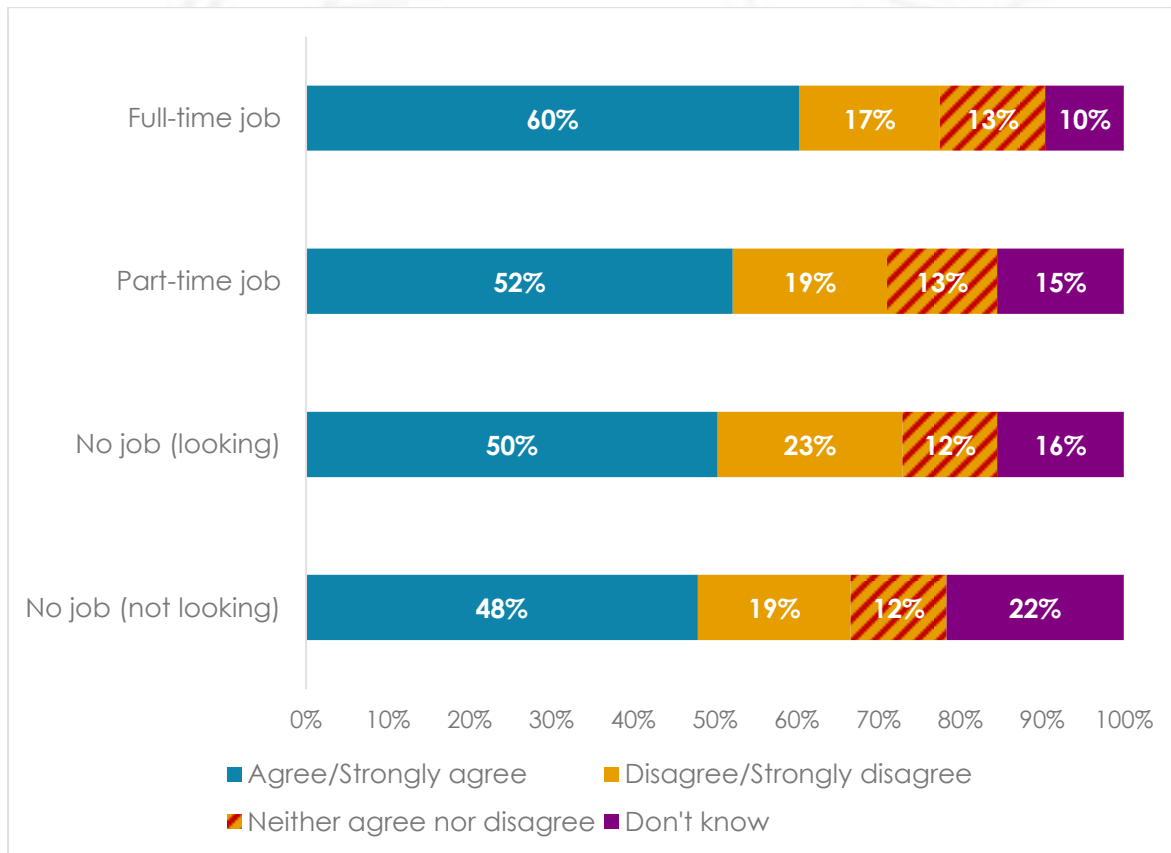
Figure 2: Support for establishing a workers' party | by province | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?

South Africans who have full-time jobs are most likely to favour the creation of a workers' party. According to the Labour Quarterly Survey (2014), about one-fourth (24%) of working-age South Africans are unemployed. Afrobarometer data show that 60% of those in full-time employment are supportive of a workers' party, whereas support is somewhat lower among part-time workers and the unemployed (Figure 3). In all employment categories, only about one in five oppose the idea of a workers' party.

Figure 3: Support for establishing a workers' party | by employment status
 | South Africa | 2015

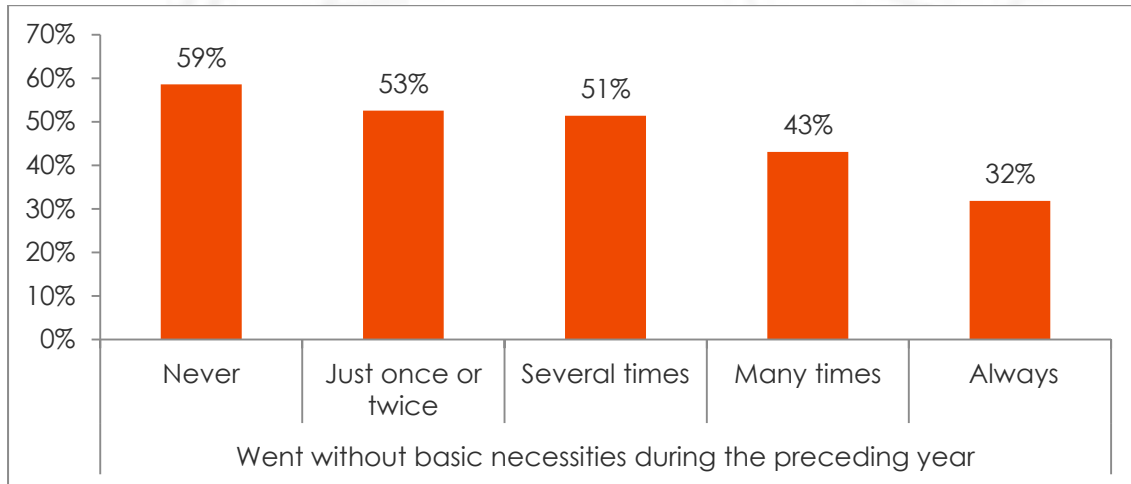


Respondents were asked:

- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?
- Do you have a job that pays a cash income? (If yes:) Is it full-time or part-time? (If no:) Are you presently looking for a job?

Support for establishing a workers' party is strongest among citizens who are best off economically, as measured by Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI). The LPI is based on survey respondents' assessments of how often, during the preceding year, they or their family members went without the basic necessities: enough food, enough clean water, medicine or medical care, enough fuel for cooking, and a cash income. Those who report "never" going without any of these essentials are most supportive of the establishment of a workers' party (59%). The level of support decreases as the experience of lived poverty increases, declining to 32% among those who report "always" going without basic necessities (Figure 4). The proportion of respondents who says they "don't know" whether they favour a new party increases as lived poverty increases, reaching 41% among those who "always" go without basic necessities.

Figure 4: Support for establishing a workers' party | by lived poverty level
 | South Africa | 2015

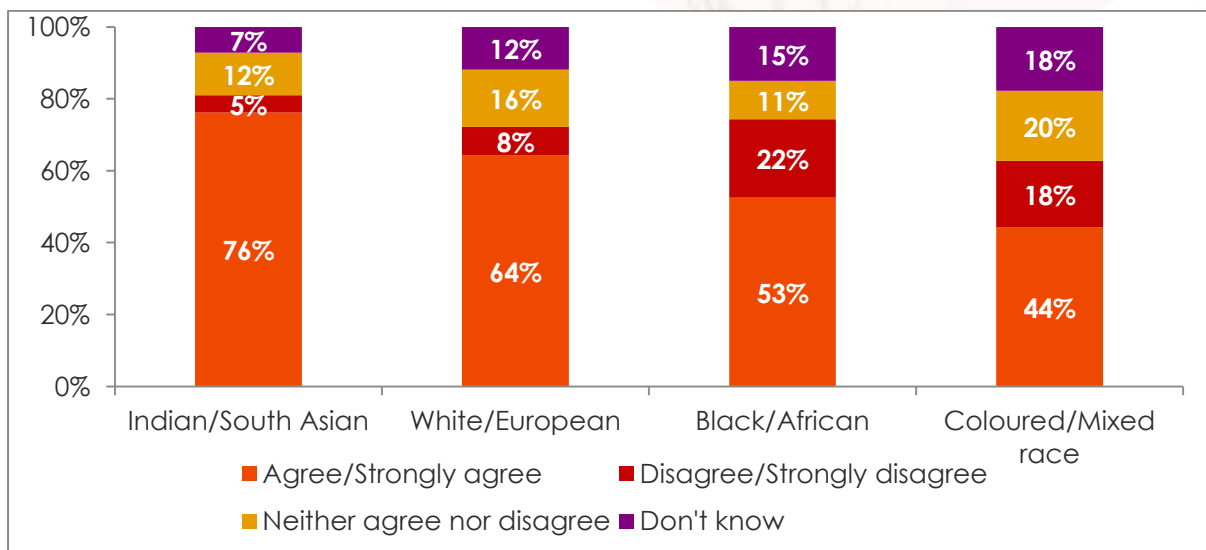


Respondents were asked:

- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?
 - Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income?
 (Figure shows % at each level of lived poverty who "agree" or "strongly agree" that South Africa needs a workers' party)

Given strong voter support for the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party among white voters (93% in the last general election) and Indian/South Asian voters (61%) (Van der Merwe, Mbanjwa, & Du Plessis, 2014), these two minority race groups express surprisingly high levels of support for the establishment of a workers' party. Three-fourths (76%) of Indian/South Asian respondents favour establishing a workers' party, as do two-thirds (64%) of white South Africans. Support is weaker among black (53%) and Coloured (44%) citizens (Figure 5).

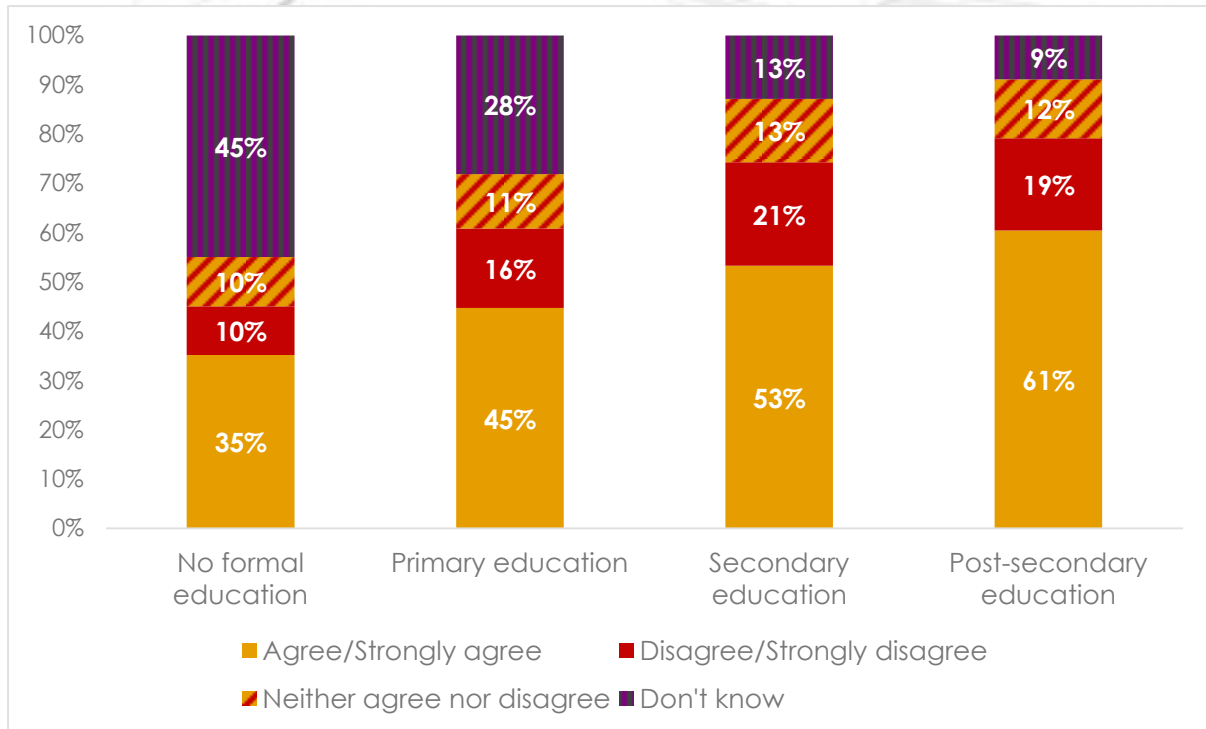
Figure 5: Support for establishing a workers' party | by race | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?

Disaggregation by education level shows that greater education is associated with greater support for the formation of a workers' party: Among those with post-secondary education, six in 10 (61%) favour the idea. Among citizens without formal education, only 35% support creating a new party, while 45% say they "don't know" (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Support for establishing a workers' party | by education level | South Africa | 2015



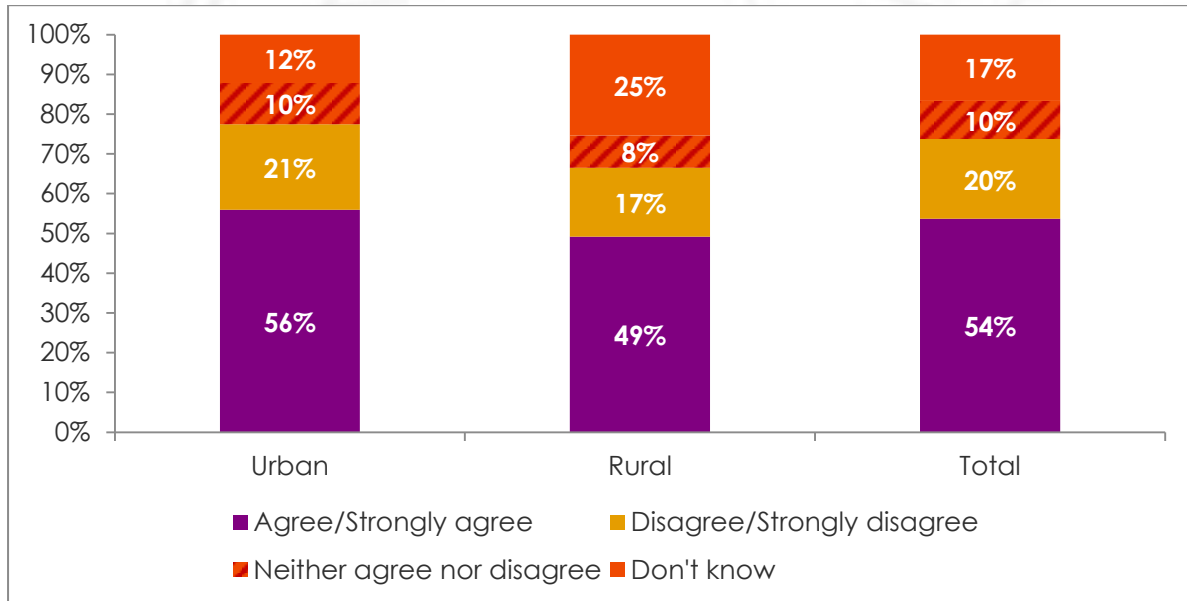
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?

Trade unions and political power

South Africa's trade union federation, COSATU, is the most powerful workers' organisation in the country, but its strength began to be diluted with the 2012 expulsion of its largest affiliate, NUMSA, and calls for an alternative "united front." While its participation in the tripartite alliance has led to some limited labour-law successes, Hassen (2011) describes the politics of the alliance as being a disciplining mechanism that has served to curtail the ambitions of the organised working class. He adds that while COSATU continues to maintain strong relations with the ANC, NUMSA and several independent unions are fashioning themselves as a "non-political" trade union centre.

In the Afrobarometer survey, a majority (54%) of South Africans "agree" or "strongly agree" that "the leaders of COSATU are more concerned about political power than the interests of workers" (Figure 7). Only two in 10 (20%) disagree with the statement. Urban dwellers are slightly more likely than rural residents to see COSATU leaders as overly concerned with political power (56% vs. 49%).

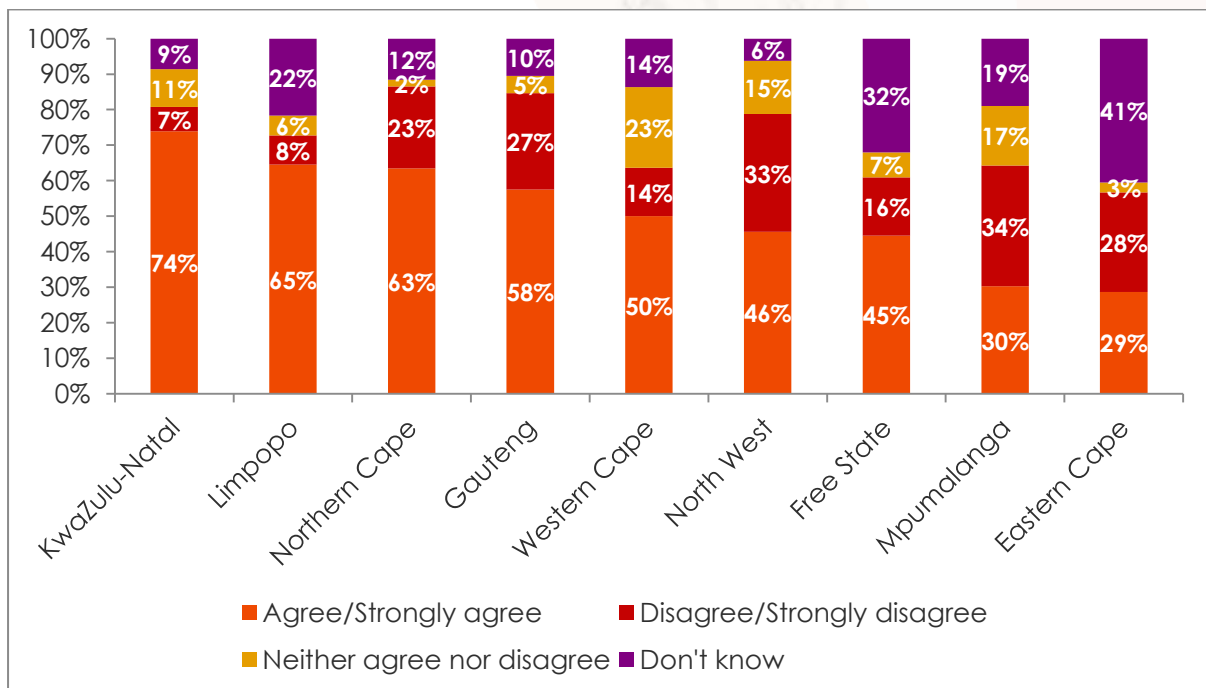
Figure 7: COSATU and concern for political power | by urban-rural residence | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The leaders of COSATU are more concerned about political power than the interests of workers?

Residents of KwaZulu-Natal are most critical of COSATU's focus on political power (74%), followed by Limpopo (65%) and the Northern Cape (63%) (Figure 8). In Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape, less than one-third of respondents share this view.

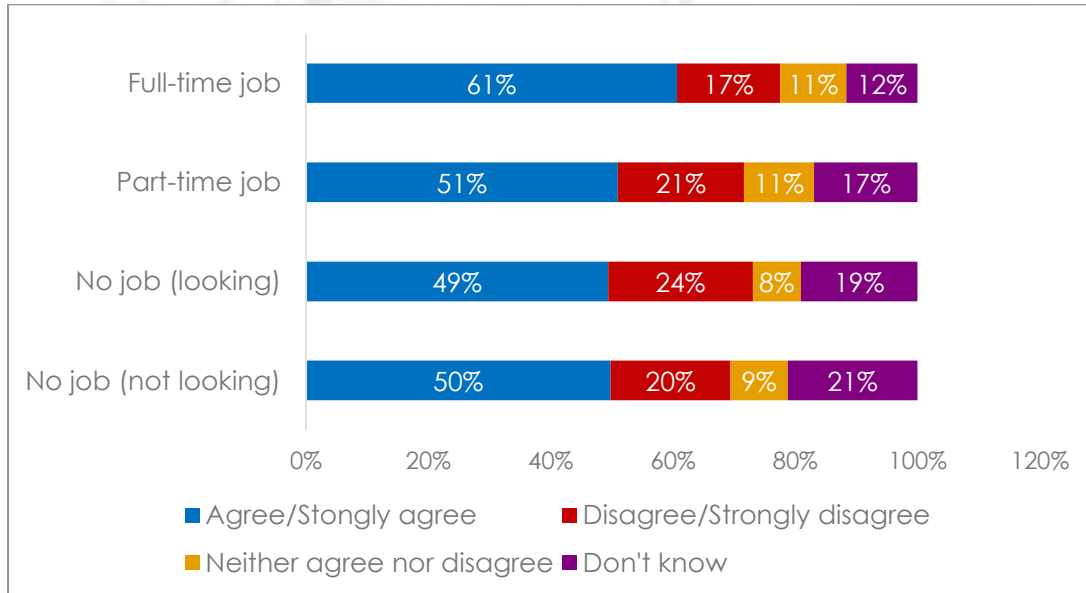
Figure 8: COSATU and concern for political power | by province | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The leaders of COSATU are more concerned about political power than the interests of workers?

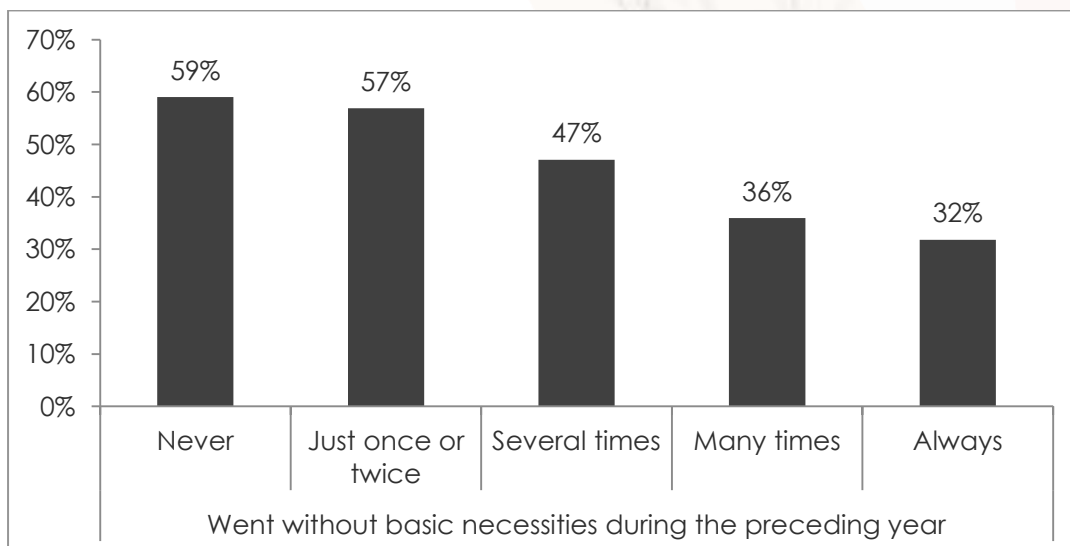
As with support for a new workers' party, criticism of COSATU's concern with political power was most common among full-time employees (Figure 9), those who are better off economically (Figure 10), and Indian/South Asian citizens (Figure 11).

Figure 9: COSATU and concern for political power | by employment status | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The leaders of COSATU are more concerned about political power than the interests of workers?

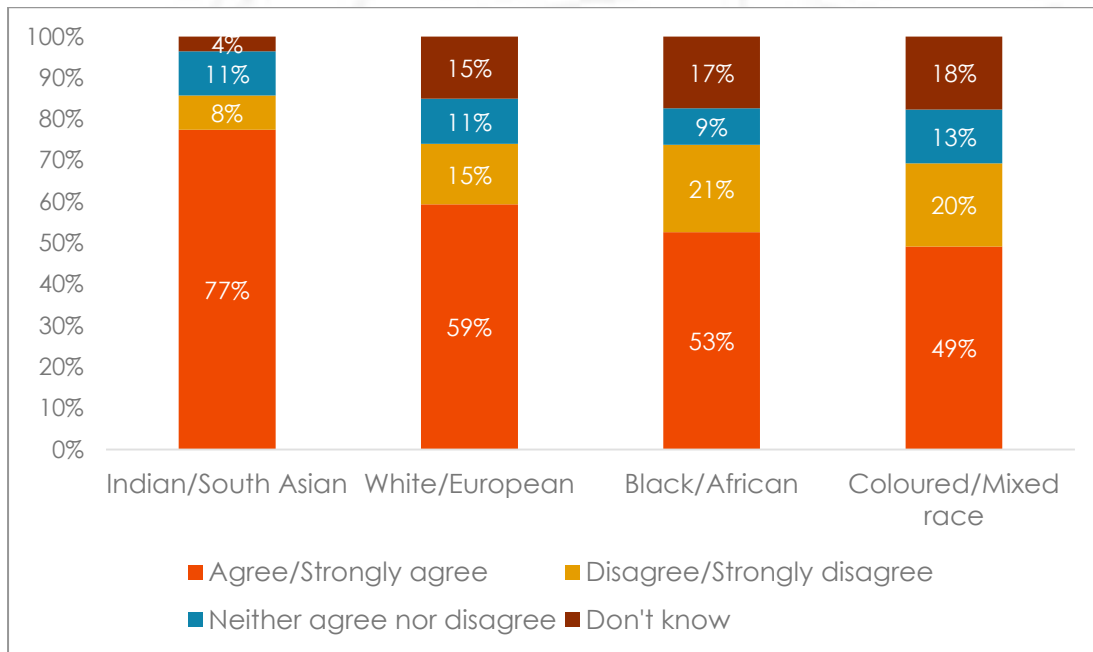
Figure 10: COSATU more concerned with political power than workers' interests | by lived poverty level | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked:

- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: South Africa needs a new workers' party that can defend the interests of the working class?
- Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income? (Figure shows % at each level of lived poverty who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 11: COSATU and concern for political power | by race | South Africa | 2015

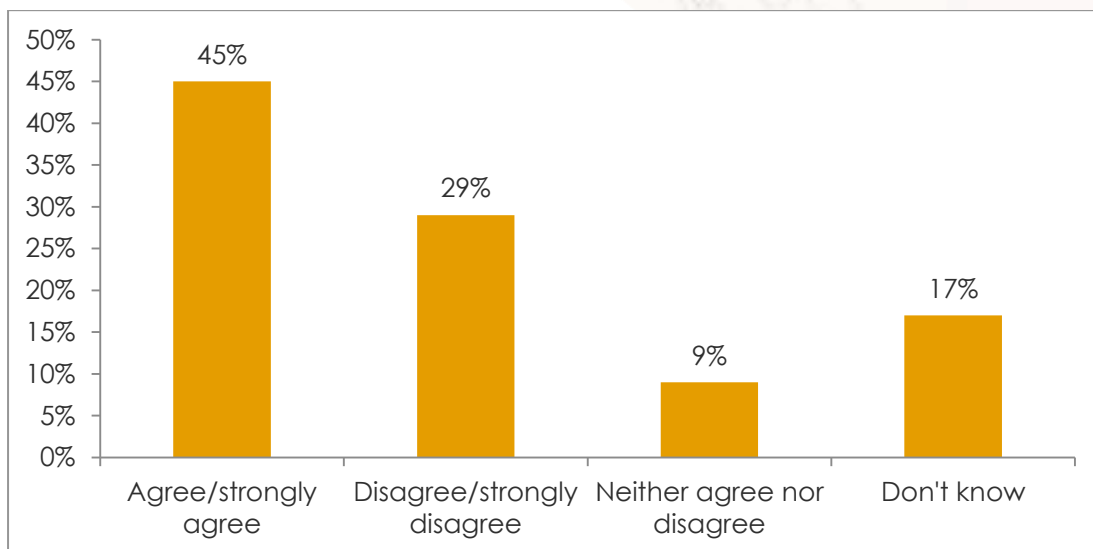


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree? The leaders of COSATU are more concerned about political power than the interests of workers

Should trade unions operate without government influence?

While slim majorities favour the establishment of a workers' party and criticize COSATU leaders' focus on political power, South Africans are more divided on the question of whether unions should operate without government control or influence. Four in ten (45%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that the government should have no control or influence over trade unions, while 29% "disagree" or "strongly disagree" and 17% "don't know" (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Should trade unions be under government control? | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: In order to fully advance the interests of their members, trade unions in South Africa, for example COSATU, SADTU, and NUMSA, should operate without any government influence or control?

Conclusion

Although South Africa's centre-left ANC government professes to work for the poor and working classes, Afrobarometer data show that a majority of citizens favour the establishment of a workers' party to challenge the party in power. A majority of South Africans say COSATU leaders are more focused on political power than on workers' interests. Views are divided as to whether trade unions should operate without government influence or control.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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