

SADTU and the Struggle for Professional Unionism, edited by Michael Cross, Logan Govender and Ahmed Essop

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Reviewed by Linda Cooper

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8159-0588>
University of Cape Town, South Africa
Linda.Cooper@uct.ac.za

Jeanne Gamble

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9232-3074>
University of Cape Town, South Africa
jeanne.gamble@uct.ac.za

Overview

This book traces the emergence and development of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and explores its role within the education landscape in South Africa, focusing on the period from the 1980s to the present. Although most chapters are set against a detailed historical backdrop, the book's aim is not to provide a general history of SADTU but rather to explore the relationship between teacher unionism and professionalism. Its starting point is that SADTU has frequently been criticised for failing to transform from the social movement form of trade union organisation, which it assumed as part of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) of the 1980s, to a post-apartheid professional union that prioritises the rights of learners, focuses on enhancing educational quality and equality, and is capable of building productive teacher-state relationships. Its broad argument is that SADTU has failed to achieve fully fledged teacher professionalism, prioritising unionism above professionalism.

Following a cyclical logic throughout the book's seven chapters, this argument is revisited from a number of different vantage points:

- The contrast between SADTU's origins as a particular form of social movement unionism, and SADTU's more recent collective action strategies and relationship with civil society;



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- The influence of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the African National Congress (ANC)-led Tripartite Alliance politics on the evolution and development of SADTU's approach to unionism and teacher professionalism;
- SADTU's relationship with the post-apartheid state and its role in education policy-making;
- The changing nature of SADTU's leadership and organisational configuration and the challenges of addressing both workplace as well as professional issues;
- The ways in which SADTU has positioned itself around issues of teacher autonomy, responsibility and accountability.

The book draws on rich primary data and historical research and brings research findings from a number of doctoral theses more firmly into the public domain. The book was produced in close working relationship with past and present SADTU leaders and members, and methodologically it draws extensively on interview material, supplemented by documentary evidence from SADTU's archives. It tries to ensure that "the lived experiences of SADTU and its members ... are balanced by intellectual rigour and theorisation of their experiences" (p. 7). To this end, Bourdieu's notion of an "epistemological break" is recruited as a warning to authors and editors that common sense narrative should not be reified as reflecting objective understanding. This is a timely warning as there is a marked difference between the views and testimonies offered by authors and interviewees who are or were closely associated with SADTU and the authorial voices of commentators and analysts who achieve a more critical distance. The "dual" interpretation offered in almost every chapter adds depth and nuance to the enquiry into the historical legacies and social, political and organisational contexts that have shaped SADTU's development trajectory over the last three decades. Overall, the book is largely successful in maintaining a balance between representation of individual and collective SADTU voices and critique based on analytical introspection.

Analysis offered in each chapter draws on the metaphor of unionism and professionalism being "two sides of the same coin". However, this relationship is neither unitary nor static, and Chapter 5 acknowledges that the tension inherent in the idea of professional unionism is not unique to SADTU or to South Africa. But how does this tension play out and how does the problematic of a lack of "relative autonomy" from the state impact on SADTU's framing of the relation? Extensive international literature based on empirical research shows that unionisation does not necessarily involve the rejection of professionalism. Equally, there are others who argue that it is both simplistic and inaccurate to view the relation between union agendas and professional concerns as inseparable or complementary (see, for instance, discussions in Kerchner and Cauffman 1995; McCollow 2017; Rabban 1991; Symeonidis and Stromquist 2020).

How then should SADTU's reported struggle for professional unionism be positioned? We explore these two concepts separately to sharpen their analytical purchase and to consider how they may point to future directions for SADTU. To this end, the review examines the book's analysis of SADTU as a trade union from a labour sociology perspective. Thereafter the book's portrayal of SADTU's stance on teacher professionalism is placed under scrutiny.

SADTU as a Trade Union

One of the contextual dimensions explored in the book is the broader backdrop of developments within the South African labour movement post-1994. Khetsi Lehoko's chapter (Chapter 2) is one of the shortest in the book but offers an insightful insider analysis of the critical role that COSATU played in the late 1980s in uniting teacher organisations and establishing SADTU. His key argument is that ideological contestation between unionism and professionalism precluded the establishment of a single, national non-racial teachers' organisation, with conservative teachers' associations forming the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) in opposition to SADTU. He makes the observation that

COSATU did not have experience or an understanding of professionalism, which speaks to the development of professional identities and characteristics in terms of values and behaviours, far removed from the identity and struggles of workers on the factory floor. Neither did COSATU understand that the pursuit of professionalism is central to the transformation and development of a quality education system. (p.76)

Lehoko's key argument is that SADTU's membership of COSATU led to the prioritising of unionism over professionalism. While the book acknowledges that the concept of unionism is dynamic and historically specific (Cross and Ndlovu's Chapter 4 recognises different forms of unionism explicitly), it is not consistently theorised throughout the book. At times, the book conflates unionism with labour economism (a narrow concern with wages and conditions). At other times, the critique of SADTU is that it has been "too political", in other words its affiliation to COSATU and close association with the Tripartite Alliance have blunted its ability to adopt an autonomous position on educational policy issues. Some chapters foreground the social movement unionism that dominated SADTU's earlier history and suggest that this can and should be revived.

The nature of SADTU's unionism is indeed complex, and some of the chapters allude to this (Chapters 4 and 5 refer to teachers' ambiguous identity, occupational status and class position). A closer examination of changes within the South African labour market and within the labour movement as well as changes in the structure of work organisation in professional fields would further help to elucidate this complexity.

Over the past 30 years, the process of South Africa's re-entry into the neoliberal global economy has meant the restructuring of workplaces and the economy as a whole. This

has led to massive job losses in mining and manufacturing—sectors that had historically comprised the heartland of the progressive labour movement—and a relative growth of white-collar occupations. Public sector unions—including SADTU—have experienced these developments as contradictory pressures: on the one hand, their relative weight within the labour movement has grown markedly and the material conditions of their members have improved significantly. On the other hand, mirroring international trends, there has been growing pressure to cut public sector jobs along with increased privatisation, outsourcing and casualisation of labour. Teachers and other public sector workers—as part of what Webster (2005) has termed the “salarariat”—are increasingly in danger of being relegated to the “precariat”, and these risks are heightened with the increased use of remote technologies and artificial intelligence.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that changes in the organisation of professional work are not simply a neoliberal trend. Massive industrial growth after the Second World War led to a shift from independent professional practice in the late nineteenth century to salaried employment in large corporations or the civil service. In the early 1950s the influential sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote:

Most professionals are now salaried employees; much professional work has become divided and standardised and fitted into the new hierarchical organisations of educated skill and service; intensive and narrow specialisation has replaced self-cultivation and wide knowledge. Assistants and sub-professionals perform ... routine tasks while successful professionals become more and more the managerial type. (Wright Mills 1951, 112)

From the 1980s on, a restructuring of state-public sector relations within a framework of neoliberal market relations intensified these trends (Dale 1997, 273–82). As some chapters in the book on SADTU note, the shift to private-sector styles of management with their emphasis on “effectiveness”, “efficiency”, “results” and “explicit measures of performance” was part of what became known as the New Public Management or the “new managerialism” (Hoyle and Wallace 2009, 205). It is within this context that the rise of teacher trade unionism and militancy internationally can be understood.

Locating SADTU more firmly as a *public sector* union with significant new weight within the South African labour movement but operating within a restructured labour market and new forms of professional work organisation would help to deepen SADTU’s understanding of its contradictory character as a trade union.

Teacher Professionalism

Professionalism is a powerful ideology and the idea of becoming and being a “professional” worker has constant appeal. However, a unified approach to the concept has not emerged. In earlier years, occupational professionalism was conceived of as a material *practice*, grounded in a normative value system as the basis for relations of trust between employers, clients and practitioners. The trust relationship was premised

on expertise based on specialised knowledge, collective and collegiate autonomy, and ultimately on accountability for ethical conduct to the profession. This understanding has since shifted to viewing professionalism as a *discourse* to expose, reproduce or challenge dominant relations of power. Current sociological interpretations focus mainly on two discourses: occupational professionalism constructed “from within” by the occupational group (as described above) and organisational professionalism imposed “from above” as a form of managerial control that aligns with the restructuring of state-public sector relations under increasingly globalised market conditions and resultant shifts in how public services are managed and appraised (Evetts 2003, 2013).

In the literature on teacher professionalism, Sachs (2001, 2016) re-describes the above discourses as “democratic professionalism” and “managerial professionalism” associated with “activist” and “entrepreneurial” professional identities, respectively. Re-description of occupational professionalism shifts the emphasis away from teacher practices in classrooms to the contribution that teachers need to make to “the school, the system, other students and the wider community” (Sachs 2001, 153.) This interpretation provides the conceptual framing of most of the discussions on teacher professionalism in the book (see, for instance, Chapters 1 and 5). Why this should be so is explained by the recognition that first-generation leadership discourse in SADTU rested on “a system of beliefs, principles, values and attitudes from every day social and cultural struggles and practices” (p. 190). The campaign for “people’s education for people’s power” and the alternative vision of a non-racial and democratic education system contained within this slogan formed the dominant ideology that drove SADTU’s early engagement in the educational field (pp. 32–38). Described as a “political mobilising strategy” rather than as a foundation for theorising an alternative education system (Kruss 1988, 11), it is difficult to fathom how everyday value systems, even though deeply rooted in the history of struggle over education in South Africa, can provide a strong enough basis for addressing the crisis facing the South African education system and schooling in particular. It is only very late in the book in the final chapter on SADTU’s future role that there is an acknowledgment that SADTU needs to pay attention to the “norms, values and principles of teaching as a profession” (p. 224). The dilemma is that identification of the need to return to occupational professionalism in some way cannot be further developed while it sits in contradiction to the position of returning to social movement unionism that is advocated in the final chapter and reinforced by a reliance on aligned discourses on professionalism. Discourse is not enough—norms, values and principles need to be visible in the everyday conduct and dealings of professionals and their organisations. While this is acknowledged in most chapters, the conceptual resources utilised do not offer the kind of alternatives that need to be explored.

In the end, the book’s focus on “democratic professional unionism” avoids confrontation with the central issue raised but not resolved in the book: that of the necessity for a professional teacher union to have relative autonomy from the state. As civil servants, teachers and their organisations are bound by the education policies and prescribed curricula of the state; at the same time, they need to be able to exercise

collective agency in critiquing and shaping state policy as well as representing the material interests of their members. Such relative autonomy is central to the concept of occupational professionalism, but it is incompatible with SADTU's continuing participation through COSATU in the Tripartite Alliance with the state.

This book offers many refreshing insights and candidly sets out some of the critiques of SADTU's practices by the 2016 Ministerial Task Team's report into allegations of corruption and fraud in education appointments. However—and possibly because of the format adopted where each chapter is separately authored—the book's overall arguments are constantly revisited rather than drawn together into a coherent strategy for how SADTU's vision of achieving quality and equity in education can be achieved in the context of the aggressive marketisation that is happening across the world.

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