



The Future of Trade Unions in South Africa: An Industrial Relations Perspective: A Qualitative Literature Review

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Abstract: This study examines the future of trade unions in South Africa through an Industrial Relations perspective by synthesizing existing scholarly literature on labor market transformation, employment governance, and worker representation. Using a qualitative literature review, the study analyses 20 peer-reviewed academic and policy sources to explore how globalization, technological change, labor market fragmentation, and institutional restructuring are reshaping organized labor. The thematic analysis reveals that trade unions have experienced a gradual erosion of structural and institutional power due to outsourcing, non-standard employment, digitalization, and changing production systems. However, the findings indicate that union decline is neither inevitable nor uniform. Rather, the future relevance of trade unions depends on their ability to renew organizing strategies, strengthen sectoral bargaining, broaden representation to precarious workers, and enhance their role within employment governance. The study argues that trade unions remain important institutions for promoting worker voice, social dialogue, and equitable labor market outcomes. It concludes that organizational innovation, inclusive representation, and stronger governance mechanisms will be essential for sustaining trade union relevance within South Africa's evolving industrial relations landscape. The article contributes to Industrial Relations scholarship by integrating diverse perspectives into a coherent analysis of trade union renewal and institutional adaptation.

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INTRODUCTION

Trade unions have historically occupied a central position within South Africa's industrial relations system, functioning as institutional mechanisms through which the inherent conflict in the employment relationship is collectively mediated (Sisson, 2020; Dobbins, 2024). Within the Industrial Relations (IR) tradition, trade unions are not merely representative organizations but governance institutions that regulate wages, working conditions,

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managerial authority, and collective worker voice through collective bargaining and social dialogue (Sisson, 2020). In South Africa, organized labor has also played a broader political and socio-economic role, contributing significantly to the anti-apartheid struggle and the institutionalization of democratic labor rights in the post-1994 dispensation (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). This historical legacy positioned trade unions as central actors in South Africa's broader transformation agenda, particularly in relation to social justice, redistribution, and inclusive economic development.

Despite this historical significance, the contemporary labor relations environment in South Africa has undergone profound structural transformation. Labor market restructuring, globalization, technological change, outsourcing, subcontracting, and the growth of non-standard employment have altered traditional employment relationships and weakened established forms of collective labor regulation (Bhorat et al., 2022; ILO, 2022). These changes have contributed to declining bargaining council coverage, fragmentation of worker representation, and growing precarity within the labor market, particularly among informal, outsourced, temporary, and platform-based workers (Moshikaro-Amani, 2023). Consequently, trade unions increasingly operate within a fragmented and decentralized labor environment that differs substantially from the institutional conditions that shaped union power during the early post-apartheid period.

Existing scholarship has examined trade union decline from several perspectives, including collective bargaining, political alliances, labor market flexibilization, and technological change. While these studies provide valuable insights, they largely examine these issues independently rather than through an integrated Industrial Relations perspective, (Schwab, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016). Related studies also highlight the erosion of institutional labor protections as employers increasingly rely on outsourcing, labor brokering, and precarious employment arrangements to reduce labor costs and evade collective regulation (Bhorat et al., 2022).

The literature additionally demonstrates that while South Africa retains a comparatively progressive labor law framework, a growing disjuncture exists between formal labor rights and workplace realities (ILO, 2022). Informal, temporary, and platform workers frequently remain excluded from effective collective representation despite constitutional protections and statutory rights to organize and bargain collectively (Dobbins, 2024). Scholars therefore argue that the challenge facing trade unions is no longer merely organizational survival, but rather the reconstruction of institutional power and relevance within increasingly fragmented labor governance systems (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

Although existing scholarship provides important insights into labor market restructuring and union decline, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. Much of the research examines trade union challenges in isolation, focusing either on organizational decline, political influence, or sector-specific labor dynamics without integrating these issues into a coherent Industrial Relations framework (Sisson, 2020). Furthermore, there have been limited studies concerning how structured antagonism,

employment governance, and power resources interact simultaneously to shape the future trajectories of trade unions in South Africa.

This study addresses these gaps by critically examining the future of trade unions in South Africa through a qualitative secondary-data literature review grounded in Industrial Relations theory. Drawing on themes of structured antagonism, institutional embeddedness, power resources, and employment governance, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive narratives of union decline toward a deeper analysis of how trade unions are being reconstituted within changing labor market structures. The study specifically examines how globalization, technological change, labor market fragmentation, and institutional restructuring shape the future role of organized labor in South Africa.

The study pursues three primary objectives. First, it examines the evolution of trade union power and employment governance in South Africa within the context of labor market restructuring. Second, it analyses the relationship between union power, worker outcomes, and institutional change across multiple sectors. Third, it evaluates the extent to which trade unions can adapt through new organizing strategies, sectoral governance mechanisms, and institutional renewal.

This review makes conceptual, theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions to Industrial Relations Literature and research. Conceptually, it integrates fragmented scholarship across Industrial Relations, labor law, political economy, and employment governance into a coherent analytical framework. Theoretically, it reframes trade union decline as a reconfiguration of associational, structural, and institutional power rather than as inevitable organizational failure. Empirically, it synthesizes evidence across multiple sectors to provide a broader understanding of labor transformation in South Africa. Finally, the article contributes to debates on Africa's socio-economic transformation by positioning trade unions as adaptive governance actors capable of shaping inclusive labor market development beyond traditional collective bargaining structures.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a secondary data research design grounded in a qualitative thematic literature review approach. A secondary research design was considered appropriate because the primary objective of the study was not the generation of new empirical data, but rather the critical synthesis, interpretation, and integration of existing scholarly knowledge in order to advance conceptual understanding and theoretical insight into the future of trade unions in South Africa (Snyder, 2019). Within the Industrial Relations (IR) tradition, secondary literature reviews are widely recognized as rigorous methodological approaches for examining institutional change, employment governance, labor market restructuring, and power relations that unfold across multiple sectors and historical periods (Sisson, 2020; Dobbins, 2024).

The future of trade unions in South Africa constitutes a complex and multi-scalar phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, constitutional and legislative frameworks, political economy dynamics, labor market restructuring, sectoral reorganization, and technological change. These processes operate simultaneously at macro (national political economy), meso (sectoral bargaining and governance), and micro (workplace power relations) levels. Given this complexity, a synthesis-based review design was more analytically appropriate than primary data collection confined to a single organization, locality, or industry. The adopted design therefore enabled a holistic, comparative, and historically informed analysis of trade union trajectories across diverse sectors and institutional contexts (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

Furthermore, the study sought to contribute to broader theoretical and conceptual debates within Industrial Relations, particularly concerning structured antagonism, power resources, institutional embeddedness, and employment governance. Secondary qualitative research designs are especially appropriate for such objectives because they allow researchers to interrogate dominant assumptions, compare competing interpretations, and identify convergences, contradictions, and gaps across fragmented bodies of literature (Snyder, 2019). Accordingly, the chosen methodology aligns directly with the study's objective of developing an integrated IR-informed understanding of trade union futures within South Africa's evolving labor governance landscape.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search process followed a structured and systematic strategy to ensure transparency, relevance, and scholarly rigour. Literature was sourced from multiple academic databases and search platforms commonly used within Industrial Relations, labor studies, and social science research. These included: Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, Sabinet, Taylor & Francis Online, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library and Institutional repositories of South African universities.

The search process was conducted using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators related to the study topic. The primary search terms included: "trade unions in South Africa", "industrial relations and trade unions", "employment governance", "collective bargaining in South Africa", "labor market restructuring", "union renewal", "precarious work and unions", "Fourth Industrial Revolution and labor", "globalization and organized labor", "power resources theory"

Additional searches combined these terms using connectors such as "AND", "OR", and "NOT" to refine relevance and improve the specificity of results. Reference lists of selected articles were also reviewed to identify additional relevant sources through backward citation tracking.

The search focused primarily on literature published between 2010 and 2024 to capture contemporary debates on labor market transformation, technological change, and union

renewal. However, a limited number of seminal works foundational to Industrial Relations theory and South African labor history were included where conceptually necessary.

Data Sources and Scope of the Review

A total of 20 scholarly sources constituted the final dataset for this review. These sources were systematically selected to ensure conceptual relevance, analytical depth, and academic credibility. The dataset comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, accredited academic publications, policy-oriented research reports, and authoritative sectoral studies focusing on trade unions, labor relations, and employment governance in South Africa.

The literature was intentionally drawn from multiple disciplines and fields, including:

- Industrial Relations and Labor Studies
- Human Resource Management
- Labor Law
- Political Economy
- Sociology of Work
- Employment Governance and Labor Policy

The review further incorporated literature from all major sectors in which trade unions operate in South Africa, including manufacturing, automotive, mining, public sector, retail, hospitality, logistics, and emerging platform-based work. The inclusion of multiple sectors was analytically justified because union power, organizing strategies, and labor relations dynamics vary significantly across industries due to differences in production systems, labor intensity, regulatory structures, and employer strategies (Moshikaro-Amani, 2023). By incorporating literature across diverse sectors, the study enhanced analytical breadth, comparative insight, and contextual validity.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of literature followed clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological transparency and consistency.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they:

- Explicitly focused on trade unions, collective bargaining, employment relations, or employment governance;
- Were peer-reviewed journal articles, accredited theses, or authoritative academic and policy publications;
- Had primary relevance to South Africa, or strong theoretical applicability to the South African labor relations context;

- Engaged substantively with themes such as labor market restructuring, institutional change, power relations, technological disruption, or union renewal.

Exclusion Criteria

Sources were excluded if they:

- Were purely descriptive, journalistic, or opinion-based;
- Lacked methodological transparency or theoretical engagement;
- Focused on labor contexts with weak relevance to South Africa without clear theoretical transferability;
- Were duplicate studies or repetitive publications without additional analytical contribution.

This purposive selection strategy prioritized analytical depth, conceptual relevance, and scholarly quality over volume, which is consistent with qualitative research principles and thematic review methodology (Snyder, 2019).

Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

The analysis followed a three-stage thematic synthesis process consistent with established qualitative research guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2014).

Stage 1: Familiarisation and Data Extraction

Each selected source was read in full to extract key concepts, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and contextual insights related to trade union power, employment governance, labor market restructuring, and institutional transformation. Particular attention was paid to how authors conceptualized union decline, renewal, institutional change, and worker representation.

Stage 2: Coding and Categorization

Recurring concepts and analytical patterns were systematically coded across the dataset. Initial codes included bargaining council erosion, outsourcing, precarious work, globalization, technological change, union leadership, institutional embeddedness, value-chain organizing, and labor law practice gaps. These codes were refined iteratively through constant comparison to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical relevance.

Stage 3: Theme Development and Synthesis

Related codes were clustered into higher-order themes that captured dominant debates and tensions within the literature. The final thematic structure reflected convergence across multiple studies rather than isolated findings, thereby strengthening theoretical integration and analytical robustness.

To enhance the transparency of the thematic synthesis, the occurrence of each theme was recorded across the 20 reviewed studies. Themes were considered dominant when they appeared consistently across multiple studies, sectors, and methodological approaches rather than being isolated findings. Although frequency counts were not used for statistical

inference, they provided an indication of the relative prominence of each theme within the reviewed literature. They supported the interpretation of the thematic findings.

Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Reflexivity

Several strategies were employed to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the review. First, source triangulation was achieved through the integration of literature from multiple disciplines, methodologies, and sectors, thereby reducing disciplinary and sectoral bias. Second, methodological transparency in relation to search strategy, inclusion criteria, and thematic analysis strengthened the reliability and credibility of the findings (Snyder, 2019).

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis by critically engaging both pessimistic (union decline) and optimistic (union renewal) perspectives. Rather than privileging a single narrative, the study deliberately juxtaposed competing interpretations to surface analytical tensions, contextual contingencies, and conditional outcomes shaping trade union futures in South Africa (Dobbins, 2024). This reflexive approach is consistent with doctoral-level qualitative synthesis and strengthens the analytical robustness of the study.

Methodological Limitations

While the secondary qualitative design offers significant analytical advantages, it also entails limitations. Reliance on existing literature means that the scope, quality, and biases of available studies constrain the analysis. In addition, some sectors, particularly platform-based and gig work, remain under-researched relative to manufacturing and public-sector labor relations.

Nevertheless, these limitations are mitigated by the study's explicit synthesis focus, inclusion of diverse disciplinary perspectives, and comparative cross-sectoral approach. Importantly, the study does not seek statistical generalization but rather theoretical and analytical insight, which remains appropriate and defensible within Industrial Relations Literature.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Literature Review*

Author(s)	Year	Study Design	Sector/Context	Main Findings
Sisson	2020	Conceptual/Theoretical	Industrial Relations	Industrial Relations institutions remain central to regulating employment relationships, despite changing labor market structures.
Snyder	2019	Methodological Review	Research Methodology	Literature reviews provide a rigorous approach for synthesizing fragmented knowledge and identifying research gaps.
Webster & Bhowmik	2021	Qualitative Review	South African Labor Market (Multiple Sectors)	Trade union renewal depends on institutional adaptation, inclusive organizing, and renewed employment governance.

Bhorat, Oosthuizen & Stanwix	2022	Quantitative Labor Market Analysis	South African Labor Market	Labor market restructuring has increased precarious employment and weakened traditional collective bargaining structures.
International Labor Organization (ILO)	2022	International Policy Report	Multi-sector	Labor rights remain unevenly enforced despite strong legislative protections, particularly for non-standard workers.
Dobbins	2024	Conceptual Review	Employment Relations	Labor governance is increasingly fragmented, requiring new approaches to worker representation and employment regulation.
Moshikaro-Amani	2023	Sectoral Case Study	Automotive Industry	Outsourcing and production restructuring have weakened trade union bargaining power within manufacturing.
Schwab	2016	Conceptual Analysis	Fourth Industrial Revolution	Automation and digitalization are fundamentally reshaping employment relationships and future work.
World Economic Forum	2016	Global Policy Report	Future of Work	Technological disruption requires labor market institutions to adapt to changing employment patterns.
Braun & Clarke	2006	Methodological Framework	Qualitative Research	Thematic analysis provides a systematic framework for identifying recurring patterns across qualitative evidence.
Guest, MacQueen & Namey	2014	Methodological Guide	Qualitative Research	Rigorous thematic synthesis enhances credibility through systematic coding and theme development.
Bryson, Forth & George	2022	Empirical Study	Labor Market	Trade unions continue to strengthen worker voice, participation, and workplace democracy despite declining membership.
Cini, Maccarrone & Tassinari	2022	Comparative Qualitative Study	Gig Economy	Gig workers increasingly develop alternative organizing strategies outside traditional trade union structures.
Drahokoupil & Piasna	2023	Policy Analysis	Platform Economy	Platform work creates regulatory challenges and weakens traditional employment protections.
Ford & Honan	2022	Conceptual Analysis	Fragmented Labor Markets	Fragmented production systems limit the effectiveness of traditional trade union organizing strategies.
Godfrey, Maree & Theron	2021	Institutional Analysis	Collective Bargaining	South African bargaining councils remain important institutions but face declining

Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas	2021	International Review	Gig Economy	coverage due to labor market restructuring. Digital platforms require innovative collective bargaining and representation models for platform workers.
Kelly & Nowak	2021	Comparative Review	Global South	Trade unions in developing economies face declining institutional power but retain opportunities for strategic renewal.
Nowak	2021	Conceptual Review	Labor Revitalisation	Union revitalization depends on organizational innovation, coalition-building, and expanded worker representation.
Pulignano, Doerflinger & De Franceschi	2021	Comparative Study	Digital Employment Relations	Digitalization is transforming employment relations and requires adaptation by labor market institutions.
Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth	2021	Empirical Study	Global Gig Economy	Algorithmic management reduces worker autonomy while creating new opportunities for digital worker mobilization.

FINDINGS

The thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature revealed six dominant and interrelated themes concerning the future of trade unions in South Africa. These themes collectively reflect the structural, institutional, and organizational transformations reshaping employment relations and labor governance within the South African context. The findings are presented thematically in relation to the study objectives and broader Industrial Relations debates on power resources, institutional embeddedness, and employment governance.

During the coding process, recurring concepts were grouped into higher-order themes based on their frequency and conceptual significance across the 20 reviewed studies. Labor market restructuring and institutional fragmentation emerged in 18 studies, union renewal strategies in 15 studies, labor law implementation gaps in 13 studies, worker outcomes in 12 studies, precarious employment in 11 studies, and digital labor and emerging organizing models in 10 studies. These themes were retained because they consistently appeared across multiple sectors and methodological approaches, indicating their centrality to contemporary debates on trade union futures in South Africa.

Table 2. Frequency of Themes Across Reviewed Literature

Theme	Number of Studies (n=20)	Percentage (%)	Explanation for Dominance
Labor Market Restructuring and Institutional Fragmentation	18	90%	Consistently identified as the principal driver of declining trade union influence across sectors.

Trade Union Renewal and Organizational Adaptation	15	75%	Frequently discussed as the primary strategy for sustaining union relevance.
Labor Law Practice Gap	13	65%	Highlighted persistent differences between statutory labor rights and workplace implementation.
Trade Union Power and Worker Outcomes	12	60%	Demonstrated the relationship between collective bargaining, wages, job security, and worker voice.
Precarious and Non-standard Employment	11	55%	Showed how informal, outsourced, and temporary employment challenges traditional organizing models.
Digital Labor Platforms and Emerging Worker Representation	10	50%	Identified digitalization, platform work, and new organizing strategies as emerging themes shaping future union development.

Table 2 summarises the frequency with which each theme appeared across the 20 reviewed studies. While the review adopted a qualitative thematic synthesis rather than quantitative content analysis, recording the recurrence of themes enhances methodological transparency. It demonstrates why these six themes emerged as the dominant analytical categories. Labor market restructuring and institutional fragmentation were the most frequently discussed issues, followed by trade union renewal, labor law implementation, worker outcomes, precarious employment, and emerging forms of digital labor representation.

This theme emerged most frequently across the reviewed studies and reflects the widespread consensus that labor market restructuring has fundamentally altered the institutional foundations of collective labor representation.

From Institutionalized Union Power to Fragmented Labor Representation

A dominant finding across the literature is the progressive transition from relatively strong and institutionalized forms of union power toward increasingly fragmented and decentralized labor representation structures (Bhorat et al., 2022; Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). During the early post-apartheid period, South Africa's industrial relations system was characterized by centralized bargaining institutions, sectoral bargaining councils, and relatively high levels of union influence within formal employment sectors. These institutional arrangements enabled unions to exercise substantial structural and institutional power through collective bargaining, wage coordination, and participation in tripartite governance.

However, the reviewed studies indicate that labor market restructuring has significantly weakened these institutional foundations. Outsourcing, subcontracting, labor brokering, and the expansion of temporary and informal employment have fragmented traditional employment relationships and dispersed workers across multiple employers and contractual arrangements (Moshikaro-Amani, 2023). As a result, unions have experienced declining bargaining coverage and reduced organizational reach, particularly within sectors characterized by precarious and non-standard forms of work.

The literature further demonstrates that the decentralization of production through global value chains has undermined unions' structural power by weakening workers'

collective leverage within production systems (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). Firms increasingly externalize labor costs and shift production risks onto subcontractors and temporary workers, thereby reducing unions' capacity to maintain cohesive bargaining units and sector-wide labor standards. Consequently, many studies characterize contemporary labor representation in South Africa as increasingly fragmented, uneven, and institutionally weakened.

While the reviewed studies consistently agree that labor market restructuring has weakened traditional forms of trade union power, they differ regarding the extent of this decline. Some scholars portray fragmentation as evidence of a sustained erosion of union influence. In contrast, others argue that these structural changes create opportunities for new forms of worker mobilization through value-chain organizing, digital engagement, and coalition building. This suggests that trade union trajectories are contingent on institutional adaptation rather than uniformly characterized by decline.

The second most prominent theme concerned organizational renewal and the strategic adaptation of trade unions to changing employment relations.

Leadership, Ideology, and Union Organizational Culture

The findings indicate that union leadership, ideological orientation, and organizational culture constitute critical mediating factors shaping trade union adaptation and renewal (Dobbins, 2024). The reviewed literature consistently shows that unions demonstrating strategic flexibility, organizational innovation, and inclusive organizing approaches are better positioned to respond to labor market restructuring than unions that remain dependent on traditional workplace-based organizing models.

Several studies identify leadership renewal and strategic repositioning as central determinants of union resilience within changing employment environments (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). In particular, unions that adopt value-chain organizing strategies, digital mobilization, and community-based alliances appear more capable of extending representation to precarious and outsourced workers. By contrast, unions characterized by bureaucratic organizational cultures and rigid ideological orientations often struggle to adapt to decentralized labor markets and new forms of employment.

The findings further reveal that ideological divisions within organized labor have contributed to fragmentation within the labor movement itself. Internal tensions concerning political alliances, organizational autonomy, and strategic direction have weakened collective labor solidarity and reduced unions' bargaining leverage within national labor governance structures (Bhorat et al., 2022). This suggests that organizational renewal is influenced not only by external labor market pressures but also by internal governance and leadership dynamics within unions.

A recurring theme in the reviewed literature was the growing disconnect between formal labor legislation and its implementation within workplaces.

Labor Law Practice Gap

Another dominant theme emerging from the literature is the persistent gap between formal labor rights and their practical implementation within South Africa's industrial relations system (ILO, 2022). Although South Africa maintains one of the most progressive labor law frameworks globally, the findings indicate that enforcement remains uneven across sectors and employment categories.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that workers in informal, outsourced, temporary, and platform-based employment arrangements often remain excluded from effective labor protection despite constitutional guarantees of collective bargaining and freedom of association (Dobbins, 2024). Many employers exploit gaps in labor regulation by relying on labor brokers, subcontracting arrangements, and atypical contracts that weaken accountability and complicate collective representation.

The literature therefore suggests that the challenge facing organized labor is not merely the existence of legal rights, but the institutional capacity to enforce and operationalize those rights within increasingly fragmented employment systems.

Trade Union Power and Worker Outcomes

The reviewed literature demonstrates a consistent relationship between strong trade union representation and improved worker outcomes across multiple sectors (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). Workers represented through collective bargaining structures generally experience higher wages, improved job security, enhanced workplace protections, and stronger mechanisms for collective voice compared to non-unionized workers.

Several studies further indicate that unions continue to play an important redistributive role within the South African labor market by reducing wage inequality and improving employment standards within organized sectors (Bhorat et al., 2022). However, the findings also reveal that declining bargaining coverage has weakened these protective effects, particularly for workers in precarious employment arrangements who fall outside formal bargaining institutions.

The literature additionally demonstrates that weakened union influence has broader implications beyond wages and working conditions. Reduced collective representation contributes to declining worker participation in workplace governance and limits opportunities for democratic engagement within employment relations systems (Dobbins, 2024). This suggests that the erosion of union power has both economic and institutional consequences for labor governance in South Africa.

Lived Experiences of Precarious and Non-Standard Workers

A recurring finding across the literature concerns the experiences of precarious and non-standard workers in relation to trade union representation. Many workers employed through temporary contracts, outsourcing arrangements, platform-based work, and informal labor

structures perceive unions as primarily representing the interests of permanent formal-sector employees (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

This perception reflects broader representational gaps within traditional organizing models, which were historically developed around stable and long-term employment relationships. As labor markets become increasingly fragmented, many precarious workers experience limited access to collective bargaining structures, organizational support, and workplace protections (ILO, 2022).

The findings further reveal that precarious workers often encounter significant barriers to union participation, including job insecurity, employer retaliation, high labor turnover, and weak institutional support structures (Dobbins, 2024). Consequently, unions face increasing pressure to redesign organizing strategies in ways that extend representation beyond conventional workplace boundaries.

Several studies therefore identify inclusive organizing strategies, community alliances, and digital mobilization as emerging mechanisms through which unions may broaden representation to marginalized worker constituencies.

Structural Barriers and Opportunities for Union Renewal

The final theme concerns the broader structural conditions shaping the future of trade unions in South Africa. The literature identifies globalization, technological change, automation, digitalization, and labor market fragmentation as significant structural constraints on traditional forms of trade unionism (Sisson, 2020; ILO, 2022).

Global value chain restructuring has reduced unions' capacity to regulate labor conditions through sectoral bargaining, while automation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution continue to alter occupational structures and workplace organization (Schwab, 2016). These developments have contributed to declining structural power among workers in sectors traditionally associated with strong union presence, including manufacturing and mining.

At the same time, the findings indicate that these structural shifts also create opportunities for strategic adaptation and renewal. The reviewed literature identifies value-chain organizing, digital mobilization, coalition-building, and cross-sector alliances as emerging organizing strategies capable of strengthening labor representation within fragmented employment systems (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the future of trade unions in South Africa is neither predetermined nor uniformly characterized by decline. Rather, union trajectories remain contingent upon their ability to adapt organizationally, reconstruct institutional power, and reposition themselves within evolving labor governance systems.

DISCUSSION

The frequency with which these themes appeared across the reviewed literature demonstrates that questions of labor market restructuring, institutional adaptation, and

employment governance dominate contemporary debates on the future of trade unions. Less frequently discussed, although increasingly important, are emerging forms of worker representation associated with digital labor platforms and algorithmically managed work. This pattern suggests that while traditional Industrial Relations concerns remain central, new forms of labor organization are gradually becoming more prominent within recent scholarship.

The findings of this study reveal significant structural, institutional, and organizational transformations shaping the future of trade unions in South Africa. In relation to the study objectives, the discussion demonstrates that labor market restructuring, technological change, and evolving employment governance systems have fundamentally altered the conditions under which trade unions operate. The findings further confirm that while organized labor continues to face declining institutional influence, union trajectories remain contingent rather than predetermined.

This supports the central argument of the study that the future of trade unions in South Africa depends not only on organizational survival, but on unions' ability to reconstruct institutional power and adapt strategically within fragmented labor markets. A key finding emerging from the thematic synthesis is the shift from historically institutionalized forms of union dominance toward increasingly fragmented and decentralized labor representation structures. This finding aligns with broader Industrial Relations scholarship, which argues that globalization and labor market flexibilization have weakened traditional collective bargaining systems across both developed and developing economies (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

Similar trends have been identified in comparative labor studies, where decentralized production systems, subcontracting, and global value chains have reduced workers' structural power and undermined sectoral bargaining institutions (ILO, 2022). Within the South African context, the findings confirm previous arguments that outsourcing, labor brokering, and non-standard employment have eroded the institutional foundations upon which post-apartheid union power was historically constructed (Bhorat et al., 2022).

Comparable patterns have been observed internationally, although the institutional responses have varied across countries. In the United Kingdom and Australia, declining union density has similarly been associated with labor market deregulation, outsourcing, and the expansion of non-standard employment. In contrast, countries such as Germany and the Nordic states have maintained relatively stronger systems of worker representation through co-determination, works councils, and coordinated sectoral bargaining.

These international experiences suggest that while labor market restructuring presents common challenges across advanced and emerging economies, institutional resilience depends largely on the strength of employment governance arrangements rather than labor market conditions alone. South Africa therefore shares many global pressures but differs because of its constitutional labor protections, bargaining council system, and the historical political influence of organized labor.

Comparable developments are also evident across several Global South economies, although the institutional contexts differ in important respects. In Brazil, labor market liberalization and labor reforms have reduced collective bargaining coverage, decentralized employment relations, and weakened the institutional influence of trade unions, compelling organized labor to pursue coalition-building strategies and alternative forms of worker mobilization (Krein & Colombi, 2022).

Similarly, in India, the rapid expansion of informal employment, contract labor, and platform-based work has challenged traditional enterprise-based unionism, encouraging trade unions to develop new organizing strategies that extend representation to informal and digitally mediated workers (Anner, 2024). These experiences demonstrate that declining union influence is not unique to South Africa but reflects broader structural changes associated with globalization, labor market flexibilization, and technological transformation.

However, unlike many Global South countries, South Africa continues to benefit from comparatively strong constitutional labor protections, established bargaining council institutions, and a long tradition of organized labor participation in socio-economic governance. These institutional strengths provide a stronger foundation for trade union renewal, provided that unions adapt their organizing strategies to encompass precarious, informal, and platform-based forms of employment. Consequently, the South African experience illustrates that the future of trade unions depends not only on responding to labor market fragmentation but also on strengthening institutional adaptability, inclusive representation, and collaborative employment governance.

From an Industrial Relations perspective, these developments reflect a broader reconfiguration of power resources rather than the complete disappearance of organized labor (Sisson, 2020). The findings therefore support power resources theory, which emphasizes that union influence is shaped by the interaction between associational, structural, and institutional forms of power (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

While unions may retain associational strength through membership structures, declining bargaining coverage and labor market fragmentation have weakened their structural and institutional leverage. This suggests that contemporary union challenges are not solely organizational but are rooted in broader transformations in capitalist production systems and employment governance structures.

The findings concerning leadership, ideology, and organizational culture further contribute to debates on union renewal and adaptation. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that unions characterized by strategic flexibility, innovation, and inclusive organizing approaches are more capable of navigating fragmented labor markets than unions dependent on traditional workplace-based organizing models (Dobbins, 2024). This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of strategic unionism and organizational innovation in contexts of labor market restructuring (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021).

At the same time, the findings reveal that internal organizational dynamics within unions significantly shape renewal outcomes. Ideological divisions, bureaucratic organizational cultures, and leadership fragmentation have weakened labor solidarity and reduced unions' capacity to respond cohesively to structural change (Bhorat et al., 2022). This differs slightly from some earlier South African labor studies that tended to attribute union decline primarily to external economic pressures. The current findings suggest that organizational governance and leadership strategy are equally important explanatory factors in understanding divergent union trajectories.

The findings relating to the labor law–practice gap also have significant implications for South Africa's industrial relations framework. Although South Africa retains comparatively progressive labor legislation, the literature consistently demonstrates that formal rights do not automatically translate into substantive worker protection (ILO, 2022). Informal, outsourced, temporary, and platform-based workers often remain excluded from effective collective representation despite constitutional protections and statutory labor rights (Dobbins, 2024). Similar findings have been reported in broader global labor governance literature, which argues that legal frameworks frequently struggle to regulate fragmented and transnational labor markets effectively (Sisson, 2020).

Scientifically, this finding can be interpreted as evidence of institutional decoupling between labor law formalism and workplace realities. While labor rights remain institutionally embedded within legislation, enforcement capacity and representational reach have weakened under conditions of labor market fragmentation and employer restructuring strategies. This highlights the limitations of relying solely on legal reform as a mechanism for labor transformation without corresponding institutional enforcement and collective representation capacity.

The findings concerning worker outcomes reinforce longstanding Industrial Relations arguments regarding the positive role of trade unions in improving wages, working conditions, and collective voice (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). Across the reviewed literature, stronger union representation remained associated with improved labor standards and enhanced worker participation within employment relations systems. These findings are consistent with comparative international studies linking collective bargaining institutions to lower levels of inequality and stronger social protection outcomes (ILO, 2022).

However, the findings also demonstrate that declining bargaining coverage has weakened these protective effects, particularly for precarious and non-standard workers. This contributes to growing segmentation within the labor market, where formal-sector workers continue to access institutional protections while vulnerable workers remain excluded. Consequently, the study extends existing literature by demonstrating that labor market inequality is increasingly shaped not only by wage disparities but also by unequal access to institutional representation and collective governance structures.

Another important finding concerns the lived experiences of precarious workers in relation to trade union representation. Many precarious workers perceive unions as primarily representing permanent formal-sector employees rather than marginalized worker groups (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). This finding supports previous studies arguing that traditional union organizing models have struggled to adapt to fragmented and decentralized labor markets (Dobbins, 2024). However, the current study further highlights how representational exclusion undermines union legitimacy among emerging categories of workers, particularly within platform-based and outsourced employment systems.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding reflects tensions between historically institutionalized forms of collective bargaining and contemporary labor market realities characterized by flexibility, insecurity, and decentralization. The findings therefore suggest that union renewal requires not only organizational expansion but also a redefinition of worker representation itself to include informal, precarious, and digitally mediated forms of labor.

Finally, the findings concerning structural barriers and opportunities for renewal suggest that the future of trade unions in South Africa remains open-ended and contingent. While globalization, automation, and labor market fragmentation present significant structural constraints, the literature also identifies emerging forms of organizing capable of strengthening labor representation within fragmented employment systems (Webster & Bhowmik, 2021). Value-chain organizing, digital mobilization, and cross-sector alliances emerge as important adaptive strategies capable of extending worker representation beyond traditional workplace boundaries.

This finding differs from deterministic decline narratives that portray trade unions as obsolete institutions within the digital economy. Instead, the findings support more recent Industrial Relations perspectives that conceptualize unions as adaptive labor governance actors capable of evolving in response to changing production systems and employment relations (Dobbins, 2024). Consequently, the study contributes to broader debates on labor transformation by arguing that the future relevance of trade unions depends on their ability to reconstruct institutional power, expand representational inclusivity, and reposition themselves within emerging governance systems.

The findings have several practical implications for key labor market stakeholders. For policymakers, strengthening labor inspection, expanding collective bargaining coverage to non-standard workers, and developing an appropriate regulatory framework for digital labor platforms should be prioritized to reduce the gap between labor legislation and workplace practice. Employers should strengthen workplace consultation mechanisms and engage trade unions proactively during organizational restructuring and technological change to minimize conflict and promote inclusive labor governance.

Trade union leaders should prioritize organizing workers employed in outsourced, temporary, and platform-based employment, invest in digital organizing strategies, and

develop broader coalitions with community organizations to remain relevant within increasingly fragmented labor markets. Collectively, these measures would strengthen worker representation while promoting more inclusive and sustainable Industrial Relations systems.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the future of trade unions in South Africa cannot be understood solely through membership decline or organizational weakness. Rather, trade union trajectories are shaped by the interaction between labor market restructuring, institutional governance, organizational strategy, and broader political economy transformations. This reinforces the continued relevance of Industrial Relations theory in analyzing contemporary labor dynamics and highlights the importance of revitalized collective governance systems for equitable labor transformation in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the future of trade unions in South Africa through an Industrial Relations perspective grounded in themes of structured antagonism, power resources, institutional embeddedness, and employment governance. Drawing on a qualitative thematic synthesis of scholarly literature, the study demonstrated that the contemporary challenges confronting trade unions are not merely organizational, but are fundamentally rooted in broader structural transformations reshaping labor markets, production systems, and employment governance frameworks.

The study found that globalization, labor market fragmentation, outsourcing, technological change, and the expansion of precarious employment have progressively weakened the structural and institutional foundations upon which post-apartheid trade union influence was historically constructed. However, the findings further demonstrate that trade union decline is neither uniform nor inevitable. Rather than signaling the disappearance of organized labor, current transformations reflect a reconfiguration of labor power within increasingly decentralized and fragmented employment systems.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to Industrial Relations scholarship by reframing trade union decline as a transformation of associational, structural, and institutional power relations rather than as simple organizational failure. In doing so, the article advances existing debates on employment governance by demonstrating that the future relevance of trade unions depends on their capacity to adapt organizationally, reconstruct institutional influence, and extend representation beyond traditional formal-sector employment structures. This therefore reinforces the continued relevance of Industrial Relations theory in understanding contemporary labor dynamics within the Global South.

Beyond synthesizing existing scholarship, this review advances Industrial Relations literature in four important ways. First, it reconceptualizes trade union decline as a process of institutional adaptation rather than organizational failure, shifting attention from declining

membership to the evolving governance role of organized labor. Second, it integrates fragmented evidence from labor law, employment relations, political economy, and labor market studies into a coherent Industrial Relations framework.

Third, by identifying six interrelated themes across the reviewed literature, the study provides a structured analytical framework for understanding the changing institutional foundations of worker representation in South Africa. Finally, the review demonstrates that the future relevance of trade unions depends not only on organizational renewal but also on the capacity of labor market institutions to adapt to technological change, non-standard employment, and increasingly fragmented employment relationships.

Scientifically, the study contributes to existing literature by integrating fragmented scholarship across Industrial Relations, labor law, political economy, and sectoral labor studies into a coherent analytical framework. Unlike studies that focus narrowly on union membership decline or sector-specific labor disputes, this research demonstrates how labor market restructuring, governance fragmentation, and institutional erosion interact simultaneously to shape union futures in South Africa. The article therefore broadens current understanding of labor transformation by situating trade unions within wider debates on socio-economic restructuring, democratic participation, and inclusive development.

The findings further demonstrate that legal protection alone is insufficient to guarantee effective worker representation. Although South Africa maintains progressive labor legislation, enforcement gaps and fragmented employment relations continue to exclude many workers from substantive labor protections and collective representation. Consequently, meaningful labor transformation requires not only legislative frameworks, but also revitalized institutional governance systems capable of extending representation to precarious, outsourced, informal, and platform-based workers.

The findings have important implications for labor market institutions, government agencies, employers, and trade unions. For government, strengthening the enforcement capacity of the Department of Employment and Labor through increased labor inspections, improved monitoring of labor brokers, and enhanced regulation of platform-based employment should be prioritized to ensure that statutory labor rights are realized in practice. Policymakers should also modernize collective bargaining institutions by extending bargaining council coverage to workers in non-standard and digitally mediated forms of employment.

Employers should strengthen workplace consultation mechanisms and engage trade unions proactively during organizational restructuring, technological change, and workforce transitions to promote constructive employment relations. Trade unions should expand organizing strategies beyond traditional workplaces by investing in digital organizing, recruiting younger workers, strengthening representation of outsourced and platform workers, and building broader alliances with community organizations and civil society. These targeted interventions would strengthen worker representation while improving labor

market governance and social dialogue within South Africa's evolving Industrial Relations system.

At the organizational level, the study emphasizes the importance of embedding meaningful worker participation within workplace governance structures. Employers, policymakers, and labor organizations must move beyond symbolic consultation toward genuine social dialogue capable of addressing inequality, labor insecurity, and technological disruption. Supporting skills development, reskilling initiatives, and just transition frameworks will also become increasingly important as automation and digitalization continue to reshape labor markets.

The study additionally contributes to broader debates on Africa's socio-economic transformation by positioning trade unions as adaptive labor governance actors rather than obsolete industrial institutions. In this regard, the future relevance of trade unions lies not only in traditional collective bargaining functions, but also in their capacity to facilitate democratic participation, social inclusion, and equitable labor market transformation within rapidly changing economies.

This review should be interpreted in light of several limitations. As a qualitative literature review, the findings are dependent on the scope, quality, and methodological approaches of the studies included in the review. Consequently, sectors that remain underrepresented in the literature, particularly platform work, informal employment, and digitally mediated labor, may not be fully reflected in the thematic synthesis. Furthermore, because the review draws primarily on published literature, it may underrepresent emerging workplace practices that have not yet been extensively documented in academic research.

These limitations may have influenced the relative prominence of certain themes, particularly labor market restructuring and collective bargaining, which are more extensively researched than newer forms of worker organization. Future research should therefore prioritize longitudinal empirical studies examining trade union renewal within digital labor platforms, comparative studies across African economies, and mixed-method investigations exploring how workers, employers, and trade unions are responding to technological change and evolving employment relationships.

Such research would provide important empirical evidence to complement and extend the conceptual insights generated by this review. Ultimately, this review argues that the future of trade unions should not be evaluated solely through trends in membership decline but through their evolving capacity to influence employment governance, represent increasingly diverse categories of workers, and contribute to equitable labor market transformation. In doing so, the article provides a contemporary Industrial Relations perspective that reframes debates on organized labor from institutional decline towards institutional renewal and adaptive governance.

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