

# Press Release

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SOUTH AFRICAN  
INSTITUTE OF  
RACE RELATIONS

South Africa's Leading Research and Policy Organisation

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Media Contact: Boitumelo Sethlatswe    Tel: 011-482-7221    E-mail: [boitumelo@sairr.org.za](mailto:boitumelo@sairr.org.za)

## **Unionisation buoyed by public sector**

A third of all workers in the formal, non-agricultural sector in South Africa belong to a trade union. This is according to figures compiled by the South African Institute of Race Relations. By contrast, the rate of unionisation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) group of countries in 2011 was 18%. The rate of unionisation refers to the percentage of workers belonging to a trade union as a proportion of total people employed.

In the last 12 years, the rate of unionisation in South Africa increased by 12%, from 26% in 2000 to 29% in 2012. The most unionised sector in 2000 was mining and construction at 34%. The most unionised sector in 2012 was the community, social services, and utilities sector (dominated by public sector employees) at 47%. Trade union membership grew by 18% in this sector over the period, while it decreased in the mining and construction, trade, and finance sectors. Some sectors were counted together by the Institute to account for unions which catered for two sectors.

Congress of South African Trade Union (Cosatu) affiliate membership accounted for 75% of the total number unionised, while rival membership accounted for the remaining 25%. The Institute's Boitumelo Sethlatswe commented that the rival union membership figures came from Cosatu and may therefore be an underestimate of real figures. The majority of Cosatu members were elementary workers or labourers and made up 38% of the membership, while workers in management positions made up only 2% of Cosatu membership.

According to Statistics South Africa, unionised workers earned more per month in 2011 than workers not belonging to a union. The median wage for unionised workers was 129% higher at R 5 500 compared to R2 400 for non-unionised workers. Some 52% of Cosatu members earned more than R5 000 a month compared to only 22% of non-Cosatu workers. 'Although two thirds of workers are not unionised, a large number of them enjoy the benefits of unionisation through the 48 bargaining councils across the various sectors of the economy. In addition, figures for rival union membership may be higher following the labour unrest and the emergence of new unions that accompanied it in the latter part of 2012 and earlier in 2013,' Ms Sethlatswe said.

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