



# Cut out the middleman: Reimagining the significance and role of organised labour in the South African public sector

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## Abstract

The role of organised labour in South Africa's public sector is undergoing renewed scrutiny amid persistent service delivery failures, institutional reform delays, and concerns about administrative performance. Traditional approaches to union engagement, particularly the practice of simply "bringing the union in", are increasingly being questioned in relation to their continued relevance in a modern and responsive public service. Drawing on Critical Theory, Institutional Theory and Conflict Theory, this study examines how power relations, institutional routines, competing interests and entrenched administrative norms shape union activism and public sector performance. Critical Theory assists in examining unequal power relations and the extent to which organised labour challenges or reproduces them. Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, informal conventions and path-dependent practices sustain bureaucratic inertia. Conflict Theory adds a useful lens for understanding organised labour as a contested space shaped by struggles over authority, representation, bargaining power and institutional influence. The study adopted a mixed-methods design within a pragmatic paradigm and targeted 500 public servants from selected provincial government departments, municipalities and public entities in the Eastern Cape. An achieved sample of 348 participants (69.6%) was obtained and used for analysis. Emerging findings point to concerns about political influence, leadership interests, union fragmentation and the extent to which labour disputes may hinder effective service delivery. Organised labour's symbolic and historical relevance does not automatically translate into an effective contribution to public sector reform, accountability and institutional performance. The study therefore offers evidence-based recommendations for recalibrating union-state relations in ways that strengthen responsiveness, legitimacy, accountability and service delivery.

**Keywords:** *governance, labour unions, public sector efficiency, public sector reform, service delivery*

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## 1. Introduction

Concerns about the capacity of the South African public sector to deliver services in a fair, reliable and efficient manner remain central to contemporary governance debates. Although the Constitution and subsequent legislative frameworks provide a strong foundation for democratic governance, persistent administrative weaknesses, service delivery failures and institutional reform delays continue to constrain the realisation of these ideals. Within this context, the role of organised labour in the public service has become increasingly contested. Historically, labour unions played a decisive role in advancing workers' rights, resisting apartheid-era labour injustices and contributing to the broader project of democratic institutional transformation. However, the contemporary public sector labour environment appears more fragmented, politically complex and institutionally embedded, raising questions about whether organised labour continues to function as a transformative actor or whether it has, in some instances, become aligned with the very bureaucratic practices it was expected to challenge (Rulashe & Jam, 2025).

Union fragmentation has particular implications for governance and service delivery. In highly unionised sectors such as health, education and municipal services, the coexistence of multiple unions with overlapping constituencies may weaken collective coherence, intensify workplace contestation and complicate policy implementation. This is especially relevant in provinces such as the Eastern Cape, where frontline public servants often operate within institutional environments shaped by formal administrative rules, resource constraints and informal labour politics. While unions remain important vehicles for worker protection and workplace fairness, their effectiveness may be undermined by ideological divisions, leadership interests, political influence and adversarial labour relations. Bramble and Barchiesi (2003) argue that the inability to consolidate union strategies in the public sector has limited labour's capacity to respond effectively to managerial reforms, performance expectations and changing service delivery demands. In such contexts, labour relations may shift from constructive engagement to institutional contestation, with consequences for morale, accountability and organisational performance.

This study critically examines these developments by analysing the evolving role and significance of organised labour in the South African public sector. The study seeks to analyse public servants' perceptions of the contemporary role and effectiveness of organised labour, assess the relevance of existing union practices in addressing governance and service delivery

challenges, and examine how union fragmentation, political influence, leadership interests and institutional constraints shape labour relations and institutional performance. By capturing the workplace experiences of public servants in the Eastern Cape, the study develops a deeper understanding of how organised labour influences service delivery, institutional coordination, accountability and public sector legitimacy. The insights generated are intended to contribute to debates on democratic engagement, ethical governance, labour representation and the repositioning of unions within a modern, responsive and accountable public administration framework.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Organised Labour and the Democratic Transition in South Africa***

The literature on organised labour in South Africa generally positions trade unions as central actors in the country's democratic transition. Friedman (1987) shows that African trade unionism in the 1970s and 1980s became an important organisational force in resisting workplace exploitation and apartheid rule. Similarly, Barchiesi (2007) argues that labour struggles in South Africa were not only about wages and working conditions, but were also connected to broader questions of citizenship, rights and postcolonial transformation. This confirms that organised labour historically carried both workplace and political significance. Bramble and Barchiesi (2003) further argue that the South African labour movement entered the democratic era with substantial moral and political authority because of its role in anti-apartheid resistance. This legitimacy enabled unions to influence labour law, collective bargaining arrangements and broader debates on redistribution and democratic governance. Webster and Adler (1999) describe this period as one of "bargained liberalisation" where labour, the state and capital negotiated the terms of transition within a changing political economy.

However, literature also cautions against romanticising this historical role. Buhlungu (2010) argues that labour's post-apartheid victory produced contradictions. While unions gained institutional recognition and access to policy spaces, they also faced bureaucratisation, leadership professionalisation and growing distance between union leadership and ordinary members. This "paradox of victory" is important to the present study because it suggests that historical legitimacy does not automatically translate into contemporary effectiveness. In the public sector, where unions operate within highly regulated administrative systems, the

challenge is no longer only whether labour is recognised, but whether it contributes meaningfully to accountable and responsive governance.

## ***2.2. Institutionalisation, Workplace Change and Union Autonomy***

According to Von Holdt (2003), workplace transformation in South Africa was shaped by complex struggles between management, unions and workers over control, participation and organisational change. Unions are not merely external pressure groups, but actors located within institutional spaces where power, authority and workplace routines are contested. Webster and von Holdt (2005) similarly show that the post-apartheid workplace remained marked by unresolved tensions between democratic participation, managerial authority and worker representation. These tensions are especially relevant in the public sector, where labour relations are shaped by formal rules, collective bargaining councils, political pressures and service delivery expectations.

While union institutionalisation has allowed labour to influence workplace governance, it has also created the risk that unions may become too closely embedded in bureaucratic systems. This may weaken their autonomy and reduce their capacity to challenge administrative inertia. Rulashe (2024) extends this argument by analysing labour unions in the South African public service through a theoretical lens. His study suggests that unions should be understood as institutional actors shaped by power relations, bureaucratic norms and governance expectations. This is useful because it avoids two simplistic assumptions: that unions are always progressive agents of transformation, or that they are merely obstacles to reform. Instead, unions operate within structures that may either enable or constrain their transformative role.

## ***2.3. Union Fragmentation, Representation and Internal Contestation***

The fragmentation of organised labour is a major concern in contemporary labour studies. Hyman (2001) argues that trade unions often face tension between their role as market actors, class organisations and social movements. This framework is useful for the South African public sector because unions are expected to defend members' workplace interests, participate in broader governance debates and maintain democratic legitimacy among workers. When these roles are not well balanced, fragmentation and strategic confusion may emerge. Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory is also relevant. He argues that collective action depends

on shared grievance, leadership, organisation and a sense of collective identity. Applied to public sector unions, fragmentation weakens mobilisation when unions compete for members, leadership visibility and bargaining influence. Multiple unions representing similar categories of workers may appear to strengthen pluralism, but they may also dilute bargaining authority, create overlapping mandates and intensify workplace contestation.

Rulashe and Jam (2025) directly address this issue in the South African public sector by showing that labour union fragmentation may affect service delivery, institutional coordination and workplace stability. Fichter et al. (2018) also argue that organised labour globally faces pressure to renew its power resources in response to changing political and economic conditions. Unions must rethink their organisational strategies if they are to remain relevant in complex public sector environments.

#### ***2.4. Organised Labour, Public Sector Reform and Service Delivery***

The relationship between organised labour and public sector reform remains contested. On the one hand, unions are necessary for protecting workers against unfair labour practices, arbitrary managerialism and reforms that may undermine employment security. On the other hand, public sector unions operate within institutions whose performance affects citizens' access to essential services. This creates a distinctive governance tension: unions must defend workers while also engaging with broader public interest. Nzewi and Sibanda (2016) argue that public sector performance in South Africa requires stronger monitoring, evaluation, accountability and institutional coordination. Similarly, Rulashe and Dyan (2023), in their examination of the Municipal Public Accounts Committee and financial management at Amahlathi Municipality, demonstrate the importance of effective oversight and accountability mechanisms in strengthening municipal governance and institutional performance. Service delivery challenges must be understood within the broader institutional environment in which accountability, administrative capacity and governance actors interact. Labour relations must therefore be understood within a wider governance environment that includes managerial capacity, performance systems, accountability arrangements and political oversight.

According to Silver (2003), labour movements often emerge and reorganise in response to changing forms of capitalism, state restructuring and worker insecurity. In South African public sector, reforms linked to fiscal restraint, performance management and administrative restructuring may provoke resistance when workers perceive them as threatening. However,

resistance should not automatically be read as obstruction. It may also reflect weak consultation, mistrust, poor communication or a history of reforms that have not adequately protected workers. The relationship between unions and service delivery should be approached carefully. It would be simplistic to blame organised labour alone for service delivery failure. At the same time, it would be equally weak to ignore the ways in which union fragmentation, political influence, leadership interests and prolonged labour disputes may affect institutional performance.

### ***2.5. Political Influence, Leadership Interests and Union Democracy***

Another important theme in the literature concerns political influence and union democracy. Buhlungu (2010) argues that post-apartheid labour politics created contradictions between institutional access, leadership authority and member-based democracy. This is particularly relevant where union leaders become professionalised actors who operate close to state and party-political structures. In such cases, unions may retain the language of worker representation while becoming increasingly shaped by leadership interests, factional contestation and political proximity. Webster and Adler (1999) also show that South Africa's democratic transition involved negotiated compromises between labour, the state and capital. While such compromises helped stabilise the democratic transition, they also created new tensions for organised labour. Unions had to balance militancy with institutional participation, and worker demands with broader political and economic pressures. These tensions remain visible in the public sector, where unions may simultaneously act as worker representatives, political actors and institutional stakeholders.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on three complementary theoretical traditions, namely Critical Theory, Institutional Theory and Conflict Theory, to analyse the evolving role of organised labour in the South African public sector. These theories are suitable because the study is concerned not only with the formal role of unions, but also with the deeper power relations, institutional routines, competing interests and governance tensions that shape union behaviour. The three theories provide a multidimensional lens for understanding organised labour as a historically significant, institutionally embedded and politically contested actor within public administration.

***Critical Theory: Power, Inequality and Resistance.*** Critical Theory provides a useful lens for examining how power is embedded, sustained and reproduced within institutional structures. Rooted in the work of scholars such as Habermas and Marcuse, Critical Theory is concerned with domination, exclusion, inequality and the ways in which social and organisational arrangements may appear normal while reproducing unequal relations. It allows researchers to question taken-for-granted assumptions and to examine whether institutions promote emancipation, accountability and democratic participation, or whether they preserve existing structures of control (Bohman, 2005).

Applied to organised labour, Critical Theory helps explain the paradox of unions that historically emerged as progressive forces for worker representation and social justice, but may, over time, become absorbed into the institutional arrangements they were expected to challenge. In the South African public sector, this lens is useful for interrogating whether unions continue to advance the interests of workers and contribute to democratic governance, or whether their embeddedness in bureaucratic and political structures weakens their transformative potential. It also assists in examining how ordinary members, frontline workers and service users may be marginalised when labour politics become dominated by leadership interests, political alignments or procedural routines.

***Institutional Theory: Norms, Path Dependency and Bureaucratic Inertia.*** Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, informal norms, organisational routines and shared beliefs shape behaviour within institutions. Drawing on DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the theory shows how organisations often become structured by established practices that persist over time, even when they no longer produce effective outcomes. Scott (2014) similarly emphasises that institutions are sustained through regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements, meaning that organisational conduct is shaped not only by law and policy, but also by values, expectations, habits and accepted ways of doing things.

In this study, Institutional Theory is useful for analysing why both unions and public sector departments may continue to reproduce outdated practices despite changing governance demands. Public sector labour relations are located within highly formalised administrative systems, bargaining councils, disciplinary procedures, reporting lines and political oversight arrangements. These structures can provide stability and predictability, but they can also create rigidity, path dependency and resistance to reform. Institutional Theory therefore assists in

explaining how union practices may become routinised, how departments may respond defensively to labour demands, and how both sides may become trapped in patterns of engagement that weaken responsiveness, accountability and service delivery.

***Conflict Theory: Contestation, Interests and Power Struggles.*** Conflict Theory adds further analytical lens by focusing on contestation, competing interests and struggles over power, authority and resources. Rooted in the broader conflict tradition associated with Marx and later developed in sociological debates on power and social conflict, the theory assumes that institutions are not neutral spaces. Rather, they are arenas in which different groups pursue interests, defend positions and contest access to influence, recognition and material benefits. In the context of labour relations, Conflict Theory is particularly relevant because unions, management, political actors and workers often operate from different interests and unequal positions of power. Applied to the South African public sector, Conflict Theory helps explain organised labour as a contested space shaped by bargaining struggles, union rivalry, leadership interests, political influence and competition for institutional authority. It is especially useful in understanding union fragmentation, where different unions may compete for members, recognition, bargaining power and proximity to decision-making structures. The theory also allows the study to examine the tension between worker protection and service delivery imperatives.

While unions have a legitimate role in defending employees against unfair treatment, prolonged labour disputes, leadership-centred contestation and adversarial relations may affect institutional stability and public service performance. The three theories are complementary rather than competing. Critical Theory foregrounds domination, exclusion and the emancipatory promise of organised labour. Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, informal norms and bureaucratic routines shape union conduct and public sector responses. Conflict Theory highlights the struggles over power, representation, authority and resources that occur between the state, unions, union leaders, ordinary members and service users. These theories enable the study to move beyond a narrow understanding of unions as either heroic defenders of workers or obstacles to reform. Instead, organised labour is analysed as a complex institutional actor whose contemporary role is shaped by historical legitimacy, bureaucratic embeddedness, internal contestation and broader governance pressures.

This theoretical framework, therefore, supports the central argument of the study: that the significance of organised labour in the South African public sector must be reassessed in relation to its ability to promote worker protection, democratic participation, accountability, service delivery and institutional renewal in a changing governance environment.

#### **4. Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework guiding this study links union fragmentation, institutional constraints and governance outcomes within a transforming public sector environment. The framework is informed by Critical Theory, Institutional Theory and Conflict Theory. Critical Theory provides a lens for examining how power, domination, exclusion and co-option may be embedded within organisational and political structures (Bohman, 2005; Habermas, 1984). Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, informal norms, organisational routines and path-dependent practices shape institutional behaviour and may reproduce bureaucratic inertia over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Conflict Theory adds an important dimension by interpreting labour relations as a contested field shaped by competing interests, authority struggles and unequal access to power and resources (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). At the centre of the framework is the argument that the contemporary role of organised labour cannot be understood only through its historical legitimacy. South African trade unions played an important role in resisting apartheid-era labour injustices and shaping democratic workplace rights, but their post-apartheid institutionalisation has also generated new contradictions concerning autonomy, accountability and member representation (Barchiesi, 2007; Bramble & Barchiesi, 2003; Buhlungu, 2010).

This suggests that organised labour's symbolic significance does not automatically translate into effective institutional contribution. Its contemporary relevance depends on how unions respond to fragmentation, political influence, leadership interests, and changing public-sector demands. Union fragmentation is therefore conceptualised not merely as the numerical presence of multiple unions within the same workplace, but as a deeper condition marked by ideological division, role ambiguity, competition for membership, diluted bargaining authority and weakened collective coherence. This interpretation is consistent with labour scholarship, which argues that unions must continually renew their organisational strategies and sources of power in response to changing political, institutional and economic conditions (Fichter et al., 2018; Hyman, 2001; Kelly, 1998). In the South African public sector, fragmentation may

weaken labour's capacity to bargain collectively, engage constructively with institutional reform and contribute to service delivery improvement (Rulashe & Jam, 2025).

The framework further proposes that union fragmentation interacts with broader institutional constraints in the public sector. These constraints include bureaucratic norms, legal rules, rigid administrative procedures, hierarchical decision-making structures and limited reform space. Institutional Theory is useful here because it shows how organisations often reproduce established practices, even when such practices no longer produce effective outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). In the public sector, these institutional conditions may limit the ability of unions and managers to engage constructively around workplace transformation, accountability and service delivery. Even where unions raise legitimate concerns, their influence may be weakened when labour relations are adversarial, politically charged or disconnected from institutional performance priorities.

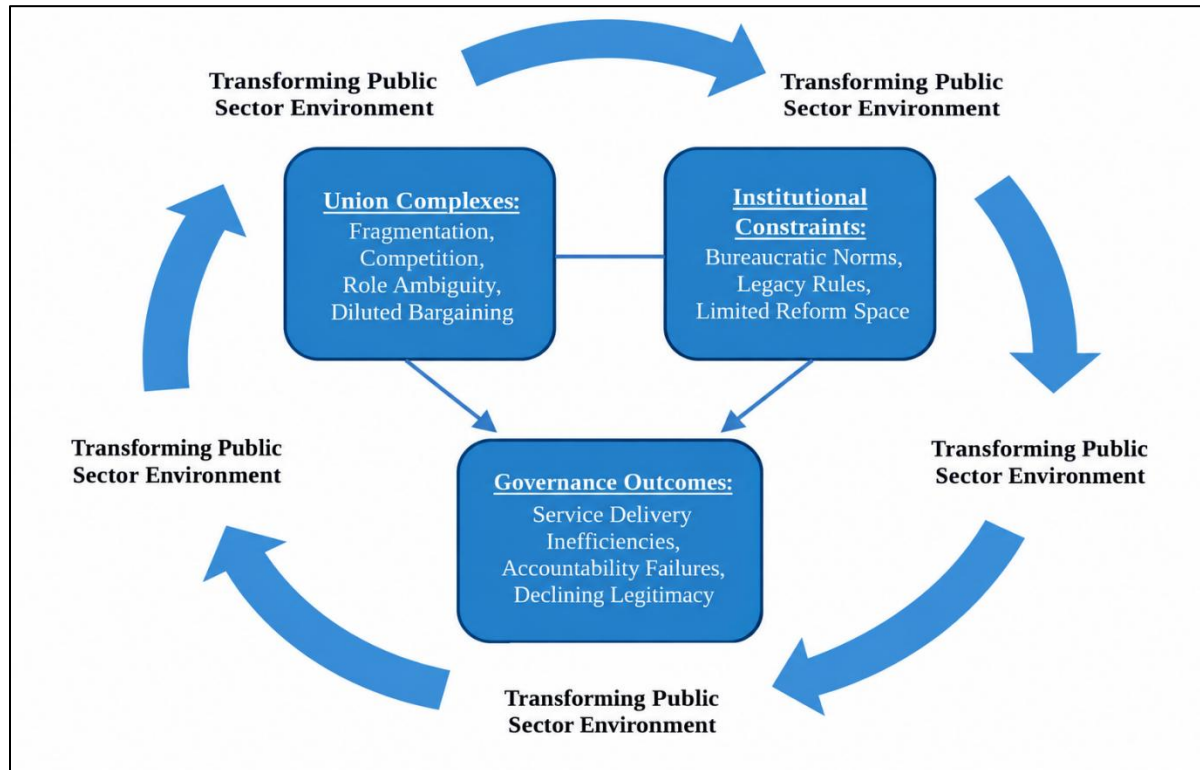
The framework therefore suggests that governance outcomes are shaped by the interaction between labour dynamics and institutional conditions. Where union fragmentation is high and institutional systems are resistant to adaptation, the likely outcomes include weakened coordination, delayed reform, accountability failures, service delivery inefficiencies and declining institutional legitimacy. Conversely, where organised labour is coherent, accountable and constructively engaged, it can contribute to workplace fairness, institutional responsiveness, improved morale and public sector renewal. This aligns with scholarship that views public sector performance as dependent on accountability, coordination and institutional capacity rather than on formal rules alone (Nzewi & Sibanda, 2016).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the transforming public sector environment surrounds and influences the relationship between union complexities, institutional constraints and governance outcomes. The framework does not present organised labour as inherently obstructive. Rather, it positions organised labour as a contested institutional actor whose role can either constrain or strengthen governance depending on the quality of representation, the nature of labour-state engagement, the degree of institutional openness and the extent to which unions align worker protection with broader public service obligations. By analysing these interrelated elements, the study seeks to generate insights into how organised labour can be repositioned beyond symbolic participation or adversarial bargaining. The framework supports the argument that effective union-state relations require more than inclusion. They require accountable representation, reduced fragmentation, constructive engagement, institutional

flexibility and a shared commitment to service delivery, legitimacy and democratic public administration.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual framework*



*Source:* Author Construction (2026)

## 5. Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, using an explanatory sequential design in which the quantitative phase preceded and informed the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design was appropriate because it allowed the study to identify broad patterns in public servants' perceptions of organised labour and then explore these patterns in greater depth through qualitative engagement.

The study was located within the pragmatist paradigm, which supports the use of methodological choices that best address complex social and organisational problems (Morgan, 2014). The study targeted 500 public servants drawn from selected Eastern Cape provincial government departments, municipalities and public entities. A total of 348 participants were reached, representing 69.6% of the intended target sample. Although the

achieved sample fell short of the initial target, it provided a sufficient empirical basis for analysing perceptions of organised labour, particularly given the sensitivity of labour relations research and the practical difficulties of accessing public sector employees across departments. The shortfall is acknowledged as a limitation, and the findings are therefore interpreted within the scope of the sample achieved.

Table 1 presents the demographic and employment profile of the 348 participants, including their age, gender, years of public sector employment, employment level, and union membership.

**Table 1**

*Participants' profile*

| Demographics                    | Frequency (n=348) | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <b>Age</b>                      |                   |            |
| 25-34                           | 78                | 22.5%      |
| 35-44                           | 165               | 47.5%      |
| 45-54                           | 61                | 17.5%      |
| 55+                             | 44                | 12.5%      |
| <b>Gender</b>                   |                   |            |
| Male                            | 218               | 62.5%      |
| Female                          | 130               | 37.5%      |
| <b>Years in public sector</b>   |                   |            |
| Less than 1 year                | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| 1-5 years                       | 52                | 15.0%      |
| 6-10 years                      | 113               | 32.5%      |
| 11-20 years                     | 131               | 37.5%      |
| Over 20 years                   | 43                | 12.5%      |
| <b>Union membership</b>         |                   |            |
| Yes                             | 278               | 80.0%      |
| No                              | 44                | 12.5%      |
| Previously, but no longer       | 26                | 7.5%       |
| <b>Employment level</b>         |                   |            |
| Senior Administrator            | 113               | 32.5%      |
| Intern / Contract / Entry-level | 96                | 27.5%      |
| Middle Management               | 35                | 10.0%      |
| Senior Management               | 35                | 10.0%      |
| Junior Management               | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| General Worker                  | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| Teacher                         | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| Self-employed                   | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| Immigration Officer             | 9                 | 2.5%       |
| Level 2                         | 8                 | 2.5%       |
| Systems                         | 8                 | 2.5%       |
| Professional Nurse              | 8                 | 2.5%       |

**Source:** Study Data 2026

In terms of age, the largest group was 35–44 years old (165, 47.5%), followed by 25–34 years (78, 22.5%), 45–54 years (61, 17.5%), and 55 years and above (44, 12.5%). The participants were predominantly male (218, 62.5%), while 130 (37.5%) were female. In terms of years of public sector employment, 11–20 years represented the largest group (131, 37.5%), followed by 6–10 years (113, 32.5%), 1–5 years (52, 15.0%), and more than 20 years (43, 12.5%). Only 9 participants (2.5%) had less than one year of service. Regarding employment level, senior administrators comprised the largest group (113, 32.5%), followed by interns, contract workers, and entry-level employees (96, 27.5%). Middle management and senior management each accounted for 35 participants (10.0%). The remaining participants were distributed across junior management, general workers, teachers, self-employed individuals, immigration officers, Level 2 employees, systems-related employees, and professional nurses. In terms of union membership, 278 participants (80.0%) were current labour union members, 44 (12.5%) were not members, and 26 (7.5%) were former members. Overall, the participants represented a range of ages, employment experience, occupational levels, and union membership statuses within the public

The Eastern Cape was purposively selected as the geographical setting for the study because of its governance challenges, levels of union activity and recurring service delivery pressures. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to potential participants across selected provincial government departments, municipalities and public entities. Participation was voluntary, resulting in responses from individuals across different employment levels, union affiliations and lengths of public-sector experience. No minimum length of public-sector service was imposed as an exclusion criterion.

Data were collected in two stages. First, a web-based questionnaire was administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire included demographic items, five-point Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The Likert-scale items measured perceptions of union effectiveness, collective bargaining, institutional responsiveness, leadership conduct, political influence, union fragmentation and barriers to public sector reform (Joshi et al., 2015; Dillman et al., 2014; Sharma, 2022). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 30 purposively selected participants who consented to follow-up engagement. The interviews provided deeper insight into emerging themes, particularly union fragmentation, leadership interests, administrative constraints and the perceived effect of labour relations on service delivery.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages and response distributions, to identify patterns in participants' perceptions of organised labour and public-sector governance. For presentation and interpretation, responses to the five-point Likert-scale items were grouped into three categories: disagree/strongly disagree, neutral, and agree/strongly agree. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This enabled the study to identify, review and interpret recurring patterns across participants' workplace experiences.

Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection commenced. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act. Participants were informed that they could skip questions or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing union leadership, political influence, workplace conflict and management relations.

## 6. Findings and Analysis

### *6.1. The Contested Relevance of Organised Labour in the Public Sector*

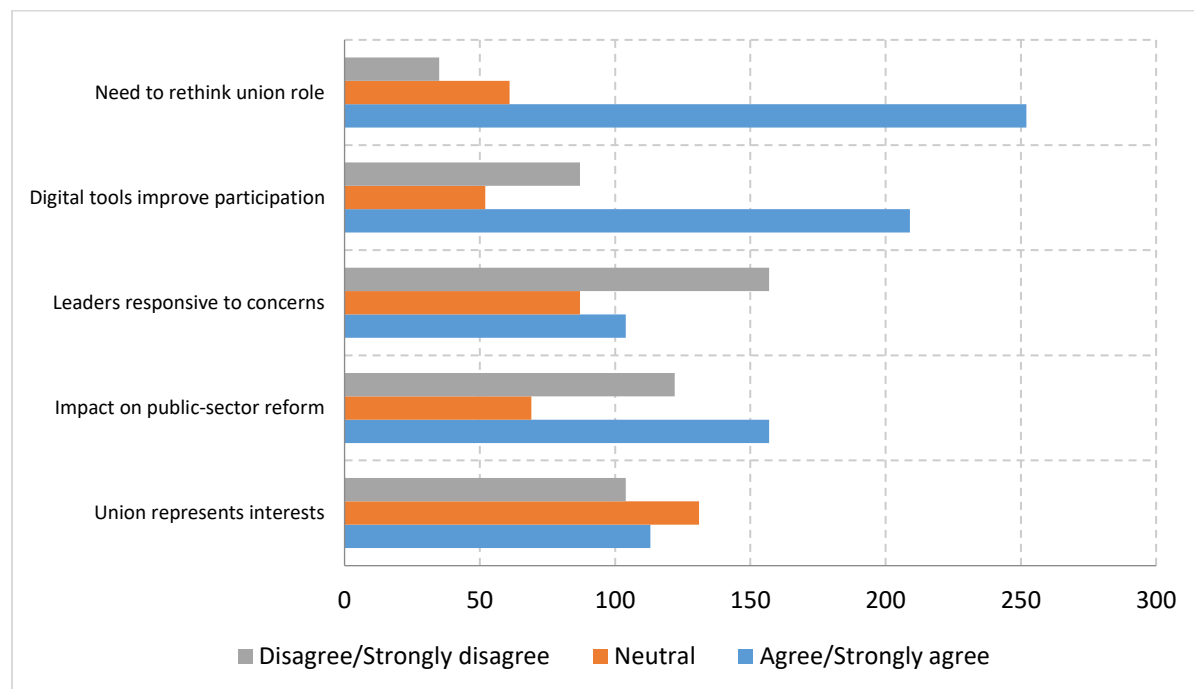
The findings suggest that organised labour continues to occupy an important institutional position in the South African public sector, but its contemporary relevance is increasingly contested. This contestation does not imply that respondents reject unions as institutional actors. Rather, the data point to a more nuanced position: unions are still regarded as potentially important vehicles for worker protection, representation and participation in public-sector reform, but their legitimacy is increasingly judged against their responsiveness, transparency and ability to contribute to service delivery and governance improvement. This confirms Buhlungu's (2010) argument that organised labour's post-apartheid institutional success has produced new contradictions, particularly where formal recognition and political access do not necessarily translate into sustained member-centred accountability.

The quantitative findings reflect this ambivalence (Figure 2). A total of 157 respondents (45.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that labour unions have a meaningful impact on public-sector reform, while 122 respondents (35.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed and 69 respondents (20.0%) were neutral. The unions are still seen by a substantial proportion of

respondents as relevant to reform processes, although this view is not uncontested. Perceptions of direct representation were even more divided. Only 113 respondents (32.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that their unions effectively represented their interests, compared with 104 respondents (30.0%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 131 respondents (37.5%) remained neutral. The high neutral response is analytically significant, as it may reflect uncertainty, uneven union visibility, or limited confidence in the practical value of union representation.

**Figure 2**

*Organised labour relevance*



**Source:** Study Data 2026

The most pronounced concern relates to leadership responsiveness. 157 respondents (45.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that union leaders were responsive to member concerns, compared with 104 respondents (30.0%) who agreed or strongly agreed and 87 respondents (25.0%) who were neutral. This finding suggests that the challenge facing organised labour is not simply one of institutional presence, but one of representational quality. In other words, unions may continue to exist as recognised actors in the public sector, but their legitimacy depends on whether members experience them as responsive, accessible and accountable. This resonates with Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory, which emphasises that

collective organisation depends on leadership credibility, shared grievance and a sense of collective identity. Where members perceive union leadership as distant or unresponsive, the foundation for effective collective representation is weakened.

At the same time, the findings show that respondents do not regard unions as obsolete. On the contrary, the strongest response pattern points towards reform rather than rejection. 209 respondents (60.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that digital tools such as email, WhatsApp and online portals improve member participation, while 252 respondents (72.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that there is a need to rethink the role of unions in today's governance environment. The participants are calling for a more adaptive form of organised labour, one that is technologically responsive, more transparent and better aligned with contemporary public administration challenges.

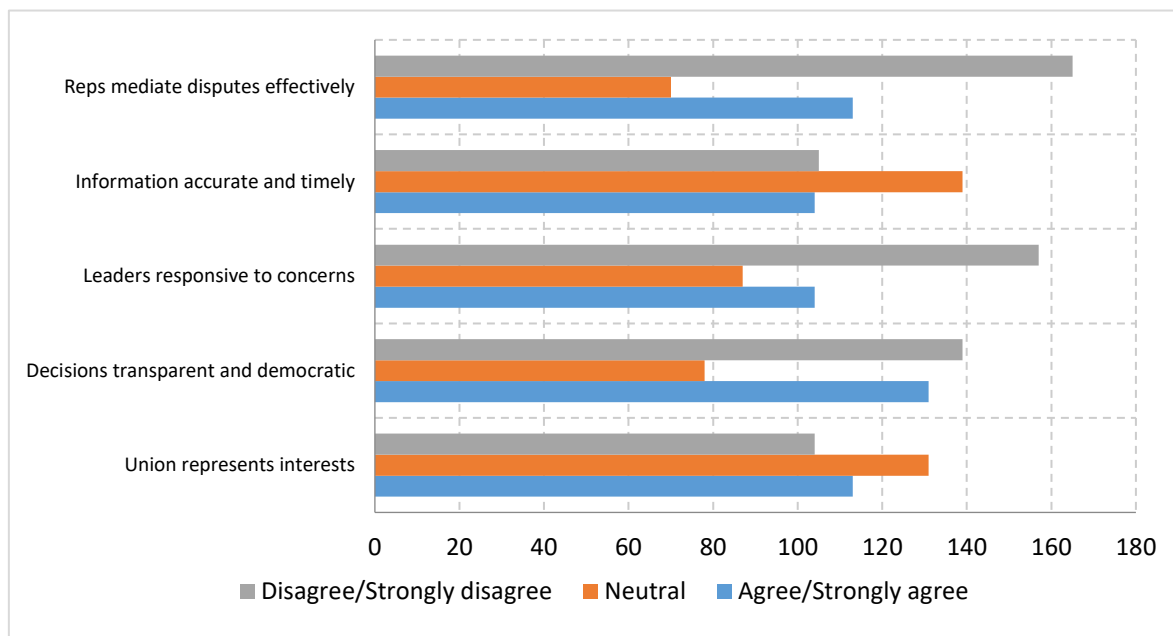
The results align with Hyman's (2001) argument that unions are often required to negotiate their roles between workplace representation, broader social responsibility and institutional adaptation. The qualitative responses reinforce this interpretation. Some participants argued that unions should encourage members to prioritise service delivery and avoid disrupting services when addressing disputes. Others emphasised that organised labour should promote accountability, fairness, innovation, improved communication and policy dialogue in the public sector. The dataset includes respondents who specifically noted that unions should encourage members to prioritise service delivery and avoid disrupting services during disputes, while others argued that unions should embrace innovation, improve communication, promote transparency and engage in policy dialogue to address evolving public service challenges.

The findings, therefore, point to a distinction between union relevance and union effectiveness. Organised labour remains relevant because workers continue to require protection, representation and collective voice in public institutions. However, its effectiveness is increasingly questioned when union leadership is perceived as unresponsive, member concerns are poorly addressed, or union activity is disconnected from broader governance and service delivery obligations. This supports Rulashe and Jam's (2025) argument that labour union fragmentation and weakened coherence can affect institutional performance and service delivery outcomes. It also reflects Webster and Adler's (1999) broader view that organised labour's democratic role depends on its ability to adapt to changing political and institutional conditions rather than relying only on historical legitimacy.

From a Critical Theory perspective, these findings raise important questions about whether unions continue to advance emancipatory worker interests or whether they risk reproducing unresponsive institutional power relations. From a Conflict Theory perspective, organised labour emerges as a contested arena in which worker interests, leadership interests, institutional authority and public service obligations intersect. The implication is that unions should not simply be “brought in” as procedural stakeholders. Their role must be recalibrated so that worker representation, union accountability and service delivery are mutually reinforced. In this sense, the future relevance of organised labour in the public sector depends less on its historical status and more on its capacity to renew its practices, strengthen internal accountability and contribute constructively to democratic and service-oriented public administration.

**Figure 3**

*Fragility of trust in union representation*



**Source:** Study Data 2026

Figure 3 shows a more unsettled picture of union effectiveness than a simple positive or negative reading would allow. Organised labour continues to hold an important place in the public sector, but respondents are less certain about whether unions consistently fulfil their representative function. This uncertainty is evident in the question of whether unions

effectively represent members' interests. Only 113 respondents (32.5%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 104 respondents (30.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The largest proportion, 131 respondents (37.5%), selected a neutral position. This neutrality implies that some respondents are unsure about the value unions currently add, that representation is uneven across workplaces, or that union visibility is strongest only when conflict arises.

Concerns about representation become sharper when transparency and responsiveness are considered. On whether union decisions are transparent and democratic, 139 respondents (40.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared with 131 respondents (37.5%) who agreed or strongly agreed, while 78 respondents (22.5%) remained neutral. The pattern is not overwhelmingly negative, but it does point to a legitimacy problem. Trade unions depend on internal democracy, communication and trust to sustain their authority. Unions are not only bargaining organisations; they are also institutions of collective voice whose strength depends on the confidence of members (Hyman, 2001). Where decision-making is seen as opaque, that collective voice becomes vulnerable to suspicion, disengagement and factional interpretation.

Responsiveness appears to be the most fragile dimension of representation. 157 respondents (45.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that union leaders are responsive to member concerns, while only 104 respondents (30.0%) agreed or strongly agreed. This finding matters because it shifts the focus from whether unions are formally present to whether they are practically accessible. A union may be recognised, visible and institutionally embedded, but still fail to create a sense among members that their concerns are heard and acted upon. Buhlungu's (2010) argument on the contradictions of organised labour's post-apartheid institutional success is useful here: the more unions become absorbed into formal structures, the greater the risk that leadership may become distant from ordinary members' everyday workplace experiences.

The same tension appears in communication and dispute resolution. Responses were evenly split on whether union information about policy or reform is accurate and timely, with 104 respondents (30.0%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, 105 respondents (30.0%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and 139 respondents (40.0%) remaining neutral. This is not a decisive rejection of union communication, but it does indicate weak confidence. Even more concerning is the perception of dispute-resolution capacity. 165 respondents (47.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that union representatives have the skills to mediate workplace disputes effectively,

compared with 113 respondents (32.5%) who agreed or strongly agreed. In a public sector environment where grievances, disciplinary processes and labour-management tensions are frequent, perceived weakness in mediation capacity directly affects trust in unions as practical workplace actors.

The open-ended responses give texture to these numbers. Some respondents referred to poor communication, lack of urgency, limited support and difficulty obtaining clear answers from union representatives. Others raised more serious concerns, suggesting that some representatives pursue personal interests, align with management, or use union positions for individual advancement. At the same time, not all responses were dismissive. Several respondents still saw unions as necessary, but argued that they must become more transparent, better trained, more technologically responsive and more accountable to members.

Union effectiveness in the public sector is no longer secured by historical legitimacy or formal recognition alone. It depends increasingly on the everyday quality of representation. The data suggest that members judge unions through practical questions: Do they respond? Do they communicate? Do they understand workplace procedures? Can they mediate disputes? Are they transparent? From a Critical Theory perspective, these questions are significant because they ask whether unions still amplify worker voices or whether they sometimes reproduce the distance and opacity associated with bureaucratic institutions. From a Conflict Theory perspective, they also show that union representation is not neutral; it is shaped by struggles over authority, credibility, leadership and member control.

What emerges, therefore, is not a picture of organised labour as irrelevant, but of organised labour under pressure to renew its representative mandate. The findings point to the need for stronger internal democracy, improved communication systems, better-trained shop stewards, clearer feedback mechanisms and a more accountable relationship between union leaders and ordinary members. In this sense, the problem is not simply whether unions exist in the public sector. The more important question is whether they are still experienced by members as trustworthy, capable and responsive vehicles of collective representation.

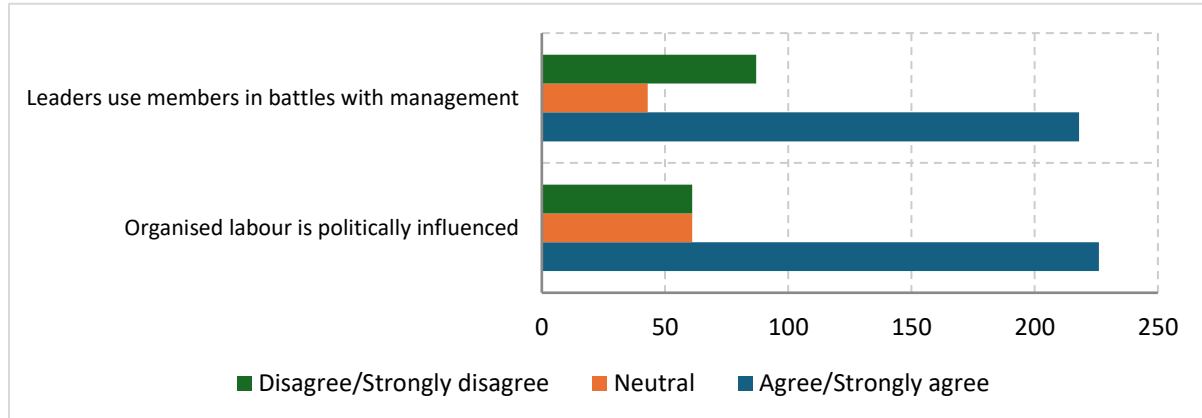
### ***6.2. Political Influence, Leadership Interests and Fragmented Collective Voice***

The data point to one of the most politically sensitive findings of the study: organised labour in the public sector is not experienced only as a protective structure for workers, but also as a contested space in which political influence, leadership ambition and organisational

rivalry shape the quality of representation. This complicates any simple reading of unions as a unified worker voice. While unions retain historical and institutional importance, participants appear concerned that the collective mandate of workers may, in some instances, be displaced by political proximity, leadership self-interest and competition for influence. This concern is visible in the strength of the quantitative responses. 226 respondents (65.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that organised labour in the public sector is politically influenced, while only 61 respondents (17.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with another 61 respondents (17.5%) remaining neutral. A similarly strong pattern appears in relation to leadership interests, where 218 respondents (62.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that union leaders sometimes use members to fight their own battles with management. Only 87 respondents (25.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 43 respondents (12.5%) were neutral. These results are difficult to treat as marginal perceptions. They point to a significant concern that union activity may at times be shaped by agendas that do not fully coincide with ordinary members' interests.

**Figure 4**

*Perceptions on union leadership*



*Source:* Study Data 2026

The open-ended responses give a sharper institutional meaning. Some participants argued that unions should “stick to the members’ mandate” and avoid standing with employers behind the scenes. Others suggested that unions were becoming more concerned with recruitment than servicing members, while one response stated that some union representatives pursue personal interests at the expense of members. These comments point to a legitimacy problem that goes beyond communication or service quality. Some respondents see union

representation as vulnerable to internal capture, factional positioning and leadership-centred politics.

This is where a fragmented collective voice becomes important. Fragmentation is not only a matter of having many unions in the same workplace. It becomes a governance problem when rivalry weakens collective coherence, when unions compete for visibility rather than membership service, and when bargaining positions are shaped by organisational survival rather than a clear worker mandate. In such contexts, public sector management may not encounter organised labour as a coherent representative actor, but as a set of competing formations with different interests, allegiances and strategies. This can weaken bargaining clarity, complicate institutional engagement and make dispute resolution more difficult. The South African labour literature helps to explain this tension. Buhlungu (2010), on organised labour after apartheid, shows that institutional success can produce its own contradictions, including bureaucratisation, leadership distance and pressures on internal democracy. Meanwhile, Bramble and Barchiesi (2003) similarly point to the difficulty of maintaining coherent labour strategy in the face of restructuring, managerial reform and changing performance expectations. The data do not simply show dissatisfaction with individual union leaders; they reveal a deeper concern about whether organised labour can still maintain a credible collective voice in a fragmented, politically charged public sector environment.

The implications for public administration are significant. A politically entangled and fragmented union environment can weaken labour-management relations, delay institutional decisions and reduce the possibility of constructive engagement on reform. The issue is not that unions should be apolitical. In South Africa, organised labour has always had a political history and has played a major role in democratic struggle, worker protection and institutional transformation. The more serious concern is whether political influence and leadership interests begin to displace the ordinary worker as the centre of union representation. When that happens, organised labour risks shifting from collective voice to institutional contestation.

From a Conflict Theory perspective, this theme is central to the paper's argument. The conflict is not only between workers and management. It is also within organised labour itself, where leaders, members, rival unions, management actors, and political networks compete over authority, recognition, and influence. This internal contestation can weaken the very solidarity on which union power depends. It also explains why fragmentation affects more than bargaining numbers; it affects trust, mandate clarity and the ability of organised labour to

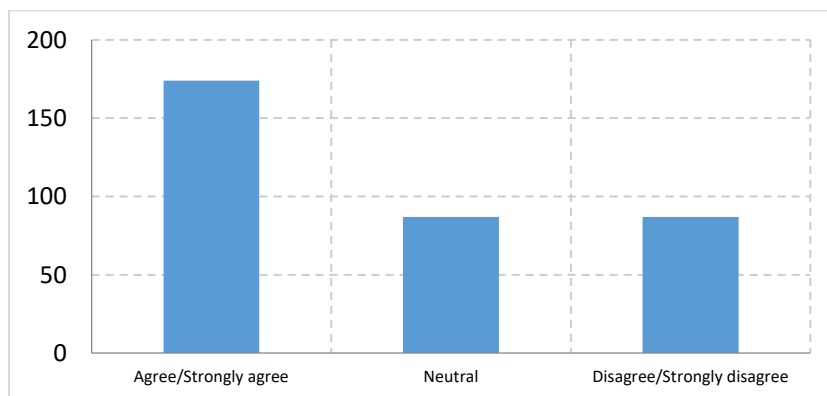
engage the public sector as a credible institutional partner. Organised labour's contemporary challenge is not only whether it remains relevant, but whether it can remain coherent, accountable and member-centred. The findings point to a need for stronger internal democracy, clearer member mandates, leadership accountability and improved coordination across union formations. Without this, organised labour may retain institutional presence but lose moral authority. Its future significance in the public sector will depend on whether it can rebuild a collective voice that is less vulnerable to political capture, less driven by leadership interests and more firmly anchored in the everyday concerns of workers and the broader obligations of democratic public administration.

### ***6.3. Labour Disputes and Service Delivery Implications***

Labour disputes in the public sector cannot be treated simply as internal employment relations matters. Unlike disputes in purely private workplaces, public sector disputes often unfold within institutions that carry constitutional, developmental, and service-delivery obligations. When labour relations become adversarial or unresolved, the effects may extend beyond employers and employees to citizens who depend on schools, hospitals, municipalities, transport systems, and administrative services. This is why public sector labour relations should be understood as part of the state's governance architecture. As Bramble and Barchiesi (2003) argue, public sector unionism operates within a terrain shaped by restructuring, managerial reform and the tension between worker protection and service performance. This tension is visible in the present study.

**Figure 5**

*Labour disputes and service delivery*



**Source:** Study Data 2026

The quantitative findings show that 174 respondents (50.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that labour disputes hinder service delivery, while 87 respondents (25.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and another 87 respondents (25.0%) remained neutral. The result does not suggest a unanimous view, but it is analytically significant that half of the respondents associated labour disputes with service delivery disruption. This finding resonates with Madumo's (2015) broader argument that public sector performance is weakened when institutional capacity, coordination and accountability systems are unable to sustain effective service delivery. It also aligns with Rulashe and Ijeoma's (2022) view that public accountability and service delivery are closely connected, particularly in municipal contexts where institutional weaknesses directly affect citizens' access to services. In the context of this study, adversarial labour relations and unresolved disputes can therefore be understood as part of the institutional conditions that may disrupt workplace cohesion, weaken accountability and complicate administrative reform. The qualitative responses help explain why respondents make this connection. One respondent argued that *"the union must at all times encourage its members to prioritise service delivery,"* while another stated that *"trade unions must not disrupt service delivery when addressing their disputes."*

A related response added that the government must better manage disputes. These responses do not dismiss the legitimacy of union action, instead, they suggest that union activism must be exercised in a way that recognises the public character of the workplace. In other words, public sector unions are expected to defend workers while remaining conscious of the citizens affected when services are interrupted. This view is consistent with Hyman (2001) that unions operate across multiple identities: as workplace bargaining agents, as institutions of worker solidarity and as social actors with broader public responsibilities. In the South African public sector, this triple role is especially complex. Unions must protect members from unfair treatment, but they also operate inside institutions whose core purpose is to deliver public value. Where labour disputes become prolonged, politicised or poorly mediated, the union's role as a vehicle of worker voice may come into tension with the state's obligation to ensure administrative continuity and service access.

Other qualitative responses extended this point by linking union conduct to employee discipline, institutional mandate and ethical public service. One respondent argued that unions should *"instil a culture in employees to serve and not be entitled,"* while another stated that unions should encourage employees to honour their jobs and service delivery responsibilities.

This speaks directly to debates on professionalism and public administration ethics. Jam et al. (2025) similarly show that ethical conduct, compliance and organisational culture are central to strengthening accountability in public institutions. The results argue that organised labour should not only defend employee rights, but also help cultivate a workplace ethic that supports integrity, responsibility and service delivery.

Public servants are not only employees; they are also agents of the state. Their work is connected to public trust, constitutional accountability and citizens' access to services. Organised labour, therefore, has an important role not only in defending rights but also in cultivating a workplace culture in which rights and responsibilities are held together. A further response made the link to governance even more explicit. A participant argued that union representatives should understand the departmental mandate and priority areas because employees are responsible for "*practicalising the agenda of the institution.*" The same respondent connected effective union engagement to improved service delivery, stakeholder relations and socio-economic development. This is a particularly valuable qualitative insight because it frames organised labour as a governance stakeholder rather than a narrow bargaining actor. It suggests that union representatives cannot meaningfully engage management if they do not understand the institutional mandate, policy priorities and service delivery context of the department in which their members work.

Mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998) reiterates that collective action depends on grievance, leadership, organisation and a shared sense of injustice. However, in the public sector, mobilisation also has institutional consequences. When collective action is rooted in legitimate grievance, it may expose managerial failure, unfair labour practices or weak accountability. Yet when disputes are poorly channelled, leadership-driven or disconnected from service obligations, mobilisation may weaken administrative continuity. The issue is therefore not whether unions should mobilise, but whether mobilisation is disciplined by a clear mandate, ethical leadership and a commitment to public value. From an Institutional Theory perspective, labour disputes also reveal weaknesses in the formal and informal rules governing labour-management relations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2014) show that institutions are shaped not only by formal regulations, but also by routines, norms and accepted ways of doing things. In this study, the call for the government to "manage disputes better" points to institutional weaknesses in how grievances are anticipated, mediated and resolved.

Where departments lack credible communication channels, responsive managers or skilled dispute-resolution mechanisms, labour conflict is more likely to escalate into broader governance and service delivery problems. The mixed methods evidence therefore suggests that labour disputes sit at the intersection of labour rights, administrative capacity and public accountability. Quantitatively, half of the respondents viewed disputes as harmful to service delivery. Qualitatively, respondents explained that unions should protect members without disrupting services, encourage ethical work conduct, understand departmental mandates and contribute to improved governance. The implication is that labour relations should not be treated as a peripheral human resource function. In a highly unionised public sector, labour relations are central to whether departments can maintain stability, implement policy, manage conflict and sustain public trust.

The broader public administration implication is clear. Organised labour must be repositioned as both a representative and governance actor. Its legitimacy depends not only on defending workers, but also on contributing to dispute resolution, institutional accountability, professional conduct, and the continuity of service delivery. At the same time, management must avoid treating labour as an obstacle and instead build structured, transparent and responsive channels for engagement. Effective labour relations in the public sector should therefore protect workers' rights while strengthening the state's capacity to deliver. This is where labour relations become part of accountable governance rather than merely a site of workplace contestation.

#### ***6.4. Repositioning Organised Labour for Accountable Public Sector Reform***

The qualitative findings do not suggest a rejection of organised labour but rather a demand for its renewal. Participants continue to recognise the role of unions in the public sector, yet their comments indicate that this role must be exercised with greater accountability, responsiveness, and sensitivity to the state's service-delivery responsibilities. Repositioning organised labour is therefore not about weakening unions but about renewing their democratic, ethical, and institutional purpose.

A recurring concern is that organised labour must return to a member-centred mandate. One participant stated that unions "must stick to the members' mandate," while another warned against unions standing with employers "*behind the scene.*" Within the same response cluster, concerns were raised that unions were focusing more on recruitment than on servicing

members. These responses suggest that reform must begin with internal accountability. If unions are to remain legitimate, members must experience them as structures that listen, report back, take mandates seriously, and place ordinary workers ahead of leadership interests or organisational survival.

Participants also linked union renewal to ethical conduct and modernisation. Some called for unions to “*put members first*,” encourage workers to perform their duties with integrity, and embrace new technology. This points to a labour movement that is not only visible during disputes but also accessible, communicative, and capable of supporting members in a changing workplace. The emphasis on technology is particularly important because it links union relevance to faster communication, wider consultation, and more direct forms of member engagement.

A stronger reform-oriented insight emerges where participants connect organised labour to the institutional mandate of the state. One participant argued:

*“As the representatives of employees who are the ones who are responsible for practicalising the agenda of the institution, it should be mandatory that they acquaint themselves with the departmental mandate and also its priority areas... I think this approach would really have a meaningful contribution towards them improving in the context of service delivery and governance.”*

This response shifts the discussion from union presence to union preparedness. It implies that representatives cannot meaningfully contribute to reform if they are disconnected from the institutional purpose, operational priorities, and service-delivery responsibilities of the departments in which their members work. Another participant linked union accountability to constituency mandates and community outcomes:

*“By taking the mandate from their constituencies, and continuously reporting back to them on the set mandate... they’re a very important stakeholder... to contribute to improved services to our communities in particular the marginalised people of the Eastern Cape.”*

The statement places organised labour within the broader public administration system. Unions should not only defend workers in internal processes but also help strengthen the relationship between workplace governance, institutional performance, and service-delivery outcomes. Several responses also position organised labour as a governance actor rather than

merely as a bargaining or oppositional structure. One participant stated that public sector transformation depends on “*integrated stakeholder engagement/relations*” and that labour, if intentional about its role, could contribute to contemporary governance, service delivery, and socio-economic development. Others argued that organised labour should promote accountability and fairness by engaging with the government to improve working conditions, strengthen governance, and enhance service-delivery outcomes. Participants also called for unions to embrace innovation, improve communication, promote transparency, and participate in policy dialogue. The value of unions lies not only in contesting management but also in contributing to fairer workplace systems, better institutional decisions, and stronger accountability mechanisms.

This reform agenda also requires unions to move beyond traditional “*bread and butter*” issues. One participant argued that organised labour must influence members through training and understand not only employee interests but also “*what the main goals of the organisation are to be achieved.*” Another argued that unions must understand contemporary challenges such as innovation, technology, cultural change, and organisational restructuring. The point is not that wages, benefits, and working conditions are unimportant, but that a modern union agenda in the public sector must also address institutional performance, policy implementation, administrative ethics, and the quality of public services. Organised labour must assume a deliberate accountability role in relation to management. Some participants argued that unions should act as “*watchdogs*” of policy and training implementation, hold management accountable, monitor and evaluate departmental policies, and ensure compliance with employment regulations and procedures. Participants still see unions as necessary accountability structures but expect this accountability to extend beyond individual grievances to include oversight of fairness, implementation, compliance, and the ethical use of institutional power.

The broader implication is that public sector renewal cannot be achieved through managerial reform alone. It also requires labour formations that are ethical, informed, responsive, and capable of engaging constructively with the state. To promote accountability, unions must be answerable to both their members and the democratic values of public administration. For institutional renewal, organised labour must move from reactive contestation towards developmental engagement, helping to build fair workplaces, stronger governance systems, and more reliable public services. The future relevance of organised

labour, therefore, depends on its ability to recover its collective voice while aligning that voice with accountable, ethical, and service-oriented public administration.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that organised labour remains a significant actor in the South African public sector, but its contemporary role is marked by deep tensions. The evidence does not support the simplistic conclusion that unions have become irrelevant. Rather, it shows that their relevance is increasingly conditional. Participants continue to recognise the importance of unions in protecting workers, articulating grievances, and engaging with management; however, they also question whether organised labour is sufficiently responsive, democratic, coherent, and service-conscious in its current form. This is consistent with the broader argument in labour scholarship that the institutional success of unions can produce new contradictions, particularly where formal recognition does not always translate into effective member representation, internal democracy, or constructive engagement with reform.

A central issue emerging from the findings is the gap between union presence and union effectiveness. Organised labour is visibly present in the public sector, but participants raised concerns about representation, transparency, communication, and responsiveness. This is important because public sector unions derive legitimacy not only from their historical role or legal recognition but also from the extent to which members experience them as accessible, accountable, and capable of addressing workplace concerns. When members perceive union leaders as distant, politically influenced, or more concerned with organisational positioning than with member service, the collective voice of workers may be weakened.

This resonates with mobilisation theory, which emphasises that collective action depends on shared grievances, leadership credibility, and member confidence. Without trust in leadership and clear mandate-taking processes, union power risks becoming symbolic rather than substantively representative. Union fragmentation and leadership interests have governance implications. Fragmentation is not only a labour relations issue; it also affects the quality of engagement between labour and management. Where unions compete for members, visibility, or influence, collective representation may become less coherent. This can complicate bargaining processes, weaken dispute resolution, and reduce the capacity of labour to contribute meaningfully to institutional reform. Participants' concerns about political

influence and leaders using members to pursue their own interests point to a deeper legitimacy problem. Organised labour is expected to represent workers; however, when it is perceived as politically entangled or leadership-centred, its democratic mandate becomes vulnerable.

From a Conflict Theory perspective, the public sector workplace is not simply a neutral administrative environment. It is a contested institutional space where workers, union leaders, management, political networks, and citizens' service-delivery interests intersect. Conflict is therefore not limited to the traditional worker-management divide. It also occurs within organised labour itself, particularly where member interests, leadership ambitions, party-political loyalties, and organisational survival compete. This internal contestation matters because it can weaken solidarity, compromise accountability, and reduce the ability of unions to act as credible representatives of workers' voices.

Labour disputes have direct implications for public administration and service delivery. Participants did not reject the legitimacy of labour action, but they expressed concern about disputes that interrupt service delivery or are poorly managed by both unions and the government. This is a critical governance issue. In the public sector, labour relations cannot be separated from the state's responsibility to provide continuous, reliable, and equitable services. When disputes escalate or remain unresolved, they affect not only employees and management but also citizens who depend on public institutions. Labour relations should therefore be treated as part of the state's governance architecture rather than as a narrow human resource function.

This is particularly important for public sector reform. Reform is often presented as a managerial, administrative, or policy process; however, meaningful reform also depends on the quality of labour relations. Public institutions cannot be renewed through policy frameworks alone if workplace actors remain fragmented, distrustful, or disconnected from institutional mandates. Organised labour can either support or obstruct reform, depending on whether it engages as a member-centred, accountable, and informed stakeholder. Some participants expect unions to understand departmental mandates, contribute to service delivery, engage in policy dialogue, monitor implementation, and hold management accountable. This points to a broader conception of organised labour as a governance actor.

Institutional Theory helps explain why the renewal of organised labour is difficult but necessary. Public sector unions operate within established routines, bargaining structures, political traditions, and workplace cultures. These institutional arrangements can protect workers, but they can also reproduce inertia, factionalism, and compliance-oriented

engagement. Where unions rely mainly on historical legitimacy or formal bargaining rights, they may fail to adapt to changing workplace realities, digital communication, younger employees, and contemporary governance pressures. The call for unions to embrace technology, improve communication, and become more transparent reflects a demand for institutional adaptation.

Critical Theory also provides a useful lens for interpreting the findings. Organised labour has historically been associated with emancipation, worker protection, and democratic participation. However, the findings raise the question of whether unions always continue to perform this emancipatory role in practice. When members experience unions as unresponsive, politically captured, or leadership-driven, organised labour may reproduce the very power relations it is expected to challenge. The renewal of organised labour, therefore, requires more than procedural reform. It requires democratic reorientation towards member voice, accountability, fairness, and ethical public service.

The study, therefore, contributes to public administration scholarship by showing that organised labour should not be treated as external to governance reform. Unions are embedded within the functioning of public institutions and influence morale, dispute resolution, accountability, policy implementation, and service-delivery continuity. The challenge is not whether unions should be “brought in,” but how they should be repositioned so that their participation strengthens rather than weakens institutional performance. This requires moving beyond a narrow adversarial model of labour relations towards a more accountable, service-conscious, and developmental form of engagement.

Organised labour remains necessary in the public sector, but its future relevance depends on its ability to restore trust, improve internal democracy, strengthen responsiveness, professionalise shop-steward capacity, and align worker representation with the broader public service mandate. For public sector reform, this means that unions must protect workers while also contributing to ethical administration, institutional accountability, and reliable service delivery. For accountability, unions must be answerable to their members and to the democratic values of public administration. For institutional renewal, organised labour must move from reactive contestation towards constructive engagement, in which worker voice, organisational performance, and public value are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

## 8. Conclusion

This study examined the changing significance and role of organised labour in the South African public sector, with particular attention to representation, union responsiveness, political influence, labour disputes, service delivery, and public sector reform. The findings show that organised labour remains an important institutional actor, but its legitimacy is increasingly being tested by concerns about accountability, transparency, fragmentation, political influence, and the quality of member representation. The study, therefore, does not support a simplistic anti-union position. Rather, it points to the need for a renewed form of organised labour that is more democratic, responsive, service-conscious, and aligned with the governance demands of the public sector. The evidence suggests that the continued relevance of unions cannot rest solely on their historical contribution to worker protection and democratic struggle. While this history remains important, participants' views indicate that contemporary public sector unions are increasingly judged by their practical responsiveness, ethical conduct, and ability to contribute to institutional performance. Concerns about leaders using members to pursue their own interests, poor communication, weak mandate-taking processes, and limited responsiveness suggest that organised labour must strengthen its internal democratic practices if it is to retain the confidence of its members.

The study further shows that labour relations are not peripheral to public administration; rather, they are central to the functioning of the state. Labour disputes, union fragmentation, and weak labour-management relations can affect service delivery, workplace morale, accountability, and the implementation of reforms. At the same time, organised labour can serve as an important accountability mechanism by promoting fairness, defending workers' rights, challenging poor management practices, and contributing to better governance. The challenge, therefore, is not whether unions should participate in public sector governance, but how their participation can be made more constructive, accountable, and service-oriented.

The findings imply that public sector reform cannot be achieved through managerial or administrative reforms alone. Institutional renewal also requires labour formations that are ethical, informed, democratic, and capable of engaging constructively with the state beyond narrow contestation. Organised labour must protect workers, but it must also understand departmental mandates, support professional conduct, promote service-delivery continuity, and participate meaningfully in policy and governance processes. This requires stronger shop-

steward capacity, improved communication systems, clearer member mandates, reduced political factionalism, and a renewed commitment to the public value of state institutions.

The future significance of organised labour in the public sector depends on its ability to recover and renew its collective voice. Unions must remain defenders of workers while also becoming credible partners in accountable public-sector reform. Their role should not be limited to resisting management or bargaining over workplace benefits; it should also include strengthening democratic accountability, supporting institutional performance, and contributing to the broader service-delivery responsibilities of the state. Reimagining organised labour in this way allows worker protection, public accountability, and institutional renewal to be understood not as competing priorities but as mutually reinforcing foundations of a responsive and democratic public service.

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### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Mpumalanga. The conduct of the study was approved and granted ethical clearance by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), Faculty of Economics, Development and Business Sciences, University of Mpumalanga, under reference UMP/Rulashe/09/2025.

### **AI Declaration**

The author used language, grammar, referencing and editorial support tools, including QuillBot, Grammarly, Microsoft Word Editor and similarity-checking tools, where necessary. These tools were used only to improve clarity, grammar, readability, referencing accuracy and manuscript presentation. Where AI-assisted tools were used, their role was limited to editorial, language and structural refinement. The author reviewed and approved the final manuscript and takes full responsibility for its content, accuracy, originality and integrity

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