

Exploring factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining: Evidence from a South African mining company

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Abstract

The study sought to explore factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining at a South African mining company given the volatile nature of employment relationship. Lack of trust due to conflicting views, interests and expectations in employment relations mostly results in collective bargaining breakdown. Exploratory qualitative research design was adopted based on interpretivist paradigm in a case study. Participants were targeted from low to senior management levels and trade union officials through a purposive sampling technique. Subsequently, data was collected from twelve participants using semi-structured interviews that allows flexibility with open ended questions. Thematic analysis was used to organise data into six (6) key emerging themes based on participants' experiences. The study found that the trade union membership and recognition, bargaining structures, bargaining units, trustworthiness as well as managerial and trade union tactics are key factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining. Theoretically, the study contributes a greater understating of how trust-based relationships in collective bargaining leads to improved conditions of employment and business growth. A key limitation of the study is that interviews were not complemented with a content analysis of company documents related to collective bargaining for determining trust-based relationships throughout this stakeholder engagement process.

Keywords: *negotiations, trade union, trust-based relationships, management*

Article History:

Received: September 17, 2025
Accepted: December 28, 2025

Revised: December 20, 2025
Published online: March 7, 2026

Suggested Citation:

Ndlovu, T. & Magau, M.D. (2026). Exploring factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining: Evidence from a South African mining company. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 6(1), 234-254. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353333>

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1. Introduction

Trust-based relationships are central to successful collective bargaining, which is expected to deliver value to key stakeholders and shareholders. Trust is conceptually defined as the expectation of a positive outcome from a promise made by others during a discourse (Ehlers, 2020, 2021; Dirks & de Jong, 2022; Fischer & Walker, 2022; Sunil & Sumitha, 2023). It manifests during verbal or non-verbal communication between two or more individuals in which certain commitments are made, creating expectations that these commitments will be fulfilled. Key elements of trust include communication behaviours, honesty, integrity, reliability, support, equality, and respect (Fischer & Walker, 2022). When these elements are present and reciprocated, relationships tend to be harmonious and capable of producing mutual benefits. Trust is psychological in nature and is influenced by individuals' worldviews and their interactions with others, including both positive and negative experiences (Abson et al., 2024; Dirks & de Jong, 2022; Hawthorne, 2025; Searle & Rice, 2025).

Levels of trust are shaped by perceptions of others as reliable, dependable, aligned with shared relational values, transparent in information sharing, and accountable for their actions. Trust has also been conceptualised in terms of benevolence, good faith, fairness, and compliance, which are considered fundamental aspects of sound employment relations (Ehlers, 2021). In examining trust-based relationships between management and trade unions in South Africa, Kritzinger and Cillie (1994) applied Purcell's model of industrial relations patterns, which includes adaptive cooperation, uninhibited antagonism, antagonistic constitutionalism, and cooperative constitutionalism. Their analysis suggests that industrial relations systems that recognise these dimensions enable management and unions to identify tactics that undermine integrative bargaining, encouraging a focus on common goals rather than positional power. Trust is also regarded as a key factor in reconciling employee needs and employer expectations during collective bargaining (Rulashe, 2024). However, parties sometimes gravitate toward distributive bargaining, often described as a win-lose approach, in which adversarial tactics are used to pressure the other party to accept an offer or concede to a demand (Khan et al., 2022; Parvaneh & Akbari, 2021; Saishi & Chakanika, 2018).

Such approaches rely on competitive tactics that prioritise oppositional behaviour and attempts to dominate the negotiation process rather than pursuing mutually beneficial interests. Examples of these tactics include personal attacks, the strategic use of "good" or "bad" negotiators, the provision of false or misleading information, deliberate delays to gain time,

interruptions during negotiations, the use of vague or questionable authority, and controlling the negotiation agenda (Parvaneh & Nasser, 2021). These practices often signal a lack of trust and good faith, tend to prolong the collective bargaining process, perpetuate antagonism, and may escalate into physical violence. Antagonistic relations have been shown to erode trust, encourage bad-faith bargaining, and increase the likelihood of violent strikes (Leppan et al., 2016). This situation is evident in the South African mining industry, where collective bargaining is often perceived as lacking trust. A notable example is the Marikana mine incident, where failure to reach agreement on substantive issues during collective bargaining reflected a significant trust deficit and ultimately resulted in strike action and violence (Boëttger & Rathbone, 2016; Chinguno, 2013; Lester, 2023; Makama & Kubjana, 2021). Although the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 in South Africa provides mechanisms for robust collective bargaining, persistent distrust continues to generate negative outcomes that undermine trust-based relationships within the mining industry.

The South African mining industry has been widely characterised by frequent and sometimes violent strikes or industrial actions, often linked to failed collective bargaining processes that weaken cooperation and trust (Harvey, 2016). Trust plays a crucial role in effective communication within manager–employee relationships and contributes to reducing conflict in teamwork (Krot & Lewicka, 2012). In many cases, trust between employers and employees deteriorates when expectations are not met by either party; however, it can be rebuilt and sustained depending on the commitment of the parties involved (Reina & Reina, 2000). Strengthening trust is therefore critical for improving employee relations in the South African mining industry and for generating shared value (Joe & Rothmann, 2016; Khubana et al., 2022; Serfontein-Jordaan & Dlungwane, 2022; Van Hoek & Schultz, 2014). Higher levels of trust encourage problem-solving, improve employee efficiency, and foster effective relationships that reduce antagonistic collective bargaining (Kritzinger & Cillie, 1994). Ultimately, collective bargaining grounded in trust promotes harmonious employee relations and produces mutual benefits (Beardwell, 2004; Akhaukwa et al., 2013; Fells, 1993; Godfrey et al., 2007). Therefore, the main aim of this study is to explore the factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining at a South African mining company.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Labour Relations: Theoretical Overview

The theory of labour relations can be understood through three key perspectives: unitarism, pluralism, and radicalism or Marxism (Bendix et al., 2022; Finnemore et al., 2018). These perspectives have important implications for trust-based collective bargaining. Firstly, the unitarist perspective views the organisation as a unified entity with a single source of authority. Managers are appointed to pursue business objectives, drive corporate values, and represent the interests of shareholders (Nel et al., 2008). Within this framework, conflict is regarded as unnecessary, and employees are expected to conform to managerial authority. As a result, power sharing is discouraged, employee voice is limited, and opportunities for meaningful collective bargaining are restricted, which may undermine trust-based relationships (Kaufman et al., 2021). Employees and their trade union representatives are therefore expected to accept managerial authority and decisions without opposition (Bendix et al., 2022; Finnemore et al., 2018). In many cases, collective bargaining is minimal or absent, as employers retain decision-making authority and dissenting views are discouraged.

In contrast, the pluralist perspective recognises the workplace as comprising different interest groups, making collective bargaining an important mechanism for promoting employee voice and worker participation in decision-making processes. Within this framework, a fair balance of power between parties is considered essential for addressing issues of mutual interest (Kaufman et al., 2021). When parties demonstrate authentic and dependable behaviour, pluralist labour relations systems can foster trust-based relationships. Trust in this context requires recognising and respecting the legitimacy of each party's role in the collective bargaining process (Ackers, 2021).

Building on these perspectives, the radical or Marxist approach views labour relations through a broader socio-economic lens. From this standpoint, trade union collective bargaining extends beyond workplace concerns to address wider structural issues, including the eradication of poverty and the reduction of socio-economic inequalities (Adams, 2023; Bendix et al., 2022; Finnemore et al., 2018). Collective bargaining efforts therefore emphasise the prevention of worker exploitation, the promotion of workplace equality, improved employment conditions, and broader socio-economic development. In the absence of an effective collective bargaining framework, a deficit of trust may emerge, undermining workplace harmony and potentially leading to unfavourable labour relations outcomes such as

strike action (Simms, 2024). Furthermore, adherence to the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 is essential for fostering trust-based relationships in collective bargaining and reducing the risk of violent outcomes.

2.2. Duty to Bargain

Kochan (2012) describes collective bargaining as a process in which trade unions engage employers on behalf of employees to negotiate improved conditions of employment. It promotes free and fair stakeholder engagement that culminates in agreements regulating the relationship between the parties. Collective bargaining therefore serves as a bridge for achieving peaceful settlements between employers and employees (Liukkunen, 2021). In South Africa, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 23(2), requires parties to engage in collective bargaining, while the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 entrenches the duty to bargain with recognised trade unions. These provisions enable employees to collectively exert pressure on employers to participate in decision-making processes (Boëttger & Rathbone, 2016; Chinguno, 2013; Lester, 2023; Makama & Kubjana, 2021; Molusi, 2010). The effectiveness of collective bargaining depends largely on the willingness of parties to act in good faith during negotiations in order to formalise agreements. Negotiation, as part of this process, involves direct dialogue between management and trade union representatives aimed at reaching fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable agreements on matters of shared interest (Nel et al., 2008).

Negotiations are a central component of the collective bargaining process and are often characterised by unequal distributions of power between the parties. In examining the duty to bargain in South Africa, Molusi (2010) highlights collective bargaining as an important mechanism for balancing power and promoting employee voice in decision-making. Similarly, Voos (2001) emphasises that collective bargaining should balance social concerns with business imperatives in order to minimise inequality and maintain a reasonable balance of power. The Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 promotes voluntary and private regulation of collective bargaining, allowing parties to determine their own frameworks of engagement on matters of mutual interest; however, trust-based relationships remain a persistent challenge (Nel et al., 2008). The duty to bargain also prevents employers from making unilateral workplace decisions and requires parties to agree on the conditions under which bargaining will occur (Akhaukwa et al., 2013). One such condition involves the establishment of

bargaining units through recognition agreements. Bargaining units refer to categories of employees with shared interests, needs, and demands who are represented by a specific trade union (Bodilenyane et al., 2025; Germishuys-Burchell, 2025; Finnemore et al., 2018). These bargaining units categorise employees by grade and determine the scope of union representation. For collective bargaining to be effective, the scope of negotiations must be clearly defined in relation to both substantive and procedural matters affecting different employee groups. However, such categorisation may also create divisions rather than maintain harmony between the parties. While bargaining unit parameters can facilitate negotiations by addressing the interests of different occupational categories, the inherent power imbalance between parties may intensify tensions and undermine trust-based relationships (Germishuys-Burchell, 2025).

2.3. Collective Bargaining in the South African Mining Industry

In August 2012, South Africa experienced one of the most violent episodes of industrial action at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, where 34 employees were fatally wounded. The strike highlighted how low levels of trust can undermine collective bargaining and ultimately result in industrial action (Harvey, 2016; Karolia-Hussain & Fourie, 2021; Madlala & Govender, 2018; Makama & Kubjana, 2021; Samuel, 2013). Since then, collective bargaining in the South African mining industry has remained volatile, with unprotected and often violent strikes taking centre stage.

Several studies suggest that the mining industry has been characterised by what is often referred to as “bad faith bargaining,” where trade unions may advance extreme demands and show little willingness to compromise, while employers tend to prioritise shareholder interests, increasing the likelihood of prolonged strikes (Karolia-Hussain & Fourie, 2021). Hostile collective bargaining is also influenced by competition and rivalry among trade unions. At Marikana, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) emerged as a powerful force around 2012 and rose rapidly to prominence, shifting the balance of union power away from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). This shift intensified rivalry between the unions and contributed to destructive strikes (Harvey, 2016; Sinwell, 2015). While growing trade union membership can strengthen unions’ bargaining capacity, it can also complicate negotiations when competing unions pursue conflicting objectives (Wöcke & Marais, 2016).

Beyond the events at Marikana, which signalled a significant deficit of trust in collective bargaining, the mining industry has more broadly been characterised by adversarial negotiations in which parties frequently adopt win–lose strategies to achieve their objectives. Van der Westhuizen (2020) examined negotiation tactics used in collective bargaining within the South African mining industry and their impact on employees’ conditions of service and organisational performance. The study highlights the importance of establishing bargaining structures at different levels to provide flexibility for parties and enhance meaningful participation. Institutional structures can support this process by facilitating participation, promoting collective decision-making, and improving accountability and transparency, all of which are fundamental elements of trust-based relationships (Amos et al., 2025). At present, collective bargaining in the South African mining sector is organised differently across subsectors: the platinum sector operates largely at a decentralised level, whereas the gold and coal sectors bargain at a centralised level.

Multilevel collective bargaining on wages and conditions of employment is often encouraged; however, addressing similar issues across different bargaining structures may also affect relationships among the parties involved (Brandl & Braakmann, 2021). This situation illustrates how the design of collective bargaining structures, when based on meaningful participation, can foster a climate of trust, support negotiations conducted in good faith, and encourage a partnership approach in which all parties pursue mutual benefits. Reflecting on the collapse of collective bargaining in the platinum sector in South Africa in 2014, Leppan et al. (2016) emphasised the importance of maintaining the duty to bargain in good faith to achieve a balance of power. Such balance strengthens trust-based relationships and contributes to outcomes based on mutual gain and fairness. Accordingly, the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 should be effectively applied to establish collective bargaining structures that enable parties to engage constructively, with good faith and transparency, thereby preventing breakdowns in trust.

2.4. Trust in Collective Bargaining

The Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 in South Africa encourages trust-based collective bargaining, where parties engage in robust negotiations with the aim of reaching agreements on matters of mutual interest. Trust-based relationships add value to integrative bargaining, minimise the risk of conflict, and lead to amicable solutions for key stakeholders (Walton &

McKersie, 1965). However, given the frequent and volatile industrial actions in the South African mining industry, collective bargaining often appears not to be grounded in trust, as parties tend to adopt win–lose approaches characterised by destructive negotiation tactics. A lack of trust typically undermines cooperation, generates tension, fuels conflict, and ultimately leads to the breakdown of relationships (Elgoibar et al., 2016). Trust therefore plays a critical role in fostering a collaborative culture in which parties willingly comply with the rules of engagement, treat one another fairly, and prioritise mutual benefits (Ehlers, 2021). In this sense, trust becomes the cornerstone of effective collective bargaining, which is characterised by interdependence, collaboration, and the co-determination of solutions that recognise the interests of all parties.

Trust has been defined as a perceived normative responsibility to care about something or someone, attributing a form of moral motivation to the trustee (De Fine Licht & Brülde, 2021; Hawthorne, 2025). It also reflects a relationship of dependence in which a less powerful individual or group relies on another party with greater power. Within employment relations, trust has been conceptualised as the willingness of a vulnerable trustor (employee) to rely on a trustee (employer or employer representative) to behave in an agreed or expected manner (Ehlers, 2021). More broadly, trust can also be understood as employees' reliance on the organisation and its leaders to improve working conditions (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997). Based on these perspectives, and within the context of this study, trust-based collective bargaining refers to the expected reciprocal fulfilment of mutual interests among employees, trade unions, and employers during the negotiation process.

3. Research Methods

A research design refers to the framework that integrates the different components of a study in a logical and consistent manner to effectively address the research problem (Creswell, 2017; Saunders et al., 2023; Sileyew, 2019). In this study, a qualitative exploratory research design was adopted to examine trust-based collective bargaining using a South African mining company as a case study. An exploratory design not only provides insights into the phenomenon under investigation but also helps deepen understanding of why the research is necessary. In addition, a case study strategy was employed to enable the researchers to explore factors within a specific context and develop meanings based on participants' interpretations. A South African mining company was selected as the case to gain insight into participants'

experiences, worldviews, and multiple interpretations of trust dynamics in collective bargaining. Case studies allow researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021; Priya, 2021; Takahashi & Araujo, 2020).

Cases typically represent situations or events in which complex activities occur at a particular time and can be examined through participants' interpretations. Case study research can therefore follow an interpretive inquiry into individuals' perceptions, meanings, and understandings of their experiences (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). The interpretivist perspective assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Saunders et al., 2023). A target sample was selected from a population of interest using purposive sampling, enabling the researchers to identify employees exposed to collective bargaining at a mining company in the North-West province of South Africa. In purposive sampling, participants are deliberately selected based on their knowledge and experience related to the research topic (Sargeant, 2012). Accordingly, the study targeted participants from both trade union and management structures who had experience in collective bargaining. The aim was to focus on participants with relevant similarities related to the research topic (Etikan et al., 2016). Twelve participants were interviewed based on their knowledge of the recognition agreement and their direct or indirect involvement in the collective bargaining process. The sample included three low-level employees, six middle-management employees, and three top-level managers. Among the participants were five general employees, four trade union representatives, and three employer representatives.

A sample of twelve participants is considered adequate for thematic analysis when data saturation is achieved and no new ideas, experiences, views, or insights emerge from the interviews (Ahmed, 2025; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Lim, 2025). Participants' demographic details were withheld in accordance with the consent agreement to ensure anonymity. Consequently, the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants were protected. Maintaining confidentiality is essential to ensure that participants' identities are not disclosed during data collection, analysis, or reporting of the findings (Hunt et al., 2021). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide designed to facilitate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Interviews enable researchers to ask questions, probe responses, and obtain detailed information from respondents (Kabir, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful because they allow flexibility through

open-ended questions, enabling participants to share their views and experiences more freely (Creswell, 2017; Saunders et al., 2023). Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted at times convenient for the participants, with the purpose of capturing, recording, analysing, and interpreting their opinions, experiences, and perspectives regarding trust-based collective bargaining.

The interviews were electronically recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were also taken to support the data analysis process. An inductive approach was applied, involving the transcription and coding of interview data to identify patterns and generate themes that could contribute to new knowledge. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying patterns or themes that emerge within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019) and allows researchers to organise, describe, and interpret various aspects of the research topic (Grobler et al., 2019). Finally, with regard to ethical considerations, data collection was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of a South African higher education institution responsible for overseeing the ethical conduct and integrity of scientific research projects.

4. Findings

The findings of the study are presented based on key themes that emerged from data analysis.

Theme 1: Trade Union Membership and Recognition

The findings indicate that the recognition of trade unions within the organisation under study is consistent with the statutory framework of the Labour Relations Act (LRA 66 of 1995), which promotes trust-based collective bargaining. The right to bargain is secured through recognition agreements that provide specific organisational rights and define the scope of negotiations according to union membership levels. The application of these organisational rights depends largely on union membership strength, and participants observed that declining membership weakens the bargaining power of trade unions. This situation allows management greater leverage to delay negotiations or resist employee demands. As Participant 3 explained, “*trade union membership explicitly influences the rights to collective bargaining,*” while Participant 11 noted that “*when the membership declines, it also affects the unions’ bargaining power.*” Participants also confirmed that multiple unions are formally recognised, with

recognition agreements ensuring that sufficiently representative unions are included in collective bargaining processes.

Recognition was described not merely as a procedural requirement but as fundamental to the legitimacy of collective bargaining. Participant 4 emphasised that “*without trade union recognition, collective bargaining is already broken,*” reflecting the view that recognition serves as a precondition for meaningful stakeholder engagement. Participants further highlighted that recognition agreements help regulate ongoing relationships and ensure transparent and inclusive bargaining forums involving multiple parties. Participant 5 stated that “*recognition agreements allow parties to regulate their relationship,*” while Participant 6 indicated that “*the company recognises all trade unions for fair and transparent bargaining.*” The evidence therefore suggests that recognition extends beyond compliance with legal thresholds and functions as a mechanism for promoting fairness, inclusivity, and trust in collective bargaining processes.

Theme 2: Bargaining Structures

The findings reveal that collective bargaining exists within a multitier structure that combines centralised forums with operational and plant-level negotiations. Accordingly, Participant 9 stated, “*centralised bargaining exists because agreements are negotiated at a central forum, which sets parameters for negotiations at the mines or company level.*” Participant 2 explained that “*there are three trade unions, namely, AMCU, NUM, and Solidarity with negotiations taking place at an operational level,*” while Participant 5 indicated that “*we have three structures in our organisation, the branch, central forum and the group forum.*” Collective bargaining is embedded within these structures, with AMCU, NUM, and Solidarity represented across the different levels. The presence of branch committees and group forums suggests an effort to balance central coordination with local responsiveness.

However, the findings also highlight a lack of clarity among several participants regarding the functioning and differentiation of these structures. This suggests that although formal mechanisms are in place, it is not always clear how they effectively support collective bargaining processes. This issue was reflected in Participant 2’s observation that “*there are substructures focusing on business unit matters, pertinent issues which covering a particular plant or section that are not substantive, yet they are important.*” The bargaining structure can be characterised as hierarchical and inclusive, but its effectiveness depends on both the

institutional design and clarity regarding how these structures are utilised in collective bargaining.

Theme 3: Bargaining Units

The findings confirm that recognition agreements provide a clear description of bargaining units that focus on both substantive and procedural issues affecting employees at specific occupational levels, in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Relations Act. According to Participant 1, “*At our bargaining level, parties negotiate from A to C4 level,*” which was echoed by Participant 6, who indicated that “*employees who fall within the bargaining unit are employees from level A1 to C4.*” At the organisation under study, three recognised trade unions operate within these bargaining units, with a relatively balanced distribution of membership.

In this regard, Participant 11 noted that “*the bargaining unit in C4 downwards represented by AMCU (32%), Solidarity (30%), NUM (13%).*” These unions often compete for dominance within the bargaining unit, which can affect the level of trust among them and frequently prolong the negotiation process. While this pluralist arrangement promotes inclusivity, it may also extend negotiations as diverse interests compete, highlighting the importance of recognition agreements in facilitating trust-based collective bargaining. The findings indicate that bargaining units in the organisation are clearly defined and institutionally supported; however, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the ability of trade unions to set aside rivalry and focus on negotiation outcomes that promote mutual benefit.

Theme 4: Trustworthiness

The findings highlight several incidents of mistrust in collective bargaining, where parties appear to pursue their own demands rather than collective interests. Participant 1 indicated that “*trust breaks when management and trade unions do not honour what they have agreed on and not truthful in information-sharing,*” while Participant 3 raised the concern that “*if it was up to management, there will never be such a thing such as collective bargaining,*” suggesting that a unitarist approach may sometimes be adopted by the company. Similarly, Participant 10 mentioned that “*one party might see the other party negotiating in bad faith and not honouring their part of the agreement.*”

The relationship also appears to be characterised by limited transparency and instances of misrepresentation of information from trade unions. This was highlighted by Participant 4, who stated that *“trade unions also need to be open to management so that management knows what the employees are expecting from them, and trade union officials need to communicate and give rightful information to their members.”* From the perspective of trade unions, management is also perceived to display unreliable behaviours that affect the level of trust in the collective bargaining process. Participant 11 expressed this concern by stating that *“management can play their games and sometimes disappoint us by not keeping their promise or commitment.”* Participants emphasised that when either party perceives the other as negotiating in bad faith or failing to honour agreements, the effectiveness of collective bargaining is undermined.

Theme 5: Managerial Tactics

The findings indicate that managerial behaviour is a critical determinant of trust in collective bargaining. Participants consistently reported that a lack of transparency, dishonesty, unilateral decision-making, and the undermining of trade union representatives erode confidence in management. Participant 1 mentioned aspects such as *“lack of transparency from the management, not providing trade union correct figures of the company’s performance and undermining unions during negotiations”* as managerial tactics that affect trust-based collective bargaining. Participant 3 expressed a similar view, stating that *“when management undermines trade unions, this will break the trust, because the trade unions are also important stakeholders in the business, and play an equal role in the collective bargaining.”* Participant 4 further added that *“dishonesty and lack openness affect trust,”* while Participant 12 indicated that *“lack of communication about changes, future plans and failures of the company erodes trust.”*

Communication plays a crucial role in providing timely and accurate information that can foster trust. When trade unions are excluded from decision-making processes or when verifiable information about company performance is not shared, trust in the collective bargaining process may be significantly undermined. These findings suggest that managerial practices characterised by the exercise of power, control, and limited transparency weaken trust in collective bargaining.

Theme 6: Trade Union Tactics

Participants also identified union behaviours that contribute to mistrust and disrupt collective bargaining. For example, Participant 1 stated that “*sometimes, trade unions do not honour meetings and always change their representatives in negotiations,*” while Participant 6 highlighted that “*shop stewards push their own agenda and communicate wrong information to the employees,*” creating the impression that the company is unwilling to meet employees’ expectations. Unreasonableness, dishonesty, poor communication, frequent rotation of representatives, and the pursuit of personal agendas over employee interests were frequently cited as factors that undermine trust. Participant 3 noted that “*trade union representatives can be pretty much unreasonable when engaging,*” and Participant 5 observed “*the untruthfulness of the union representatives to their members, not telling them the truth and making empty promises.*” The reciprocal nature of trust was also emphasised, as mistrust by unions can provoke defensive or controlling behaviours from management, thereby creating a cycle of bad faith between the parties.

5. Discussion

Trust dynamics in collective bargaining are influenced by the effective application of the Labour Relations Act in relation to trade union recognition and the duty to bargain. The current study found that trade union power and organisational rights derived from membership often determine the composition of bargaining structures and influence trust dynamics. This finding is consistent with Wöcke and Marais (2016), who confirmed that trade union membership determines bargaining power and influences expected outcomes in collective bargaining. Similarly, Bendix et al. (2022) emphasised that trade union recognition based on membership serves as the gateway to structured collective bargaining. Within the organisation under study, different recognition agreements enable trade unions to bargain on behalf of their constituents within specific bargaining units. The recognition process therefore functions not only as a legal obligation but also as a relational mechanism underpinning industrial democracy, where parties are expected to make genuine efforts to uphold fair collective bargaining processes (Finnemore et al., 2018; Nel et al., 2008).

The establishment of bargaining units provides parties with the flexibility to negotiate conditions of employment according to specific employee categories. However, Brandl and Braakmann (2021) caution that the existence of multiple bargaining units may also create

divisions among parties. Recognition agreements should therefore articulate clear conditions for bargaining across different structures in order to promote mutually beneficial relationships. Bargaining structures are effective only when they are clearly defined and when the responsibilities of stakeholders are articulated with clarity (Bendix et al., 2022). Despite these institutional arrangements, participants in the present study expressed doubts about the level of trust between management and trade unions. The findings suggest that parties often fail to bargain in good faith and instead focus on their differences, which erodes trust and negatively affects collective bargaining outcomes. Trust is more likely to emerge when parties demonstrate good faith by relying on one another, prioritising shared interests, and sharing relevant information to support effective negotiations (Ehlers, 2021; Elgoibar et al., 2016). Conversely, a lack of trust is reflected in the use of adversarial tactics associated with distributive bargaining.

In the current study, several such tactics were identified. Management was perceived to engage in practices such as a lack of transparency and the failure to involve trade unions in decision-making processes. On the other hand, trade unions were reported to miss meetings, frequently change their representatives during negotiations, provide inaccurate information to members, and make unrealistic promises. These practices reinforce adversarial relationships rather than encouraging collaborative problem-solving (Khan et al., 2022; Parvaneh & Akbari, 2021). Overall, the findings indicate that trade unions, like management, must demonstrate transparency, competence, and good faith to promote trust-based collective bargaining. These expectations should be clearly articulated in recognition agreements or related frameworks to reinforce a culture of trust in collective bargaining. Without mutual trust, negotiations tend to stall, implementation becomes difficult, and all parties, including employees, experience negative consequences (Ehlers, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The primary aim of this research was to explore the factors affecting trust-based collective bargaining at a South African mining company. The study found that trade union membership, recognition, bargaining structures, bargaining units, trustworthiness, and the tactics adopted by both management and trade unions are key factors influencing trust-based collective bargaining. Understanding the scope of the company's recognition agreement within

the framework of the Labour Relations Act is fundamental to facilitating trust-based collective bargaining and is likely to encourage bargaining in good faith.

Formal collective bargaining structures can strengthen trust by facilitating effective communication through appropriate channels, improving transparency in engagements, and promoting accurate feedback to constituencies. The findings reveal that all parties involved in collective bargaining play an important role, and each must recognise the legitimacy and contribution of the other to foster mutual understanding and achieve agreements on shared objectives. The study further suggests that sound employment relationships grounded in trust provide the foundation for effective collective bargaining. Conversely, a lack of trust makes it difficult for parties to engage objectively in negotiations aimed at achieving mutual benefit.

In terms of limitations, this study did not include a content analysis of company documents related to collective bargaining. Future research could therefore examine such documents to further understand how trust-based relationships are reflected and maintained throughout this stakeholder engagement process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Johannesburg. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearances by the University of Johannesburg.

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