

## ***Can Shop Stewards Rekindle the post-1973 Union Traditions? Setting A New Agenda for Union Revitalisation!***

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### **Abstract**

The role of shop stewards is one of the celebrated themes of the radical post-1973 union movement. They are given wide-ranging legal powers in law: to represent union members in the workplace; to monitor employers' compliance with the post-apartheid labour law; to monitor the implementation of collective and/or wage agreements; and, to report non-compliance to union structures, union federations and authorities. However, shop stewards operate in the belly of the beast: in the crisis-riddled union movement and the neoliberal-influenced industrial relations system. Neoliberalism has snuck crude corporate managerialism into workplaces. Corporate managerialism has diminished the power and influence of the union movement in the workplace and society. The paper will argue that "corporate managerialism" underscores 'business unionism'. It will also remark that internal union democracy and workers control are under threat from business unionism.

Notwithstanding, research studies demonstrate that the culture of regular meetings, elections and reports back are still in place. Shop stewards are rightly given superseding legal powers in the workplace where a constituency-based participatory democratic culture is still a reality. The paper will suggest that a combination of legal and political leverage, that shop stewards possess, has not been fully exploited to resist management's strategies in workplaces. The rationale of this paper is that the legal-political strategy should be considered for the thorough-going revitalisation agenda for the union movement. The paper will conclude that a shop stewards-led strategy, steeped in political/ideological plurality and countervails the fragmentation of the union movement, ought to anchor this union revitalisation agenda.

True to the post-1973 traditions, workers control and internal union democracy can still be rekindled. The constituency-bound shop stewards in workplaces – as the microcosm of society – may illuminate the limits and help restore a participatory radical democracy. In conclusion, the paper will submit that a reenergised bottom-up 'shop stewards' movement' of the 1970s that morphed into the 'roaring 1980s', may still become the keystone for rebirthing working-class-led civil society.

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*MOJALEFA M. MUSI was part of the mid-1980s Soweto Youth Congress (SOYCO) and Soweto Students' Congress (SOSCO) – affiliates of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Between 1990 and 2015, he played different roles in union organising and education activities of COSATU affiliates and labour support*

organisations. MUSI is a freelance labour specialist. He holds a Master of Arts degree, Global Labour University (GLU) programme, University of Witwatersrand.

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