

# FreeFACTS

No 9/2023 | September 2023 | Issue 65

Find us online at [www.irr.org.za](http://www.irr.org.za)

## Strikes part of living in a free society

**Strikes are a fact of life. Some people may see them as a necessary evil while others would prefer if it were illegal to go on strike. But the fact of the matter is that being allowed to strike is part of living in a free society.**

This edition of *FreeFACTS* looks at trends with regards to strikes and unionisation in South Africa.

It shows that the proportion of people who are members of trade unions in South Africa is on the decline. In the mid-1990s about 40% of employed people were trade union members. By 2020 this had declined to about 20%, a significant drop.

This issue of *FreeFACTS* also looks at trends with regard to wage increases. In South Africa, in recent years, most strikes have been triggered over wage disagreements. For example, in 2021 some 99% of all workdays lost to strikes were due to disputes over wages.

In addition, the proportion of strikes that are unprotected is also increasing (a protected strike is one that complies with the requirements of the Labour Relations Act, in which case the strike is legitimate and procedural requirements are complied with before it commences). This increase in unprotected strikes would seem to imply that labour relations are – in general – deteriorating. This has serious implications for broader South African social and economic stability.

Nevertheless, strikes are an important tool in the arsenal of employees. However, violent strikes should not be tolerated and those who engage in acts of violence or destroying property while on strike, should face the full might of the law.

For South Africa to be a successful country, relations between employers and employees need to be one which is not overly adversarial. However, in South Africa too often strikes are a first resort, and which often degenerate into violent confrontation. This is not the way to build a country that works.

At the same time, the right to strike is a fundamental right in any democracy, and employees also have the right to be treated with dignity by their employers.

— Marius Roodt

## JOIN US

The IRR is an advocacy group that fights for your right to make decisions about your life, family and business, free from unnecessary government, political, and bureaucratic interference. FreeFACTS publishes evidence that communities are better off when individuals are free to make decisions about how they want to live, be educated, work, access healthcare, think, speak, own property, and protect their communities. If you agree with the issues we stand for, welcome to the team. There are millions of people just like you who are tired of South African politicians, activists, and commentators attempting to rein in your freedom to decide. Take control and make sure your voice is heard by becoming a friend of the IRR.

**SMS YOUR NAME  
TO 32823  
SMS costs R1.  
Ts and Cs apply.**

## Labour Relations

Trade unions <sup>a</sup> and membership, 1995/96-2021/21				
Year	Active registered trade unions	Registered trade union membership <sup>c</sup>	—Registered union membership <sup>b</sup> —	
			as a share of total employment	as a share of the EAP <sup>d</sup>
1995/96	248	2 690 727	35,5%	28,0%
1996/97	303	3 016 933	40,0%	30,8%
1997/98	365	3 412 645	36,3%	27,2%
1998/99	433	3 801 388	36,7%	28,1%
1999/2000	397	3 359 497	28,3%	20,7%
2000/01	537	3 552 113	28,4%	21,4%
2001/02	488	3 939 075	32,8%	23,7%
2002/03	513	3 277 685	28,1%	19,9%
2003/04	533	4 069 000	34,4%	25,3%
2004/05	390	3 134 865	25,1%	19,0%
2005/06	367	3 134 865	23,7%	18,2%
2006/07	357	3 049 860	23,0%	17,5%
2007/08	317	3 220 245	22,1%	17,1%
2008/09	285	3 298 559	23,0%	17,6%
2009/10	244	3 238 519	23,5%	17,6%
2010/11	222	3 057 772	22,0%	16,3%
2011/12	218	3 192 530	22,3%	16,8%
2012/13	208	3 028 400	20,6%	15,4%
2013/14	203	3 250 100	21,5%	16,1%
2014/15	196	3 556 365	22,7%	17,0%
2015/16	190	3 556 914	22,9%	16,8%
2016/17	191	3 926 025	24,4%	17,6%
2017/18	190	3 945 518	24,2%	17,2%
2018/19	207	3 870 024	23,7%	16,8%
2019/20	218	4 051 529	28,6%	22,0%
2020/21	222	3 110 000	20,0%	13,2%
<b>1995/96-2020/21</b>	<b>-10,5%</b>	<b>15,6%</b>	<b>-43,7%</b>	<b>-52,8%</b>

Source: Department of Employment and Labour, www.labour.gov.za, accessed 27 October 2022

<sup>a</sup> A trade union is a workers/employee organisation constituted for the purpose of furthering and defending the interests of workers.  
<sup>b</sup> IRR calculations.

<sup>c</sup> Data from 1994 to 1996 includes membership of unregistered trade unions. From 1997 onwards, total trade union membership figures do not include the membership of unregistered trade unions. In terms of the Labour Relations Act of 1995, the Department of Labour is no longer required to keep records of unregistered trade unions.

<sup>d</sup> Registered union membership as a proportion of the total economically active population (official definition of unemployment).

## Labour Relations

Number of unions in each grouping, 2021/22	
Grouping	Affiliates
Confederation of South African Workers' Unions (CONSAWU)	3
Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)	20
Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA)	22
National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU)	18
South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU)	21
Other groupings and unaffiliated unions	138
<b>Total</b>	<b>222</b>

Source: Department of Employment and Labour, www.labour.gov.za, 26 January 2023

Wage settlements <sup>a</sup> and inflation, 1998-2021			
Year	Average level of wage settlements	Inflation rate (CPI) <sup>b</sup>	Difference in percentage points <sup>c</sup>
1998	8,6%	6,9%	1,7
1999	8,3%	5,1%	3,2
2000	7,4%	5,3%	2,1
2001	7,4%	5,7%	1,7
2002	8,0%	9,2%	-1,2
2003	8,9%	5,8%	3,1
2004	6,8%	1,4%	5,4
2005	6,3%	3,4%	2,9
2006	6,5%	4,7%	1,8
2007	7,3%	7,1%	0,2
2008	9,8%	11,5%	-1,7
2009	9,3%	7,1%	2,2
2010	8,2%	4,3%	3,9
2011	7,7%	5,0%	2,7
2012	7,6%	6,0%	1,6
2013	7,9%	5,9%	2,0
2014	8,1%	6,1%	2,0
2015	7,7%	4,5%	3,1
2016	7,5%	6,4%	1,1
2017	7,6%	5,3%	2,3
2018	7,2%	4,6%	2,6
2019	6,7%	4,1%	2,6
2020	6,3%	3,3%	3,0
2021	4,4%	4,5%	-0,1

Source: Andrew Levy Employment Publications, *The Wage Settlement Survey Quarterly Report*, December 2021, p5, accessed 18 October 2022

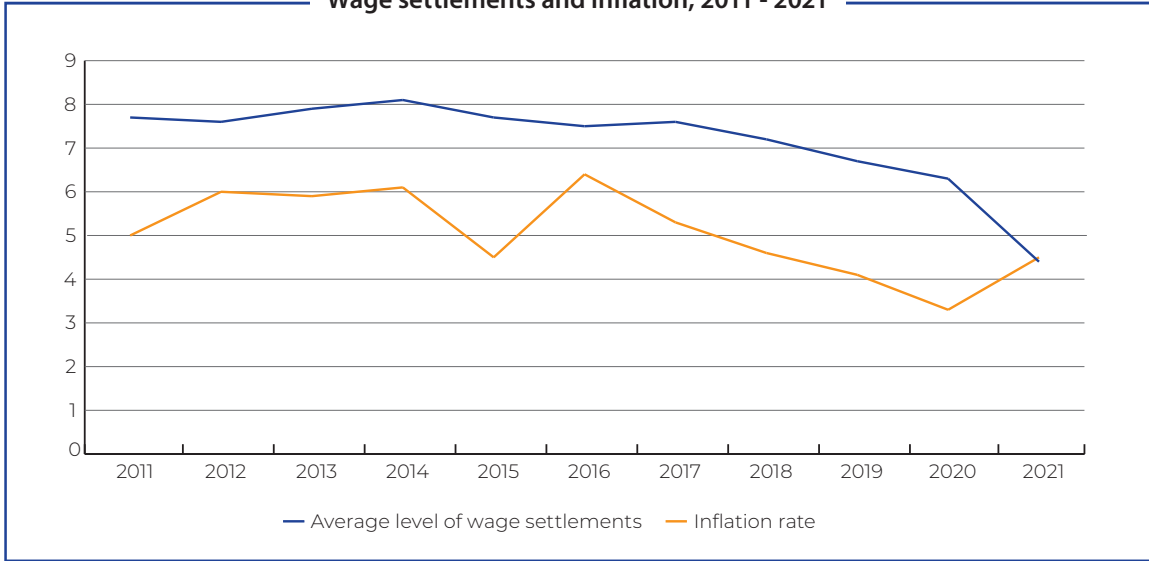
<sup>a</sup> A wage settlement is an agreement over wages, following negotiations between employers and employees. So, the proportions in the first column indicate the average wage increments for each year as agreed upon during employer/employee negotiations.

<sup>b</sup> Consumer Price Index.

<sup>c</sup> Average level of wage settlements minus the inflation rate.

# Labour Relations

Wage settlements and inflation, 2011 - 2021



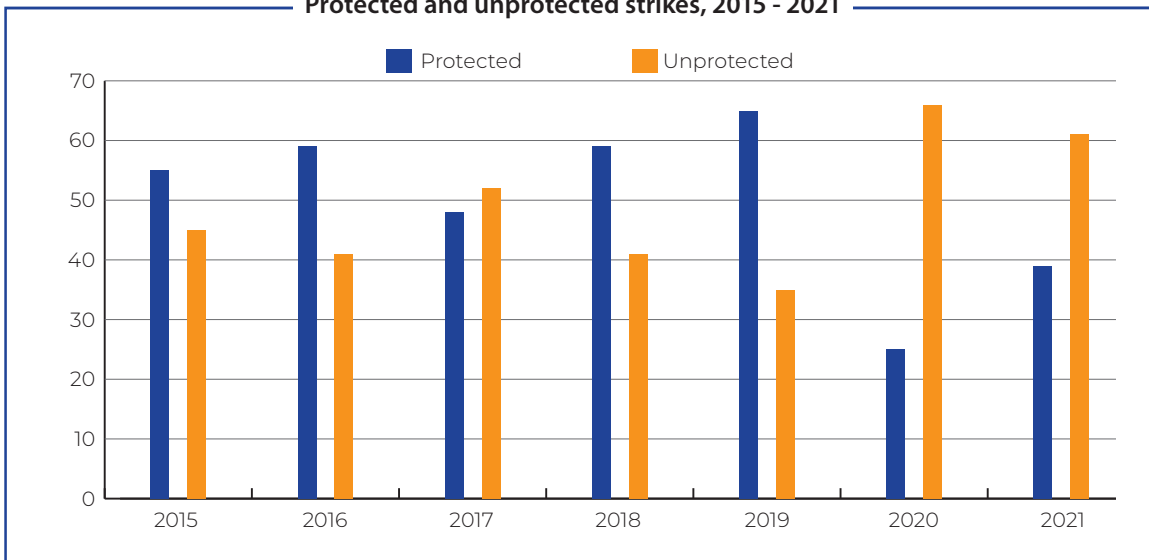
Protected<sup>a</sup> and unprotected strikes, 2015-21

Strike status	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Protected	55%	59%	48%	59%	65%	25%	39%
Unprotected	45%	41%	52%	41%	35%	66%	61%

Source: Department of Employment and Labour, *Annual Industrial Action Report 2015*, p11; *Annual Industrial Action Report 2017*, p8; *Annual Industrial Action Report 2018*, p10; *Annual Industrial Action Report 2019*, p11; *Annual Industrial Action Report 2020*, p11; *Annual Industrial Action Report 2021*, p11

<sup>a</sup> A protected strike is one that complies with the requirements of the Labour Relations Act of 1995, in which case the strike is legitimate and procedural requirements are complied with before it commences.

Protected and unprotected strikes, 2015 - 2021



## Labour Relations

Working days <sup>a</sup> lost to strikes, 1979-2021			
Year	Number	Year	Number
1979	100 000	2001	1 250 000
1980	250 000	2002	945 000
1981	500 000	2003	700 000
1982	150 000	2004	1 100 000
1983	250 000	2005	2 300 000
1984	950 000	2006	2 900 000
1985	1 250 000	2007	12 900 000 <sup>c</sup>
1986	1 350 000	2008	990 000
1987	9 000 000 <sup>b</sup>	2009	2 900 000
1988	1 500 000	2010	14 600 000 <sup>d</sup>
1989	3 090 000	2011	6 200 000
1990	4 000 000	2012	3 500 000 <sup>e</sup>
1991	3 800 000	2013	5 200 000
1992	4 200 000	2014	11 800 000 <sup>f</sup>
1993	3 600 000	2015	640 000
1994	3 900 000	2016	550 000
1995	1 600 000	2017	480 000
1996	1 700 000	2018	1 950 000
1997	650 000	2019	1 200 000
1998	2 300 000	2020	50 000
1999	3 100 000	2021	1 500 000
2000	500 000		

**Source:** Andrew Levy Employment Publications, *The Wage Settlement Survey Quarterly Report*, December 2021, p7

**a** Or mandays. A manday is an industrial unit of production equal to the work one person can produce in a day. Typically 1 manday = 8 man hours = 40 hours per week.

**b** This high level of industrial action was the result of two large strikes in the mining and transport sectors.

**c** This high level of industrial action was the result of a major public service strike.

**d** This was the highest level of industrial action post-1994 and was largely the result of a public sector strike in September 2010, which alone accounted for the loss of 12 million working days/mandays.

**e** This figure does not reflect the true impact in terms of the nature of strikes. The year's activity was dominated by the wave of violent unrest in the mining sector set off by events at Marikana (North West) in August 2012.

**f** This high level of industrial action was the result of a major strike in the mining sector.

## Labour Relations

Working days <sup>a</sup> lost by strike trigger <sup>b</sup> , 2011-2021						
Year	Wages	Recognition/ retrenchment	Other grievances <sup>c</sup>	Dismissal/ disciplined	Other <sup>c</sup>	Total <sup>e</sup>
2011	97,6%	– <sup>f</sup>	2,3%	– <sup>f</sup>	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2012	96,0%	– <sup>f</sup>	4,0%	– <sup>f</sup>	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2013	95,6%	1,1%	2,9%	0,3%	0,1%	100,0%
2014	68,5%	5,3%	21,0%	5,2%	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2015	81,0%	6,5%	12,0%	0,5%	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2016	86,0%	0,9%	11,0%	2,1%	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2017	78,0%	0,7%	14,0%	7,3%	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2018	92,0%	2,5%	5,5%	– <sup>f</sup>	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2019	92,0%	– <sup>f</sup>	8,0%	– <sup>f</sup>	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%
2021	99,0%	0,3%	0,6%	– <sup>f</sup>	– <sup>f</sup>	100,0%

Source: Andrew Levy Employment Publications, Wage Settlement Survey Quarterly Report, December 2021, p8

<sup>a</sup> Or mandays. A manday is an industrial unit of production equal to the work one person can produce in a day. Typically 1 manday = 8 man hours = 40 hours per week.

<sup>b</sup> For example, in 2016, 86% of working days were lost to strikes stemming from disputes over wages.

<sup>c</sup> For example, grievances about conditions of employment or discrimination.

<sup>d</sup> Includes sympathy strikes i.e. strikes in which the strikers have no direct grievance against their own employer but attempt to support or aid another group of workers on strike.

<sup>e</sup> Figures should add up horizontally to 100% but may not, owing to rounding.

<sup>f</sup> No strike triggers fell into this category.

Employees involved in work stoppages by industry, 2017-21								
Industry	2017		2019		2020		2021	
	Number	Proportion <sup>a</sup>	Number	Proportion <sup>a</sup>	Number	Proportion <sup>a</sup>	Number	Proportion <sup>a</sup>
—Employees involved—								
Agriculture	7 048	5,6%	4 763	3,3%	1 576	1,5%	3 487	1,6%
Mining	30 439	24,3%	14 092	9,8%	8 587	8,4%	45 282	20,9%
Manufacturing	8 009	6,4%	7 738	5,4%	17 542	17,2%	56 812	26,2%
Utilities	239	0,2%	412	0,3%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%
Construction	1 674	1,3%	2 483	1,7%	452	0,4%	0	0,0%
Wholesale and retail trade	2 161	1,7%	4 914	3,4%	461	0,5%	37 223	17,2%
Transport	15 950	12,7%	6 577	4,6%	2 234	2,2%	5 057	2,3%
Finance	2 629	2,1%	0	0,0%	235	0,2%	693	0,3%
Community services	56 976	45,5%	102 596	71,5%	70 625	69,4%	68 044	31,4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>125 125</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>143 575</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>101 712</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>216 598</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

Source: Department of Employment and Labour, Annual Industrial Action Report 2020, p4, Annual Industrial Action Report 2021, p3  
<sup>a</sup> IRR calculations.