

## The Impact of Labour Union Fragmentation on Service Delivery in The South African Public Sector

### Dampak Fragmentasi Serikat Pekerja terhadap Penyediaan Layanan di Sektor Publik Afrika Selatan

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#### Abstract

This study examines the impact of increasing fragmentation among labor unions in South Africa's public sector on the government's capacity to deliver services effectively. Grounded in Conflict Theory and Agency Theory, the research employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary data from government reports, union publications, and scholarly articles published over the past decade. The analysis utilizes thematic content coding to identify patterns related to service disruptions, organizational inefficiencies, and the erosion of public trust. The findings reveal that political fragmentation and inter-union competition are primary drivers of service disruptions, complicating collective bargaining processes and weakening institutional cohesion. Public sector employees frequently find themselves navigating competing union mandates, which contributes to diminished morale, demotivation, and the absence of a unified institutional direction. These tensions exacerbate strains in the relationship between the state and organized labor, thereby impeding efforts to improve service delivery. This study contributes to the literature by establishing a link between macro-level labor dynamics and micro-level service delivery outcomes, a nexus that remains relatively underexplored in public administration scholarship. It calls for more coordinated, depoliticized labor relations as a means to restore institutional effectiveness and rebuild public trust.

**Keywords:** employee & employer relations; fragmentation; labour union; public administration; public sector strikes; service delivery.

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dampak meningkatnya fragmentasi di antara serikat pekerja pada sektor publik di Afrika Selatan terhadap kapasitas pemerintah dalam memberikan layanan secara efektif. Berlandaskan Teori Konflik dan Teori Keagenan, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan memanfaatkan data sekunder yang diperoleh dari laporan pemerintah, publikasi serikat pekerja, dan artikel ilmiah yang diterbitkan dalam satu dekade terakhir. Analisis dilakukan melalui pengkodean isi tematik untuk

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mengidentifikasi pola terkait gangguan layanan, inefisiensi organisasi, dan menurunnya kepercayaan publik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa fragmentasi politik dan persaingan antarsesama serikat pekerja merupakan faktor utama penyebab gangguan layanan, yang memperumit proses perundingan bersama serta melemahkan kohesi institusional. Pegawai sektor publik kerap menghadapi mandat serikat pekerja yang saling bersaing, yang pada gilirannya menurunkan moral, memicu demotivasi, dan menciptakan ketiadaan arah institusional yang terpadu. Ketegangan ini memperburuk hubungan antara negara dan organisasi pekerja, sehingga menghambat upaya untuk meningkatkan kualitas pelayanan publik. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada literatur dengan menghubungkan dinamika ketenagakerjaan pada tingkat makro dengan konsekuensi pelayanan publik pada tingkat mikro, sebuah keterkaitan yang relatif jarang dieksplorasi dalam kajian administrasi publik. Penelitian ini mendorong terciptanya hubungan ketenagakerjaan yang lebih terkoordinasi dan terlepas dari kepentingan politik guna memulihkan efektivitas institusional dan membangun kembali kepercayaan publik.

**Kata kunci:** hubungan karyawan & pemberi kerja; fragmentasi; serikat pekerja; administrasi publik; pemogokan sektor publik, penyampaian layanan.

## Introduction

This research critically investigates the impact of public service union fragmentation on service delivery within South Africa's public sector—an issue of increasing urgency as government institutions continue to fail in providing stable and effective services. Historically, labour unions played a central role in the anti-apartheid movement, acting as a cohesive force for workers' rights and broader socio-political transformation (Buhlungu, 2010). However, in the democratic era following 1994, fragmentation intensified, both within and beyond the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which remains allied with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) through the tripartite alliance. The rise of numerous independent unions alongside COSATU affiliates has heightened competition for influence, membership, and governmental recognition, thereby fostering divided interests and eroding the overall quality of service delivery (Buhlungu, 2010; Von Holdt, 2010). This historical shift from cohesive unionism to a fragmented and competitive labour environment has had significant policy implications. As unions have splintered and pursued divergent agendas, government departments have faced mounting challenges in maintaining consistent labour policy implementation, particularly at provincial and municipal levels. This has led to regulatory uncertainty,

fragmented wage negotiations, and incoherent service mandates, especially during periods of industrial action. The erosion of the “one industry, one union” principle has consequently weakened worker representation and undermined long-term planning and policy coherence within the public sector.

While previous scholarship has addressed union competition and political alliances in general terms, there remains a notable gap in research examining the immediate operational consequences of union fragmentation on service delivery outcomes. Earlier studies have largely concentrated on historical transitions or high-level political tensions, overlooking the real-time administrative effects evident in schools, clinics, and municipal offices. This study addresses this gap by investigating how disunity among unions directly influences workplace dynamics, employee morale, and the daily functioning of public services. Once a unified labour movement, the sector is now characterised by decentralisation, with unions within the same industries engaging in political and ideological conflicts. This has led to competing mandates, duplication of efforts, and recurrent strike actions that disrupt essential services (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004; Makino, 2008). Notably, the foundational principle of “one industry, one union” championed by COSATU has been compromised, as its own affiliates and independent unions increasingly organise in overlapping sectors.

Such competition, driven by the pursuit of overlapping membership bases, polarizes representation and hinders constructive interaction between the state and unions. Consequently, governance processes are disrupted, leading to policy inconsistency and weakened institutional capacity (Habib, 2013). The originality of this research lies in its precise focus on the immediate effects of union fragmentation on public service delivery an aspect that remains insufficiently examined in existing literature. While prior studies have addressed intra-union competition in general terms, few have systematically analyzed its impact on public sector performance, particularly in relation to industrial action and political contestation (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). By filling this gap, the present study offers a nuanced understanding of how fragmented political structures and divided unionism collectively diminish governmental efficiency and service delivery outcomes.

Grounded in Conflict Theory and Agency Theory, the study contributes theoretical insights into the structural and relational complexities of decentralized labor relations. Conflict Theory explicates how inter-union rivalry, power struggles, and competition for resources erode solidarity and weaken collective bargaining capacity (Webster, 2012). Complementarily, Agency Theory highlights the disequilibrium among the state, public sector employees, and union leadership, which undermines goal alignment and hinders policy implementation (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Methodologically, the research draws upon secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and union publications to explore how competing union agendas influence institutional strategies and outcomes. This approach enables a detailed examination of the extent to which political fragmentation both within the tripartite alliance and in broader contexts reduces cooperation and contributes to poor service delivery performance (Godfrey et al., 2007).

The research confirms that fragmented unionism particularly when coupled with political competition fosters disempowerment, complicates government–union relations, and erodes the public sector’s capacity to fulfill its service delivery mandate. This study critically examines the ways in which labor union fragmentation influences public service delivery in South Africa, with specific attention to the roles of political alliances, inter-union rivalries, and leadership dynamics. It also evaluates the implications of fragmented labor relations for collective bargaining processes, strike behavior, and workforce morale, drawing comparative insights from international contexts, including Denmark and Brazil.

Building on these analyses, the study advances strategies to strengthen labor cohesion, enhance institutional efficiency, and restore public trust in the sector. Addressing the challenges of fragmentation will require the implementation of a more integrated labor relations framework that fosters coordination, encourages depoliticized participation, and rebuilds staff confidence. These elements are identified as critical determinants for revitalizing public service delivery in South Africa.

## **Literature Review**

Trade unions have long been good defenders of workers' rights, and in South Africa, they have been at the forefront of resisting apartheid (Rulashe, 2024). By then,

they were an institutionalised force for socio-political change (Buhlungu 2010; Rulashe, 2024). Following apartheid, particularly in new and post-industrial economies, the fragmentation of unions has become the greatest threat. In the rest of the globe, such fragmentation tends to take place on the basis of ideological, political, or resource cleavages. Such opposition movements as labour unions, such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC), have given rise to jurisdictional disputes and chronic industrial unrest that interferes with the delivery of service (Fashoyin, 2005). It's the same with South Africa as well. That same powerful, longtime alliance of the ex-COSATU and ANC has been rocked by breakaway unions such as the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) group, or more recently, to unite under federations such as the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). This fragmentation has resulted in inefficiency, duplication of resources, and obstacles in strategic spheres such as health, education, and local services (Von Holdt, 2010). Although there are more specialist unions providing specialised representation, their proliferation has a tendency to wear away coordinated service provision and disempower collective bargaining.

One of the key factors contributing to this fragmentation is the politicisation of union leadership. COSATU's support for the ANC has resulted in tension, especially where union leaders have been accused of putting party interests ahead of those of the workers (Sebake, 2024). This has resulted in member disillusionment, as seen in the instance of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), where unfinished bargaining demands have led to strikes and service disruptions (Buhlungu, 2010). Rulashe (2024) posits that such disillusionment has spawned breakaway unions, including the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) split to form SAFTU. The trend mirrors what has occurred in other countries abroad, such as in India, where political affiliations have also undermined union solidarity (Hensman, 2002). In South Africa's public sector, it has meant severe consequences, with ruptured labour relations hindering effective governance. Weak regulatory control also aggravates the state's poor ability to handle conflicting union interests. On the contrary, nations such as those in Scandinavia have embraced centralised, depoliticised bargaining systems that enhance stable, cooperative labour relations and more secure service delivery

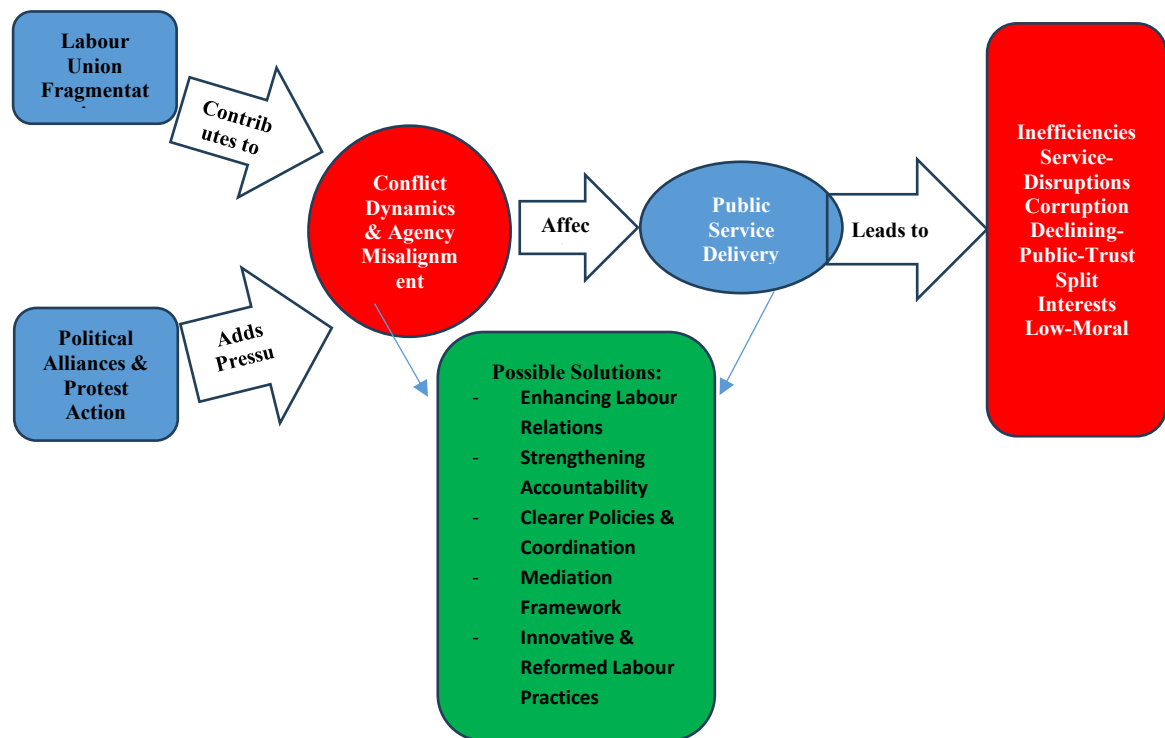
(Jensen, 2020). Overall, whereas unions remain essential in championing workers' rights, unchecked fragmentation, especially when politicisation has been a major threat to sound public sector management and service delivery. Institutional performance needs more cohesion and depoliticisation of labour relations in order to reconnect and better serve.

The international case studies discussed, such as Denmark's centralised bargaining system and Brazil's efforts at union depoliticisation, offer relevant models for interpreting South Africa's labour challenges. These examples are not merely descriptive; they frame a comparative lens through which South Africa's fragmented union landscape can be evaluated. As later sections of the study demonstrate, Denmark's unified negotiating framework offers lessons for minimising inter-union competition, while Brazil's political decoupling of unions provides a strategic model for restoring organisational credibility. Recent studies, such as Andersen et al. (2023) and Omar & Kiley (2022), further affirm the importance of labour governance innovations in navigating public sector reform and workforce morale. By drawing these international parallels into the discussion, the study situates South Africa's experience within a global discourse on union fragmentation and governance efficiency.

### **Conceptualisation of the study.**

Labour union fragmentation is emphasised as an underlying cause, leading to divided representation, rival interests, and power struggles within the public sector. The fragmentation can lower the effectiveness of collective bargaining processes, leading to intragroup conflict and rival objectives. Political coalitions and strike action are also regarded as complementary forces that sustain turbulence in labour relations. Scholarship, like that by von Holdt (2002), indicates that political affiliation is a factor of union politics that leads unions to prioritise political agendas over enhancing workers' conditions. In South Africa, the relationship between political movements and labour unions is very profound within the anti-apartheid struggle, where all these organisations came together in their fight for the liberation of the oppressed and the unity of equal rights for all citizens (Rulashe, 2024). The relationship played a crucial role in ending

institutionalised racial discrimination as well as developing the democratic transformation of the nation.



**Figure 1** Labour Union Fragmentation Conceptual Framework  
Source: Authors' Illustration (2025).

The theory offers a nuanced lens through which to understand the intricate relationship between labour union fragmentation, political affiliations, and the resulting tensions that shape the delivery of public services in South Africa. Fragmentation of labour unions increases disunion, resulting in division of representation and inefficiency when negotiating as a collective entity, resulting in mounting labour unrest (Sebake, 2024). Von Holdt (2002) advises that the fragmentation is usually driven by conflicting agendas and misaligned union priorities, reducing their bargaining power in collective bargaining. In the same way, political affiliations lead to instability by integrating unions with political formations, shifting focus from campaigning based on workers to politics. According to Nyamnjoh et al. (2013), such alignments serve to put political objectives before service delivery results, raising tensions within the public sector. Conflict dynamics and agency misalignment are significant mediating variables in the

model. Conflict dynamics emphasise tensions within and between unions that frequently stem from poorly articulated mandates and incompatibility of interests. Agency misalignment, however, describes the absence of coordination and communication among government agencies. Reddy's (2016) study identifies that inefficiency in defined responsibilities in local government results in overlapping and inefficiency, discouraging service delivery. According to McLennan and Munslow (2009), horizontal misalignment (laundry list between departments) and vertical misalignment (between levels of government) are still major barriers to effective governance. Failure in South Africa's service delivery, such as inefficiency, corruption, interference with services, deterioration in public confidence, conflicting interests, and negative staff morale, has been widely reported.

Auditor-General South Africa (2023) identifies the way corruption and inefficiencies seep into public resources, while strikes hinder the services, draining citizens' confidence in government institutions. Declining public trust also sets a vicious cycle, as disengaged citizens reduce public accountability, further making it easier for corruption and inefficiencies. Public servants get demotivated because of systemic issues such as political interference and no or minimal professional growth. Enhancing labour relations is the most important method of protecting workers' solidarity and firming up collective bargaining approaches. As argued by Kenny (2020), building solidarity among unions enhances their capacity to act on workers' interests without encountering political compromise.

Strengthening accountability institutions, as the Public Service Commission (2022) has highlighted, is needed to decrease corruption and inefficiency and hold public officials and unions accountable for their conduct. Having more formal policies and coordinating institutions can help ease agency misalignment by having clear directions for intergovernmental coordination (Kenny, 2020). Mediation institutions can bring conflict dynamics to a close by giving a systematically conceived space for the collaborative resolution of conflict. New and revitalised labour practices, like the embrace of technology for productive communication and work-advancing arrangements, are able to unlock the dynamism of labour relations and productive performance (Rulashe, 2024). Such innovations are among the solutions that offer such



great promises, but are confronted with overcoming institutionalised bureaucratic animosity and political obstruction. Successful implementation of transformed labour practices and mediation strategies has the ability to enhance public service delivery, and through this, in turn, replenishes public esteem and morale (Sebake, 2024). However, the linear nature of these relationships is prone to diminishing the complexity of the governance ecosystems. External factors of socio-economic inequality, scarcities of resources, and global trends in the economy exert paramount influences on the dynamics of the elements in the framework.

**Table 1** Conflict Theory and Agency Theory in the Labour Union Context

Theory/ Concept	Definition	Elements	Articulation
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	Rooted in Marxist thought, this theory posits that societal structures are shaped by perpetual struggles between competing groups over resources and power (Marx, 1990).	<p><i>Power and resources:</i> The unequal distribution of resources leads to societal conflicts.</p> <p><i>Oppression:</i> Dominant groups use their power to oppress subordinate groups.</p> <p><i>Resistance:</i> Subordinate groups fight back to redress inequalities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The theory explains how labour union fragmentation emerges from competition for resources, power, and political influence.</li> <li>- In South Africa, fragmentation within COSATU reflects intra-group conflicts driven by ideological and political divisions within the tripartite alliance.</li> <li>- These conflicts weaken the ability of unions to present a unified front, undermining their effectiveness in labour negotiations.</li> </ul>

<i>Agency Theory</i>	Focuses on the relationship between principals (e.g., union members or employers) and agents (e.g., union leaders or managers), highlighting how conflicting interests and misaligned incentives can create inefficiencies (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).	<i>Principal-agent relationship:</i> Principals delegate authority to agents. <i>Asymmetric information:</i> Agents may have more information than principals. <i>Misaligned incentives:</i> Agents might prioritise their interests over those of principals. <i>Monitoring and enforcement:</i> Mechanisms to align agents' actions with principals' goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In South African labour unions, leaders (agents) often prioritise political alliances (e.g., loyalty to the ANC) over the interests of their members (principals).</li> <li>- Fragmentation exacerbates the principal-agent problem as competing unions present conflicting agendas, making collective action difficult.</li> <li>- Misalignment of goals reduces trust and weakens public sector service delivery, as seen during fragmented wage negotiations and strikes.</li> </ul>
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Source: Authors' Illustration (2025).

Conflict Theory brings out the ideological and structural tensions among unions as they struggle for resources and political control, very much present in COSATU and its ventures into the tripartite alliance. The struggle for power not only divides the labour movement but also weakens the bargaining capacity of unions, hence their capacity to represent workers in the public sector. The theory outlines how this fragmentation translates into inefficiencies in service delivery, duplication of resources, and strikes that undermine public trust in government. Agency Theory goes one step further in pointing out the congruence of interests among union members (principals) and union leaders (agents). Union leaders sacrifice their political constituencies or personal interests on the altar of workers, which further worsens the issue of fragmentation. Agency Theory reveals how rival unions impose conflicting demands, further

destabilising labour relations and complicating it for the government to deal with public sector issues. The agency-principal disparity also erodes trust, lowering the morale and cooperation of workers necessary in delivering quality services. The theories form a twin-prism whereby the Conflict Theory is the institutional cause of fragmentation and the Agency Theory represents working effects. They both highlight that in the absence of unified union relations and associated objectives, trade unions make public services inefficient and disrupt sustainable service delivery.

### **Impact of Political Alliances on Union Fragmentation**

Despite significant work on the public sector delivery and labour unions, the intricate political alliance role towards union fragmentation has not been researched. A good part of the literature that has taken the issue in focus has treated unions' role in democratic development in South Africa from a socio-political perspective without adequate emphasis on intra-union politics and their tangible contribution towards public sector governance and delivery. This failure leaves wide knowledge gaps on the extent to which political alliances have an impact on union unity, bargaining power, and service stability.

#### **Political Alliances and Fragmentation**

The South African labour and political environment's tripartite alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and South African Communist Party (SACP) is a unique aspect of South African political and labour culture. The alliance in the past gave unparalleled political influence to the unions, enabling them to shape policy and safeguard workers' interests throughout and after the anti-apartheid struggle (Kenny, 2020; Rulashe, 2024). However, this political alignment has had a two-edged nature. As noted by Buhlungu (2010), it has brought with it the situation where political interests come to predominate at the cost of the common attributes of its membership, encouraging internal contradictions as well as fragmentation. Fragmentation is occasioned by unions that belong to the alliance adopting incompatible stands in matters of political or economic importance. COSATU's internal battle for policy alignment with the ANC has created

tensions within member unions, which has undermined their capacity to make a united front and resulted in breakaway parties, with one of the latest being the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) formed by ex-COSATU secretary general Mr Zwelinzima Vavi (Chaskalson, 2017).

Such splits are not just conceptual but are also realised in real-life disturbances. Leaders of the unions tend to employ their roles to earn political favour at the cost of labour issues and inter-member trust. Such politically produced fragmentation makes governing more difficult because it hinders the capability of unions to organise as one to address issues affecting the public sector.

### Impact on Strikes and Service Delivery

Though strikes are a common occurrence in South African labour relations, the contribution of fragmentation to strike action intensification and its influence on public service provision is under-researched. Fragmentation among unions will tend to result in coinciding or conflicting strike demands, which increase dispute duration and their destabilising effect. The 2010 public sector strike is a ready example. Driven by different union agendas, the strike resulted in widespread school closures and disruptions to hospitals that affected millions of citizens who depend on public services (Rulashe, 2024). These strikes have nothing to do with workers' interests but with the choice of ANC leadership by union leaders. It so occurs that the leaders of the union do not desire the leaders of the ANC at present, so they then write down all the workers' complaints and strike against such leadership. Such strikes then halt service delivery (McGreal, 2007). Divided unions concentrate on demonstrating their own negotiating capacity and relevance instead of concerted action, reducing the possibility of early settlement. This fragmentation reduces the collective bargaining power of the unions to negotiate as an effective force with the government, resulting in prolonged labour unrest. Lack of collective bargaining also adds pressure on public sector institutions, resulting in delayed crucial services and destroying public faith (Buhlungu, 2010).

### Comparative Insights

Global studies provide important insights on how union unity can promote effective delivery of services and help counter fragmentation problems. Denmark's single-table bargaining system has proven effective in promoting labour stability. The bargaining is done collectively under one platform, with consistency in demands and minimum opportunity for protracted disputes (Jensen, 2020). Not only does the system strengthen the bargaining power of unions, but it also provides a stable platform that promotes effective delivery of public services (Andersen, Hansen & Ibsen, 2023). Conversely, South Africa's decentralised labour market lacks such centralisation, and unions must fight for influence and resources. Such a competitive market setting incites strike action, dissuades consensus, and leads to poor service delivery. Comparative analysis of how South Africa can learn from examples of models such as Denmark, e.g., by adopting a single bargaining structure attuned to its specific political and social environment, is not found in the literature. This would enable policymakers and stakeholders to create targeted interventions for consolidating union solidarity, enhancing bargaining processes, and improving public sector performance.

While the political significance of alliance in South Africa's working class has been widely researched, their contribution to union fragmentation and interference in public service delivery remains under-researched to a critical point (Kenny, 2020). Political cleavages in the tripartite alliance provide the background for conflicting priorities that threaten union unity and bargaining capacity, with practical implications for governance and service delivery. Strikes, supported by fractured union plans, increase such challenges even more, calling for a comparative analysis of integrated labour frameworks. Multidisciplinary research can provide clearer insights, enabling realistic measures towards moderating the negative effects of union fragmentation in South Africa's public sector.

### Research Methods

In dealing with the research objectives, the study used an integrated approach of literature review, document analysis, and qualitative inquiry (Babbie, 2013). Rooted in a critical and exploratory qualitative research approach, the study sought to explore the

subjective dimension and contextual nuances of fragmentation between labour unions and their effect on public service delivery in the South African public sector. A critical and exploratory research design assisted the qualitative research to facilitate a comprehensive examination of the complex dynamics of union disintegration, political affiliations, and strike behaviour in the situation presented. The collection of data depended greatly on secondary sources such as government documents, union documents, scholarly research, and policy documents to facilitate multi-layered and general research of the phenomenon. The selection of secondary data sources was guided by relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research objectives. Government reports were chosen based on their authority and currency, academic studies for their peer-reviewed rigour, and union publications for capturing insider perspectives on labour dynamics. The sources spanned a 10-year timeframe (2013–2023) to ensure both historical continuity and contemporary relevance.

The use of secondary data was particularly appropriate given the exploratory and critical nature of this study. It enabled the researchers to access a breadth of documented institutional patterns, policy trajectories, and strike-related trends that would be difficult to capture through primary data alone within the study's timeframe. Additionally, given the political sensitivity surrounding union-state relations, secondary sources offered an ethical and non-intrusive approach to engage with contested narratives. However, reliance on secondary data also presents certain limitations. First, some government documents may reflect institutional bias or omit critical stakeholder perspectives. Second, the absence of real-time engagement with union members and public officials limits the ability to capture experiential insights. Lastly, variations in the quality and depth of documentation across different sources posed challenges during content analysis. These limitations were mitigated through triangulation, thematic coding consistency, and the inclusion of diverse source types to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The use of theoretical frameworks like Conflict Theory and Agency Theory brought analytical depth to understanding, in breaking down power struggles and conflicting objectives that typify unions, government, and public sector delivery of services.

Content analysis was performed as the primary tool for analysis, and it allowed for systematic extraction and interpretation of the themes and patterns in the gathered data. Literature findings were triangulated to ascertain the validity and credibility of the research findings. Extended engagement with the data, peer debriefing, and systematic documentation of procedures used in analysis were utilised to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliability was strengthened by rigorous coding and clear methodological reporting, careful adherence to limitations and possible biases (Creswell, 2014). Where possible, along the research trajectory, transparency and reflexivity were core, so that the research made a useful contribution to the problem at hand, to the degree that consideration of labour union disorganisation, meaning and implications to South African public service delivery was at stake.

## **Results And Discussion**

Fragmentation of the labour unions has a multifaceted and far-reaching impact on the delivery of public services in South Africa. The findings are presented in this section in a critical and scholarly manner, well organised into meaningful thematic sections to facilitate ease of understanding and analytical richness. The analysis relies on theoretical concepts such as Conflict Theory and Agency Theory, guided by lessons from the international experience, to offer a holistic explanation of the phenomenon.

### **Impact on Service Delivery**

The fragmentation of labour unions in South Africa inflicts serious negative impacts on the effectiveness, cohesiveness, and quality of public service delivery. Below are three interrelated challenges that arise out of fragmentation:

#### **Inefficiencies in Public Sector Operations**

The fragmentation of labour unions creates operational inefficiencies by promoting overlap and duplication of efforts within the same sector. Competing unions often engage in parallel advocacy, resulting in policy disjointedness and delays in service delivery. These redundant activities reduce the capacity of public institutions to operate effectively, efficiently and economically (Von Holdt, 2010). A clear example

of these inefficiencies is found in uncoordinated industrial actions. During the 2010 public sector strike, various unions pursued divergent demands, prolonging negotiations and delaying conflict resolution. This lack of coordination severely hindered the government's ability to deliver essential services, including education and healthcare, further contributing to the existing service delivery challenges (Buhlungu, 2010).

### Service Disruptions from Prolonged Strikes

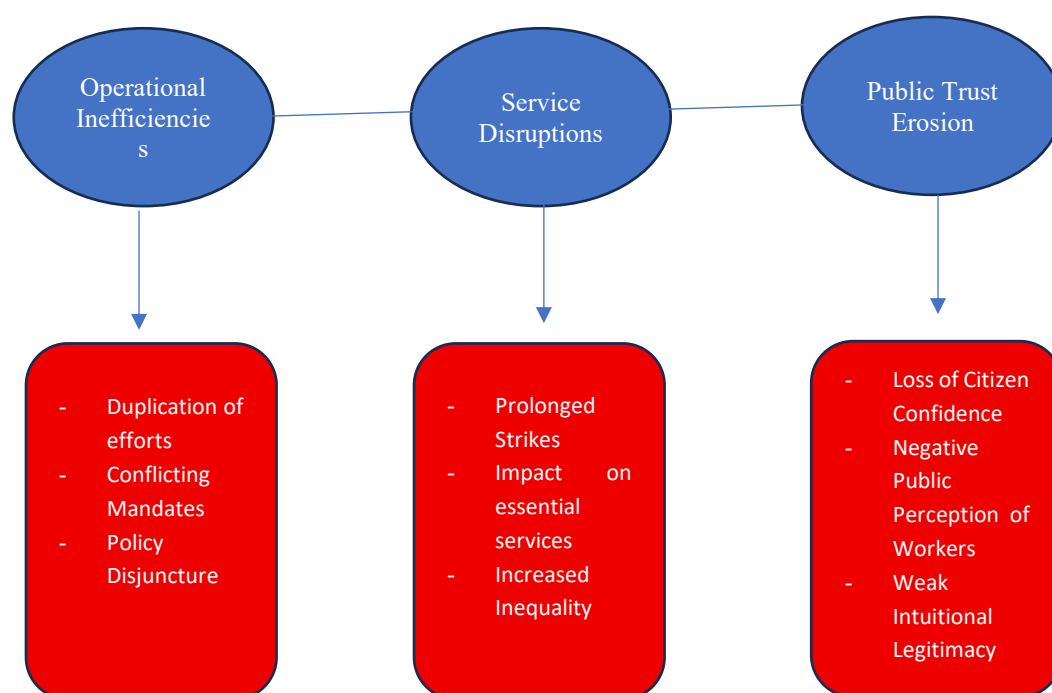
Strikes stemming from fragmented unions frequently result in extended disruptions to public services. Unlike strikes led by unified unions with aligned agendas, those organised by fragmented unions are more challenging to resolve, as the government is required to address multiple, often conflicting, demands (Habib, 2013). Essential services such as emergency healthcare, schooling, and municipal waste management are particularly vulnerable during these strikes. The consequences are disproportionately felt in underserved areas, especially in rural municipalities, where service delivery gaps are already significant. Such disruptions further add to social inequalities by depriving marginalised populations of critical public services.

### Breach of Public Trust

The persistent inefficiencies and service disruptions caused by union fragmentation contribute to a breach of public confidence in both the state and labour unions. Historically, trade unions have played an important role in advocating for the rights of workers, but their politicisation and failure to bring about concrete changes to public services have guaranteed growing scepticism from citizens (Webster, 2012). The politicisation of trade unions is especially destructive, given that it provides legitimacy to popular perceptions that union leadership has more interest in political objectives than the interests of workers and members of the public in general. Such a trend not only demeans the integrity of unions but also destroys confidence in state institutions with the mandate of mediating labour relations and offering effective service delivery. The failure to confront the inefficiencies and reduce the service disruptions associated with labour union fragmentation is a reflection of underlying governance failures and structural weaknesses. These problems, in aggregate, erode state legitimacy, with the



public questioning the ability of the government to effectively manage labour relations and guarantee the provision of key public services (Miggels and Rulashe, 2022). The solution to these problems necessitates an enhanced, coordinated, and integrated labour relations approach to re-establish institutional trust and enhance public service delivery. The interrelationship between inefficiencies, service disruptions, and breach of public trust reflects a cascading pattern of dysfunction triggered by labour union fragmentation. Operational inefficiencies reduce service responsiveness, which in turn intensifies labour dissatisfaction and strike activity. Prolonged disruptions further damage public trust, weakening institutional legitimacy and citizen engagement. These themes are not discrete but form part of a reinforcing cycle that undermines the capacity of the public sector to function efficiently. This section, therefore, presents the themes not as isolated consequences but as overlapping challenges embedded within a broader system of fragmented labour relations.



**Figure 2** Consequences of Labour Union Fragmentation on Public Service Delivery  
Source: Author Construction (2025)

## **Internal Union Dynamics**

The intrasectoral dynamics of South Africa's fractured unions, dominated by inter-union rivalry and political divisions, have largely accounted for the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the public sector. Such dynamics undermine the unions' capacity to function as collective and effective agents of the workers, thus creating challenges in service delivery.

### **Inter-Union Rivalries**

Union fragmentation is perpetuated by intense competition between COSATU-affiliated unions and independent unions such as the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and the South African Federation of Trade Union (SAFTU), among others. These rivalries often escalate into open conflicts, with unions competing for membership, political influence, and dominance in wage negotiations. This competition detracts from the overarching goal of representing workers' interests and instead shifts the focus toward asserting organisational superiority (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). The AMCU 2012 strike took place despite the majority union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), agreeing to the 18% salary increase. The strike ended up being tragic, where 34 miners were killed. The rivalry between the COSATU-affiliated NUM and AMCU led to the loss of lives in Marikana (South African History Online, 2012). At times during public sector wage negotiations, unions with overlapping constituencies frequently undercut one another, presenting conflicting demands that undermine their collective strength. This fragmented approach leads to unsatisfactory compromises, weakening the union's bargaining power and diminishing its ability to secure favourable outcomes for workers. The inability to present a unified front in negotiations contributes to protracted disputes and suboptimal agreements, further eroding trust in unions' effectiveness. Conflict Theory provides a useful lens for analysing these dynamics. It suggests that the competition for resources and influence among unions is a natural consequence of structural divisions within the labour movement. However, this internal conflict weakens the unions' capacity to achieve collective goals, ultimately harming their members (Webster, 2012).

### Political Divisions within the Tripartite Alliance

The tripartite alliance comprising COSATU, ANC, and SACP once served as a powerful unifying force in South Africa's labour movement. However, it has increasingly become a source of division. Political allegiances within the alliance often conflict, leading to fragmented unionism that prioritises party-political alignments over worker solidarity (Buhlungu, 2010). Union leaders frequently pursue personal or political agendas that diverge from the interests of rank-and-file members. COSATU's alignment with the ANC often results in union leaders advocating for policies that align with the government's objectives, even when these policies are at odds with workers' demands. This dynamic contributes to the disillusionment and mistrust among union members, who perceive their leaders as prioritising political loyalty over their welfare (Habib, 2013). Agency Theory highlights the misalignment between union leaders (agents) and their members (principals), as the pursuit of political agendas by leaders creates a disconnect that breaches trust and solidarity within the labour movement. This misalignment weakens the unions' ability to function as effective intermediaries between workers and the state, undermining their role in labour relations (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

### Absence of a Unified Strategy

The absence of a single labour strategy by South Africa's unions has led to the failure to consolidate gains in promoting workers' rights and enhancing public service delivery. Without a centralised strategy, the unions find it difficult to develop clear and coherent demands, resulting in ad hoc and reactive state-level decision-making (Von Holdt, 2010). This lack of unity has far-reaching implications for public sector governance. Fragmented unions are less capable of shaping policy in an effective manner, which aggravates inefficiencies and constrains the scope of genuine reforms. Throughout wage negotiations, fragmented unions tend to push for short-term solutions over longer-term solutions, leading to erratic policy results and persistent labour unrest. On the other hand, nations such as Denmark have exemplified the advantages of a cohesive labour strategy. Denmark's model of centralised bargaining guarantees that

unions have a unified front when negotiating, which lessens fragmentation and promotes labour stability (Jensen, 2020).

The internal political and rivalry divisions within South Africa's unions have deep consequences for their capacity to function as effective agents of change. Such divisions undermine collective bargaining power, destabilise labour relations, and lessens the unions' credibility with their members and the public. Unless these internal dynamics are addressed, unions will continue to be plagued by divided agendas and reactive approaches, exacerbating service delivery problems. To combat such problems, a move towards a more consolidated and depoliticised labour movement is imperative. This needs reforms aimed at facilitating more cooperation among unions, minimising political intervention, and consolidating the institutions for collective bargaining. This can help strengthen South Africa's unions, empowering them to make more substantial contributions to public service delivery and governance.

### **Public Sector Workforce Effects**

Labour union fragmentation has profound implications in the public sector workforce, with intense impacts on employees' solidarity, morale, and motivation. In addition to labour workforce demoralisation, its effects ensure that service delivery and governance are based on inefficiencies. Three of the issues stand out as having an impact on the public sector workforce: deteriorated morale and motivation, compromised solidarity, and demoralisation of professionalism.

#### **Declining Morale and Motivation**

Fragmentation of the union generally entails ineffective and disconnected leadership that pays no attention to the pressing welfare of public sector workers. That is the perception from the politicisation of unions and segmentation of their agendas, which results in diversion from the basic issues of workers. Consequently, the public sector workers remain disconnected and not represented in their careers (Alford et al., 2021). Extended labour battles, usually precipitated by competing union agendas, impose significant emotional and financial burdens on workers. Delayed wage deals subject employees to extended periods of uncertainty, demoralising and infuriating

them. In the 2010 public sector strike, most workers complained of extended negotiations brought about by fragmented union agendas, which eventually proved to be useless in securing worthwhile concessions for the affected employees (Buhlungu, 2010).

The failure of one unified method by unions confuses employees with different instructions. Besides interfering with work activities, it increases the level of anger among employees against union officials. Employees are left torn between the fulfilment of their work tasks and compliance with union instructions during work stoppages, generating additional stresses and disappointment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The case is explained by Agency Theory in the sense that union officials (agents) are seen as being conflicted with the workers (principals). When labour interests are made secondary to organisational or political agendas by union officials, it produces a disconnection which lowers motivation and trust within the workforce (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

#### Loss of Solidarity

The fragmentation of the unions undermines the long-standing traditional solidarity that has been the backbone of the labour movement. Instead of guaranteeing collective strength, union fragmentation divides the workers based on political, ideological, and organisational divisions, which weaken their organising capabilities and further their collective interests (Buhlungu, 2010). In the public sector, it leads to the siloing of the workforce, where workers become members of rival unions or political groups. This disorganisation limits the common sense of public sector workers, weakening their capacity to present a unitary front either in bargaining or in industrial action. Solidarity is vital in uniting collective action, but fragmented unions are highly disadvantaged in mobilising their members onto a single common cause. This weakening of collective power humiliates both bargaining power and leaves each worker isolated and powerless in their working landscape. These splits are an inevitable consequence of competition over resources and ideological conflicts within the labour movement. But the consequent loss of solidarity weakens workers' collective strength to oppose institutional injustices and fight for improved conditions (Webster, 2012).

### Breach of Professionalism

Union fragmentation, coupled with frequent disruptions to service delivery, tarnishes the public perception of the public sector workforce. Teachers, healthcare professionals, and municipal employees are often criticised for participating in strikes or other industrial actions, regardless of the legitimacy of their grievances (Von Holdt, 2010). Strikes and service disruptions associated with fragmented unions often shift the blame onto workers rather than union leadership or systemic governance failures. This creates a negative public narrative that paints workers as unprofessional and indifferent to the needs of the communities they serve. Continuous disruptions lead to the loss of professional identity of public sector employees. While teachers and healthcare workers, who are expected to uphold ethical and service-oriented standards, face significant reputational damage when prolonged strikes disrupt schooling and medical services, unions could play a more critical role in ensuring that resolutions are achieved much quicker if they are unified. While the Constitution of South Africa upholds the right to strike for all citizens, including public servants, it is equally crucial for these officials to uphold transparency and accountability in their actions. Demonstrating ethical leadership and a commitment to public service strengthens public trust and ensures that their demands do not compromise service delivery and governance integrity (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022).

Internationally, centralised labour frameworks, such as Denmark's, reduce the frequency and duration of strikes, allowing workers to maintain their professional identity while advocating for their rights. South Africa's fragmented labour environment lacks such structural safeguards, leaving workers exposed to public backlash and reputational harm. Beyond boardroom negotiations, significant factors contribute to such disruptions, including socio-economic challenges and the country's historical context. Union fragmentation does more than disrupt organisational efficiency; it deeply impacts the psychological and professional well-being of public sector employees (Kenny, 2020). The cross-feeding of shattered leadership, demoralisation of staff, and shattered public trust sustains a self-reinforcing cycle of inefficiency and distrust. Demoralised and disengaged workers often contribute to

lower-quality service delivery, reinforcing negative perceptions of the public sector workforce. Addressing these issues through structural reforms may help promote greater union solidarity and mitigate the effects of fragmentation (Omar & Kiley, 2022). Like common bargaining models and depoliticised leadership of the unions, solidarity and morale among employees can be regained. The professional identity of the workers in the public sector must be strengthened not only to improve the delivery of services but also to regain public trust in the workers and the unions.

**Comparative Insights**

International experience is useful in providing lessons for the understanding and management of the consequences of the fragmentation of unions in South Africa. Comparative analysis of countries with similar or divergent labour trends provides valuable lessons in mitigating fragmentation as well as advancing public service delivery, as illustrated in the table below.

**Table 2** Global Perspectives on Labour Fragmentation

Country	Perspective	Lessons for South Africa
<i>Nigeria: Fragmentation and Reform</i>	Nigeria’s labour movement shares key similarities with South Africa’s, including frequent industrial actions and inefficiencies in public service delivery driven by union fragmentation. Rivalries between unions like the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) often lead to prolonged strikes and operational standstills, disrupting service delivery (Fashoyin, 2005). However, Nigeria has initiated reforms to address these challenges. By improving collective bargaining processes and implementing stronger regulatory frameworks, the country has encouraged dialogue	Strengthening regulatory frameworks and facilitating structured dialogue among unions could help South Africa address its own challenges with fragmentation, particularly in mitigating the frequency and impact of prolonged strikes.

	between unions and the state, reduced industrial actions, and promoted more coordinated labour relations, demonstrating the potential of effective governance in mitigating fragmentation.	
<i>Denmark: Centralised Bargaining and Stability</i>	Denmark stands in sharp contrast to the fragmented labour systems of South Africa and Nigeria, with its centralised bargaining model effectively minimising union fragmentation and promoting labour stability. Through unified frameworks, Danish unions negotiate collectively, ensuring consistent representation of workers' interests (Lind, 2009). This centralisation reduces inter-union competition and enables quicker conflict resolution. Denmark's collaborative approach builds trust among unions, workers, and the government, resulting in consistent service delivery and minimal disruptions. Public sector strikes are rare, as unions and employers proactively address disputes through mediation and joint decision-making.	Adopting elements of Denmark's centralised bargaining system could help South African unions coordinate their demands more effectively, reducing fragmentation and promoting stability in labour relations. This would not only improve service delivery but also rebuild public trust in unions and the state.
<i>Brazil: Depoliticisation and Labour Relations</i>	Brazil's labour movement, like South Africa's, has struggled with politicisation and fragmentation, where union leaders often prioritised political agendas over workers' welfare, weakening union credibility and disrupting labour relations (Cardoso, 2016). In response, Brazil introduced reforms to depoliticise unions, reducing political party influence on union leadership. These changes refocused unions on worker advocacy and improved labour relations. Additionally, measures to enhance dialogue	Depoliticising unions in South Africa, particularly within COSATU and its affiliates, could help realign their focus toward worker advocacy rather than political alliances. Strengthening mechanisms for negotiation and dialogue between unions and the state could also improve labour relations and service delivery outcomes.



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between unions and employers  
have contributed to more  
consistent public sector  
performance.

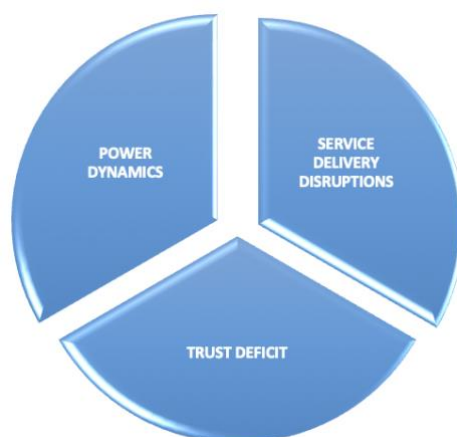
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Source: Authors' Illustration (2025).

Comparative experience from Nigeria, Denmark, and Brazil indicates that union fragmentation is not a prerequisite for the labour movement. Mechanisms of good governance, including centralised bargaining arrangements (Denmark), reforming rules (Nigeria), and depoliticisation programs (Brazil), are templates for addressing fragmentation and its negative impact on public provision. For South Africa, these international models propose that strong labour governance frameworks, coordinated bargaining processes, and less political interference would be a long way to solving the problems presented by union fragmentation. Although South Africa's labour movement is working in a distinctive historical and political environment, the implementation of aspects of these models would assist in promoting more cohesion, minimising service disruptions, and making public sector services more efficient.

### Reflective Themes

A content analysis of findings yields three major and interconnected themes that describe the systemic concerns that arise from union fragmentation in South Africa. The themes capture the long-term effects of labour relations fragmentation on public provision of services, governance, as well as social trust.



**Figure 3: Study Emerging Themes**

Source: Authors' Illustration (2025)

Union fragmentation stems from power competition because unions compete for membership, political power, and leadership in bargaining. These competitions, especially between COSATU-affiliated unions and non-affiliated unions like the AMCU, promote a culture of competition over cooperation. This provides weakened labour unity because unions are more interested in organisational leadership than group worker representation (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). The political affiliations of union leaders further worsen these power dynamics. In some cases, leaders affiliate with political parties or factions and advance their own political agendas ahead of worker needs. This creates a dynamic not only destabilising collective action but also deflecting unions from their fundamental role as representatives of workers' interests. Conflict Theory explains this scenario as one where, as a result of conflicting interests over resources and control, internal variations in unions become an area of weakness, lessening their ability to function as collective units (Webster, 2012).

These power struggles undermine the collective bargaining strength of unions, rendering workers vulnerable and weakening the effectiveness of labour relations. Inability to be represented collectively allows the state to capitalise on these fault lines, further weakening workers' bargaining strength. The ripple effects of union disintegration are most strongly felt in the disruptions to public service provision. Strikes, frequently called by rival unions with competing agendas, lead to standoffs and operations come to a halt and unfairly impact essential services like health care, schools, and city trash collection. Long-term strikes, like the 2010 strike in the public sector, illustrate how fragmented unions exacerbate service delivery inefficiencies by mounting conflicting demands, extending negotiations, and stalling settlement (Buhlungu, 2010; Habib, 2013). Fragmentation also enhances policy disconnection within the public sector since the government is unable to harmonise the demands of diverse unions.

This lack of coordination compromises the state's capacity to have coherent labour policies and stable service delivery. This inefficiency has the most disproportionate effect on marginalised communities, especially in rural municipalities, where there is already limited availability of basic services. The instability of split labour relations evidences a structural deficit in unions as well as in the state. Without

representative capacity, unions cannot effectively represent workers, with the government having to operate in an unstable labour environment, impacting service delivery as well. The greatest impact of union fragmentation is the loss of trust, both among the workforce and the general public. Workers will be more likely to view the unions as politicised and ineffective and more concerned with organisational and political agendas than with actual worker representation (Alford et al, 2021).

This lack of trust is further exacerbated by protracted wage negotiations and strikes that fail to yield concrete benefits for workers. Similarly, the public's confidence in unions and the state has been undermined by repeated service outages and operating inefficiencies. Historically, unions were pioneers in advocating for social and economic justice, particularly during South Africa's anti-apartheid fight. But their present fragmentation and seeming ineffectiveness have changed popular attitudes, and unions are now regarded as selfish organisations rather than as advocates of worker and social welfare (Webster, 2012). The decline in trust is symptomatic of a wider crisis of legitimacy for unions and the state. This scarcity echoes the necessity of radical reforms to restore trust in mechanisms of labour relations and regain the legitimacy of unions as efficient drivers of change. South Africa's system problems of union fragmentation, prompted by these topics, are beyond organisational inefficiencies. War, service interruption, and erosion of trust combined weaken the capacity of the labour movement to speak for workers and feed into governance.

To resolve these problems, structural change is needed, for example, centralised bargaining structures and cultural shifts within unions to place worker solidarity and public transparency above political and organisational agendas. Without such change, the vicious cycle of inefficiency, disruption, and distrust will persist, undermining labour relations and public service delivery.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the influence of labour union fragmentation on South African public service delivery and revealed that this has resulted in heavily entrenched inefficiencies, governance deficits, and trust shortages. Fragmentation undermines the delivery of service, weakens collective bargaining, and demotivates staff morale. Inter-union competition-generated industrial action and operational inefficiencies extend the

length of strikes and disproportionately harm disadvantaged groups, most notably in rural areas where the availability of basic services like healthcare, education, and municipal services is already compromised. Divided unions' failure to articulate coherent demands undermines collective bargaining power, ensuring policy inconsistency and slowness in reacting to systemic issues (Von Holdt, 2010). The public service strike of 2010, characterised by competing union agendas, demonstrates the manner in which fragmented labour relations prolong negotiations and escalate service disruption (Buhlungu, 2010).

Union dynamics are significantly influenced by power struggles and political allegiances. Rivalries between COSATU-affiliated unions and independent unions such as the AMCU often shift the focus from worker advocacy to organisational dominance and political agendas, leaving unions less effective in representing their members (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). These findings are consistent with earlier research by Von Holdt (2010), who observed that fragmentation within COSATU affiliates led to weakened organisational coherence and inconsistent policy engagement. Similarly, Buhlungu (2010) identified how political patronage and internal union rivalries undermined collective bargaining and disrupted labour unity. Internationally, Fashoyin (2005) documents comparable challenges in Nigeria, where union rivalries prolonged industrial actions and weakened state-labour coordination. However, unlike some previous studies that focus predominantly on ideological contestation, our findings emphasise the operational consequences, specifically how inter-union competition translates into disjointed service delivery, declining morale, and diminished public trust. In this way, the study builds upon and deepens the understanding of union fragmentation by linking macro-level union politics to micro-level service delivery outcomes. These dynamics, explained through Conflict Theory, suggest that competition for resources and influence undermines collective action and weakens union unity (Webster, 2012). At the same time, Agency Theory reveals the misalignment between union leaders (agents) and their members (principals), highlighting how political loyalties and personal ambitions can override the core responsibility of representing and advancing workers' welfare. This disconnect erodes trust, contributing to declining morale among public sector employees, who

increasingly perceive unions as ineffective (Alford et al., 2021). The public also exhibits declining confidence in unions and the state, as repeated service disruptions and politicisation undermine institutional credibility. Once central to pushing forward social and economic justice in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, unions are today viewed as egotistical forces that focus more on political ambitions than worker and societal interests (Habib, 2013).

Comparative lessons can prove useful in addressing union fragmentation. In Nigeria, efforts to enhance collective bargaining and improve regulatory mechanisms reflect the capacity to contain competition between unions and promote more cooperative labour relations (Fashoyin, 2005). Denmark's bargained-centred approach reflects the capacity of concerted frameworks to dampen fragmentation, build trust, and facilitate standardised provision of services (Jensen, 2020). Likewise, Brazil's depoliticisation restored unions to worker activism due to reduced political interference, leading to better public sector performance (Cardoso, 2016). The above examples of foreign countries indicate that the fragmentation of unions is not inevitable and may be reversed through structural reforms, strong governance institutions, and depoliticisation. Nonetheless, a particular socio-political situation in South Africa calls for special solutions in light of its historical, institutional, and cultural specifics.

The findings of this study carry critical implications for labour policy and public administration in South Africa. First, the establishment of a centralised and neutral bargaining council for public sector unions could minimise duplication and promote coherent collective bargaining. Second, depoliticising union leadership structures through enforceable ethical codes and separation from partisan agendas could restore internal trust and member alignment. Third, the state must strengthen regulatory oversight mechanisms to manage inter-union disputes proactively and safeguard essential services during industrial action. Finally, there is a need for capacity-building initiatives that encourage inter-union cooperation, shared mandates, and joint negotiation platforms. These interventions, if integrated into the broader reform agenda, could help re-stabilise the labour landscape and improve the effectiveness and equity of public service delivery.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to critically examine the impact of labour union fragmentation on public service delivery in South Africa, with a particular focus on the roles of political alliances, inter-union rivalries, and leadership dynamics. The findings confirm that union fragmentation significantly undermines service delivery by eroding collective bargaining strength, prolonging strike action, lowering employee morale, and weakening public trust in both unions and state institutions. These outcomes directly address the research question by demonstrating how fragmented labour relations, particularly when politicised, disrupt the coherence and efficiency of service provision in the public sector. The implications of these findings extend beyond union dynamics. They reflect deeper governance challenges, including weak institutional coordination, regulatory inertia, and politicised public sector leadership. Union fragmentation thus emerges not only as a labour issue but as a systemic governance failure that affects administrative accountability, developmental responsiveness, and social cohesion.

Structural reforms are urgently needed. Drawing from comparative insights, the study recommends the adoption of a centralised bargaining framework to harmonise labour negotiations, the depoliticisation of union leadership to refocus attention on worker advocacy, and the strengthening of state capacity to mediate inter-union disputes and protect service continuity. These measures must be contextualised within South Africa's unique socio-political environment, where labour movements historically played a central role in the democratic transition. Ultimately, the research highlights the necessity for a more coherent and depoliticised labour relations framework as a foundation for restoring trust, improving governance, and revitalising public service delivery. Future studies, particularly those using primary data from union members and frontline service workers, will be imperative for further unpacking the lived realities of fragmented labour representation and shaping pragmatic reform interventions.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors have contributed to the final manuscript. The contribution of all authors: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing original draft preparation, writing review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### **Conflict of Interest**

All authors have no conflict of interest related to this study.

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