South Africa’s trade unions are believed to hold the key not only to galvanising a new class politics in South Africa; they are also lauded as an example for labour movements in other parts of the world to follow in their struggles against neoliberal globalisation. This stems from COSATU’s pivotal role in the struggle against apartheid: it was a role made possible by an adherence to what Webster (1988) identified as ‘Social Movement Unionism’ (SMU), combining deeply embedded traditions of democratic shop floor organisation (which encouraged rank-and-file militancy) and engagement in a broader political struggle to overcome apartheid in alliance with other social movements (Baskin 1991; Buhlungu 2004; Friedman 1987; Siedman 1994; Wood 2003). This won the labour movement global acclaim, and academics heralded South Africa’s unions’ virtuous commitment to democratic organisation, membership participation, linkages with civil society and broader social/political goals as a model of unionism that could be replicated elsewhere in an effort to regenerate labour moments in the north in particular (Clawson 2003; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001). Moody (1997: 201–227), for example, implores northern unions to ‘look south’ to the example of SMU offered by unions in Brazil and South Africa who, Moody argues, have retained a ‘solid class outlook’ in their political organisation.

But are South Africa’s unions in a position to lead a new left wing politics informed by such a ‘solid class outlook’ and grounded within the organisational principles of SMU? Moreover, do they have a unifying class identity that could serve as the foundation of the kind of new politics envisioned by NUMSA through its ‘United Front’ and its plans for a political party? This chapter, drawing on my previous work (Beresford 2012a), will focus on the longer-term trends of social mobility within the COSATU unions in order to highlight some of the challenges
confronting the labour movement – and NUMSA in particular – if there is an attempt to ferment a new class-based political organisation from within the union ranks. To do so, I draw on the ethnographic case study outlined in chapter 1. I explore how social mobility at all levels within the NUM has impacted upon the union’s organisational integrity and class identity through a study of NUM’s organisation in the energy sector, including in-depth interviews with workers, shop stewards, union officials, national office bearers and participant observation at NUM meetings, training workshops and rallies. While NUM is a particular case, given its close historical relationship with the ANC, this chapter will, nonetheless, use this in-depth case study to offer a window through which we might understand some of the trends in social mobility and class formation that have impacted upon the union movement as a whole, including NUMSA.

It is these trends that give us an opportunity to see just how much of an impact the ‘double transition’ has had at the workplace level, as well as some of the wider political implications this bears. While a great deal of attention has been drawn towards the formation of a new black upper class of so-called ‘black diamonds’ (for example, Gumede 2005: 215–234), other scholars have drawn attention to the increasingly stark gap between the organised working class and South Africa’s ‘underclass’ of unemployed and rural poor (Seekings 2004; Seekings and Nattrass 2005). However, this chapter will illuminate the increasing diversity within the organised working class itself (see Crankshaw 1997) which, it will be argued, has a profound impact on its political potential.

In particular, in this chapter I will explore internal class cleavages within the unions that complicate, and potentially obfuscate, the prospects for a coherent ‘working class’ political programme becoming the union movement’s raison d’etre. It will examine how employment equity and affirmative action policies – which NUM had originally struggled for in the early 1990s – have had unintended consequences for the union itself. While these policies have opened up opportunities for the workers which NUM represents, the manner in which workers are grasping at these opportunities has, in some cases, eroded the organisational cohesion of the union and undermined its working class identity.

This has both organisational and political implications for NUM that bear broader significance for the trade union movement as a whole. While COSATU affiliates have maintained a reasonably strong organisation base since the end of apartheid, the union movement has encountered several problems which undermine its capacity to maintain democratic practices and militant mobilisation. There have been