

struggles woven together by a discourse of national liberation struggle. In effect, the community was inside the union.

In place of the democracy and open debate identified in the literature as a core feature of social movement unionism, this study highlights a coercive approach to solidarity at Highveld Steel and the failure of democracy to empower unskilled migrants in the union. The result was a fierce and recurring internal struggle over power, leadership strategies and practices. This was not primarily a power struggle driven by personal ambition but rather a contestation – based on contending collective identities – over the meaning, strategies and practices that defined the collective identity of the union. At its height, this struggle broke into open violence between factions and an inability to accommodate diverse views.

The formation of the strike committee

The shop steward committee was involved in the formation of the strike committee in early 1986, and initially it was seen as supplementing the role of the shop stewards. The strike committee emerged from the most militant workers among the rank-and-file, those who 'would sing, dance, give morale to the workers who were on strike, moving around with placards'.¹

The idea was introduced to workers at a general meeting, with the motivation that the union would 'remain weak at Highveld, because you don't have a backup for the shop stewards'. The strike committee remained an informal structure – workers 'were urged to join' rather than elected. The role of the strike committee was to keep order and discipline among workers during strikes and stoppages, especially when the shop stewards were negotiating with management, and to ensure that all workers attended union meetings in the hostels or the workplace.²

Many workers believed the strike committee was formed on the understanding that the negotiating relationship with management needed to be supplemented with more forceful action. The young worker who became its chairperson remarked: 'Our shop stewards said we have got to have a sort of committee that would be more violent against Highveld than what they are doing.'³

The use of violence against Highveld Steel included the use of coercion to maintain discipline among workers, and most shop stewards colluded in this. As one put it:

We used intelligence teams to go and check the situation in the plants during strikes. They would report to us as shop stewards that 'there are people working, what are we supposed to do?' We said, just go and form your committee, don't come to us and ask what you are supposed to do. We are Highveld representatives, we can't tell you. Take the stick and do punishment. So that is where the strike committee came from. It managed the situation. You can blame the strike committee for doing a lot of corporal punishment, but they managed to build the union.⁴

Thus many shop stewards gave implicit or explicit support to a structure that would operate outside the negotiating relationship with management, and without being constrained by the procedures that tended to bind shop stewards to the negotiation of order. A degree of coercion, or 'revolutionary bullying',⁵ was therefore implicit in the collective construction by workers of the union as a social structure in opposition to the management order. This social structure blended consent and coercion. If an individual broke the code of behaviour agreed by the majority, physical punishment was legitimate. As one worker put it: 'The strike committee came there to teach people what union law is.'⁶

Quite rapidly, however, the 'union law' itself became subject to contestation. This took the form of growing conflict between the shop steward committee and the strike committee. The shop stewards were in an ambiguous position, both negotiating and enforcing procedures, and challenging and rejecting the racial order. In their role as agents of negotiation and procedure, they came to be identified at times as 'sellouts', traitors to the law of the union. The chairperson of the shop steward committee at the time of the formation of the strike committee, Bob Moloi, saw the tension over procedure, and mistrust of the shop stewards, as inscribed in the very formation of the strike committee:

The shop steward committee was aware of the disciplinary code and the procedures of the company, and was finding it very difficult to cope with the demands of the workers who were now saying 'away with your procedures, if we're saying we want this, we want it tomorrow'. If you talk to the shopfloor about a procedure, they

don't know anything about procedures, they have never been subjected to any procedures in their past. Now all of a sudden, when the union is introduced, you come and tell him about procedures – then they showed mistrust to the shop stewards, and that mistrust led to the formation of the strike committee.⁷

Frank Boshielo, then branch secretary of NUMSA, commented on the complex structural pressures on the shop stewards that produced this conflict:

There would be an action, and the shop stewards would start negotiating with management. They would find somewhere that management is convincing them, saying your strike is unlawful, unprocedural, and threatening dismissals. They would start to change their approach, and tell the workers, 'We are facing a danger here. We need to retreat'.⁸

The result was that many workers began to suspect that shop stewards were 'selling out'. Jacob Msimangu, who became chairperson of the strike committee, explained how this perception developed, and linked it to the specific intransigence of management at Highveld Steel:

We felt that ever since the union was formed we never won anything. We felt as if these people were betraying us, because whatever our demands, when they came back we get nothing. Even when we would go on strike for about two days, the shop stewards would come back from negotiations and say the strike is not legal, so we've got to go back to work, there's a court order. Most of us were not educated, so it was very difficult to understand this.⁹

The strike committee and the shop steward committee were no longer complementary power centres maintaining and defending a commonly constructed social structure under the overall direction of the formally elected union representatives, the shop stewards. The strike committee started to develop its own autonomy, seeking to discipline and control the shop stewards, and organising industrial action independently of them. A

fierce contestation opened up within the social structure of the union over leadership and power, tactics and practices, and organisational culture or 'union law'.

The chairperson of the strike committee described how it began to assert its control over the shop stewards, organising wildcat strikes and using 'violence' against Highveld Steel. The fact that the shop stewards had blessed its formation was of significance but beyond that it did not acknowledge the structures or procedures of the union – it was without 'guidelines':

We had no guidelines, so we felt that we could do whatever we wanted, because we had been given the green light by the shop stewards. We had our own meetings, excluding the shop stewards, and we even elected a chairman and secretary from among ourselves. So it changed. The shop stewards were getting uneasy and they wanted to know what we were discussing. We refused, saying the only thing is that they must take from us the instructions as to how they must operate. Before they report to the members, they must come and meet us. Nobody should talk to the management without consulting us first.¹⁰

Shop stewards who objected were intimidated, and some were assaulted by strike committee members. Bob Moloi was accused of being too conciliatory, and resigned as shop steward chairperson. He was replaced by the more militant Bunny Mahlangu. At one point the strike committee appointed several of its members to accompany the shop stewards to negotiations to monitor whether workers were being sold out. When they reported back they had to admit that shop stewards were negotiating 'in good faith'. Nevertheless, the tension continued.¹¹

'Violence' against Highveld Steel took a variety of forms. The strike committee would organise wildcat strikes, for example to demand the reinstatement of a dismissed worker, by gathering at the bus station outside the plant early in the morning and preventing people from entering. They would disrupt an inquiry if they thought it was unfair. They used coercion to reinforce worker solidarity and to strike at production. The chairperson described an expedition to Mapochs mine to bring it out in support of a strike at the steelworks:

We decided, let's go and disturb production at Mapochs, without even consulting with our shop stewards. We went there in four Kombis, about 60 of us. We went into the hall at Mapochs, we called the people from the hostels to a meeting, and then we danced and went straight to the plant. Then we didn't only sing, we pulled people out from the plant and beat them, that they must come and join us. We beat them, we stopped the plant.¹²

While many of the shop stewards were political activists and led or supported confrontation, they were also involved in a negotiating relationship with management. Following negotiating procedure undermined their role as worker leaders because many workers did not understand 'the law of the strike' or 'the meaning of strike':

People didn't understand the meaning of wildcat strike. We take this wildcat strike because we want to force management back to the negotiating table. Okay, management agrees. When we tell the workers, let's go to work because management has accepted to return to the negotiating table, they say, fuck you. Now there is a quarrel between workers and their representatives.¹³

This in turn undermined shop stewards' relations with management. The strike committee became an alternative power base to the shop stewards, and shop stewards frequently found themselves at a loss to explain or justify strikes to management.¹⁴

The strike committee rapidly grew to be a movement within the union. At its height it had anywhere between 800 and 1 800 members/supporters, identified by distinctive maroon T-shirts and *sjamboks*. The membership or supporters of the strike committee consisted of migrant workers from the hostels, and militant young workers from hostels and township. The hostels were known as its base.¹⁵

Bunny Mahlangu argued that the majority of NUMSA members did not support the actions of the strike committee but, like the shop stewards, were intimidated by it:

We thought the strike committee was going to be a limited number of people. Eventually we saw a very big giant that was now

uncontrollable, coming and attacking us viciously. Can you imagine 800 people coming from one side with sticks and everything, that's a very large number. They could take up a very big space in a general meeting. And if one person talks and the 800 clap hands, the rest get frozen. They scare the shit out of you. So the people who would have maybe supported us were scared.¹⁶

Shop stewards were also scared. The attempt to reconcile the conflicting pressures in their role was extremely difficult:

The ungovernability of Highveld in 1987, I really don't think it was condoned by the shop stewards. We sort of played hide-and-seek as shop stewards, not really coming up with what we believed as individuals was the real situation. Fear was always there in people's hearts. You would speak with caution. In the shop stewards meeting I would say, let's be frank and open, if what we intend doing is not taking us anywhere, please say so. But people would first look around, to see who's there and who's not there. The team that we had then was mostly comprised of people who were literate, people who when they sit down with management, their understanding broadens. It then becomes difficult when you have to go to these illiterate people where you've got to narrow your understanding to their understanding. So most of the time, as shop stewards we'd sit and discuss things and completely disagree with the membership, but no one would have the nerve to go and put it to the membership. Because you know that once you do that then you're in for a hiding. Once people see you as literate, they easily target you to be a softy. People would want a leader who talks a lot of insulting language in the meetings, who would go to management and shout at management. Given the political climate, if they saw a white person they didn't trust him. The whole of Highveld management was seen as untrustworthy.¹⁷

Hostel dwellers and township residents

Mahlangu's comment points to the centrality of tension between migrant ('illiterate') and local ('literate') workers in understanding the strike