

experience of Khuduthamaga and the conflict at Highveld Steel, than the repertoire of interpretations, codes and practices which existed in rural Pedi social structures and which formed a resource for men whose power was being undermined.

85. Delius finds a similar experience of disempowerment underlying the youth uprisings and witch killings in the Sekhukhuneland Revolt of 1986 (1996: 202–3).

CHAPTER 7

'Freedom is here, apartheid is finished'

NUMSA, transition and the new strategy of reconstruction

Now that we have a democratic government, we want to see it succeeding, and of course no political power can be maintained if there is no economic power. Our economy has been devastated by the system of apartheid, and we need to rebuild it now. So I believe that the culture definitely has to change from the culture of resistance and ungovernability to the culture of productivity.

Meshack Malinga, chair, joint shop stewards' committee, 1994

When Nelson Mandela was released to tumultuous rejoicing in February 1990, workers in many factories organised celebratory demonstrations, marches and stoppages – some lasting several days (Mondi 1990; Parfit 1990). The unbanning of the ANC, the SACP and the PAC was announced at the same time. The 1994 democratic elections that followed a period of protracted negotiations, disputes, deadlocks, mass action and a referendum of the white electorate over the process of establishing a democratic government, constituted a radical rupture in the colonial history of South Africa.

For the first time, the colonised had breached the walls of political exclusion – they were now citizens with the right to vote for government, and they formed the overwhelming majority of voters. The new electorate included the black working class, the members of NUMSA and other unions. This change had a profound impact on the structure of social movement unionism, which had been so strongly defined by the connection between political struggle against apartheid and the confrontation with white power in the workplace. Shop stewards and workers now saw it as necessary to separate and redefine the politics of the union's relationship with

government and its engagement with management. This shift could be discerned in the changing attitudes of workers and the changing meaning of union activities for them, as well as in the adoption of new policies at a formal level.

The election of the ANC government – for which black workers campaigned and voted – constituted the moment of democratic incorporation of the black working class. Class incorporation is a contested process. The trade union movement developed a new *strategy of reconstruction* in order to contest and shape incorporation and the broader transition from apartheid. What was at stake was the nature of the post-colonial social order, and the idea of ‘reconstruction’ defined the kinds of contestations and accommodations that would characterise it.

The new strategy reflected the distinctive nature of the South African transition from apartheid to a post-colonial society. It has been – and continues to be – a transition akin to other transitions from colonialism, in that the entire system of social, political and economic relations and institutions was structured by colonialism and apartheid, and the transition is therefore a struggle between different forces over the nature and extent of the transformation of this legacy. In this, the South African transition differs substantially from other non-colonial transitions from authoritarian rule. The rest of this book examines in detail those struggles in the workplace, the community, the union, the ANC and the Witbank Town Council through which the old order was being transformed, and out of which the new order was emerging.

This book argues that the foundation for incorporation is established primarily at the political level of relations between classes and the state, rather than in the workplace. Workplace incorporation follows from such political incorporation. This chapter describes the adoption by COSATU and by NUMSA and its shop stewards and officials at Highveld Steel of the strategy of reconstruction and considers the implications of the new strategy for trade unionism.

The new meaning of the union

In the view of most shop stewards, the new political dynamics in South Africa changed everything. The movement towards a negotiated settlement and democracy implied a change in the nature of workplace struggle. Albert Makagula, a migrant shop steward, argued:

When Mandela came out of prison we realised the importance of negotiating issues first. If those fail, then we can go into the bush and fight [take strike action]. Mr Mandela’s release brought a change in how things were done. It showed us the importance of negotiations. Before his release we never negotiated. We would just go into the bush and when asked why, we would tell them to release Mandela first.¹

The transition to democracy meant South Africa was no longer a white man’s country – and therefore Highveld Steel, as a part of the broader South African economy, was in some sense no longer a white man’s factory. ‘Killing the economy of this factory’ would be ‘killing the economy of the entire country’. Likewise, workers should start paying rent and rates in the township.²

These issues were not only of concern to the leading shop stewards. Tshagata, the migrant worker activist, expressed similar concerns:

It’s different now because the government is ours. We must fight bearing this in mind. As for demands inside the firm, we are still demanding those previous demands because there is nothing which is really satisfactory. But you see us not demanding too much because if we were to strike for a long time we would destroy the government. Before, we were destroying the previous government using those tactics.

Asked whether this meant limiting the fight against the employers, he answered:

Actually, we do not limit it – as for fighting, we are fighting. But we no longer fight in the same manner as before, destroying things. If we say we are limiting, that won’t be true, because we are still using the same power. But when considering our government, we think we must support it in a new manner, unlike before when we were *toyi-toying*. Because now, if I *toyi-toyi* while the government is mine it seems I’m not intelligent. So even if we take action, we just sit down to show that we have defeated the employer.³

Shop stewards and workers grappled with the complex tension between supporting government and fighting employers, demonstrating how broader political relations are inscribed within the social structure of the union through a process of social construction of the meaning of the union. On the one hand, their words reveal the desire to support the government and simultaneously continue the militant struggle for change in the workplace, where the apartheid workplace regime was relatively intact. On the other, they knew from their struggle against apartheid that workplace action has political and economic implications for government, and they wanted to find a different way of engaging in workplace struggle.

For shop stewards in particular, the new conditions implied a new concern with workplace procedure, and therefore awareness of common ground with managers:

It's my duty to inform the employees what is wrong, what is right, what our constitution stands for. We are not there to fight management, we are there to support our families. According to the Highveld rules, anything you do has to be done in the correct way. If someone is absent without permission he is supposed to be disciplined, otherwise you will find the whole workforce absent without permission. We are part and parcel of management, not officially, but according to our constitution as a union. It's playing a managerial role, to bring people in order. The difference is that management is giving you discipline and at the end you will be fired. My goal is different, I don't discipline, I'm helping the guy. To be a leader, you are supposed to see both sides. When the managers have left and I'm alone with my member I will tell him straight, you have done bullshit here, that is not the correct way to behave.⁴

In this shop steward's words there is a growing concern with legitimate procedures and 'correct' behaviour. Highveld Steel is no longer 'a white man's factory', but the place where workers earn wages to support their families. He grapples with the complexity of defending his members, persuading or compelling managers to conduct themselves differently, and constructing a new legitimate order in the workplace – an order that defines his own rights and duties as well as those of managers and workers. To do

all of these he himself has to be a manager, managing relationships, people, conflicts and procedures. Clearly, the new conditions implied a greater degree of institutional participation, of negotiated accommodation, than previously.

There was no consensus among workers about these shifts. Some shop stewards, like J.J. Mbonani, complained that their members saw no reason to change. When he tried to explain to workers that procedures should be followed:

They said, 'No, man, Mbonani has taught us about this action, we didn't know anything about strikes. Now he's telling us that we mustn't strike, we must negotiate. What is negotiate? What are we going to resolve out of that?' I said, 'Hey, Nelson Mandela has climbed to the position where he is now through negotiations, let's try it and see if it won't work.' But the people take a strike as something which just occurs at any time. If one feels oppressed, he just talks to his friend, they don't consult me. I'll find them dancing, on strike. The people don't understand the difference between the old government and this new one. We need more time to teach our people the differences.⁵

Shop stewards had mixed perceptions about the response of the general body of workers to the political transition in South Africa. Some commented that workers no longer had a fighting spirit, but were relaxing 'now that freedom is here and apartheid is finished'.⁶ Others commented that 'some workers didn't know why we were fighting, and don't know why we now say they mustn't fight', and continued to draw on the repertoire of militant and unprocedural actions which developed during the 1980s.⁷ These tensions and contradictions in workers' attitudes reflected the ambiguity, complexity and instability precipitated by the shifting meaning of trade unionism. The process of class incorporation was complex and contested, and opened up new challenges within the union.

Labour's new strategy of reconstruction: a national overview

At a more formal level too, the trade union movement responded proactively to the democratic transition by developing new policies and strategies.

COSATU adopted a *strategy of reconstruction* focusing on strategic engagement with the process of working-class incorporation in an attempt to shape its terms and the balance of forces that would emerge within institutions and relations underpinning post-colonial society. It became a member of the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the SACP – an alliance with an insurrectionary liberation movement was replaced by an alliance with a government-in-waiting. It also became an active participant in various forums where the new order was being negotiated.

COSATU's programmatic vision was crystallised in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) – initiated as a strategy to shape the policies of the ANC. In the end, the RDP was jointly drafted by COSATU and the ANC, and became the election manifesto of the Tripartite Alliance. The significance of these developments was that the union movement had shifted from a stance of all-out challenge to an economy structured by apartheid and capitalism, to a concern with the problems of economic reconstruction and industrial restructuring, and a quest for various channels and institutions through which to participate in national economic policy formulation. Concern with building institutions rather than destroying them, solving problems rather than precipitating crises, governing rather than opposing, had profound implications for organisational policies and practices, culture and identity.

As an affiliate of COSATU, NUMSA also grappled with the need to develop a new strategy in response to the changing political and economic landscape. Not only was the metal union a leading protagonist in the evolution of COSATU's strategy of reconstruction, it also developed policies for engaging with restructuring in the metal industry. Like other COSATU affiliates, NUMSA was faced with complex problems of company restructuring – retrenchments, outsourcing, new technology, reorganisation of production. The transition from a closed economy to an open one had severe implications for trade unions because of increasing competitive pressure on employers. The union began to develop a focus on skills formation, training, grading and narrowing the 'apartheid wage gap' as a strategy for addressing pressures for improved productivity (Von Holdt 1991a, 1991b).

NUMSA developed a programme of research groups for shop stewards (including two from Highveld Steel), which comprised seminars and

overseas study tours to a number of countries, including Australia. NUMSA's strategic vision was strongly influenced by 'strategic unionism' as it had developed in Australia, and in 1992 an Australian unionist who had been closely associated with the development of strategic unionism was employed by NUMSA as a head office official. By the beginning of 1993, these internal processes had culminated in the adoption of a new negotiating strategy. This set goals to be achieved over a period of three years to replace the annual bargaining goals, and came to be known as 'the three-year programme'. In NUMSA's assessment, South African employers were choosing a strategy of 'lean production' in response to competitive pressures. This would, in the view of the union, entrench racial inequality. In contrast, the union strategy aimed to transform the apartheid workplace regime and construct a new non-racial order in the workplace based on workplace democracy, with the focus on 'intelligent production' rather than 'lean production'.⁸

The thrust of the bargaining strategy was to establish a new framework linking grading, training, skills development, pay and work organisation in the industry. Broadly speaking, the aim was to move from the highly differentiated, racist and anomalous system of 14 grades, to a five-grade system based on skills levels and known as 'broad banding'. Workers would have a clear career path up the grading ladder based on acquiring new skills through training. Wage gaps would be narrowed and wage levels would be determined by the levels of workers' skills. Restructuring would be based on more skilled work and higher value added as the workforce became more skilled. The shift away from narrow job demarcation would open the way for flexibility and teamwork based on multi-skilling and so would allow for a more competitive industry as well as greater job satisfaction.

The reconstruction strategy adopted by NUMSA shared the broader ambiguities of the RDP in relation to capitalism. On the one hand, it stressed that reconstruction was a strategy for achieving socialist goals, and it was based on building working-class power in society. On the other, it presented itself as a strategy for modernising and revitalising capitalism in the context of globalisation and increased competitive pressure. These ambiguities reflected the contradictory and contested nature of the process of class incorporation on the terrain of 'reconstruction'.

NUMSA's new strategy has been termed 'strategic unionism', based on

the model of the strategic unionism developed by the Australian trade union movement (Joffe et al. 1995). Strategic unionism, itself an attempt to transplant the strategies of Scandinavian social democratic unionism into the Australian trade union movement, was a response to globalisation and industrial restructuring, and focused on industrial policy and workplace change (Ewer et al 1991). It was characterised by four features: union involvement in *wealth creation*, not just redistribution; *proactive* rather than reactive unionism; *participation* through bipartite and tripartite institutions; and a high level of union *capacity* in education and research ('Strategic unionism' 1989).

The strategy of reconstruction in Witbank: the political dimension

The dominant view among shop stewards and many workers was that the union movement should engage in a strategy of reconstruction that mirrored the strategy adopted by COSATU at a national level. This strategy, which was most coherently articulated by the shop steward leadership, most of whom were actively involved in the Tripartite Alliance as COSATU representatives, and some of whom occupied leadership positions in the local branch of the ANC, had the following elements:

- union commitment to political, social and economic development beyond the workplace;
- an alliance with, and participation within, the ANC;
- a strong role for organisations in civil society, including labour, in elaborating and implementing the RDP, and holding the ANC and government accountable;
- a strong role for labour in institution building, institutional transformation and democratisation in society;
- a continuing struggle for workplace change, with militancy, tactics and demands tempered in one way or another to avoid weakening the government or undermining the economy;
- recognition of contestation between labour and 'opportunists' in the ANC over the primacy of meeting the needs of the poor;
- recognition of contestation between labour and 'capitalists' both within the ANC and in society more broadly over development.

Strengthening and supporting the ANC, engaging and influencing it through the Tripartite Alliance and through becoming active members and leaders within it, would contribute organisational and negotiating experience, and ensure the ANC met the needs of the people. This was how the shop stewards explained their decision to stand as ANC candidates for the town council.⁹

This commitment to strengthening and influencing the ANC was marked with a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, the shop stewards felt 'at home' in the ANC because 'it articulates the basic demands of the people' and the ANC and COSATU 'agree on issues'; on the other, they expressed a fear that the ANC might distance itself from the masses or the workers, and adopt policies more favourable to 'the capitalists':

If we do not have our people inside there, if we are not involved as shop stewards, the ANC government can turn its back and follow the capitalists. It was very difficult for COSATU to convince the ANC to go along with the RDP.¹⁰

This was because there were 'opportunists' in the ANC who were pursuing their own interests and because many activists in the ANC failed to adopt democratic practices. It was to prevent this danger that it was so important for COSATU leaders to be deployed to work within the ANC. COSATU was like 'a mini-government because they have practical experience of democratic structures and the workers are the most democratic people in the country'.¹¹

The shop stewards added that COSATU should not only rely on trade unionists *within* the ANC to ensure that it implemented the RDP, but that COSATU 'must maintain its independence and work as a watchdog of the ANC; whenever the ANC deviates, try to bring it back'. If the ANC failed to implement the RDP then 'hard luck, we will *toyi-toyi* against them'.¹²

In the view of the shop stewards, the transition to democracy was a breakthrough on the political front, but employers were not yet prepared to accept the need for change, both within the workplace and in contributing to the development of communities. Their concern was still 'only for profits, not to uplift the people of the country'. It was 'the duty of the companies that they must contribute in the community, because it is the community

that is working for the companies'. During the apartheid era companies were able to hide behind the government, but the advent of democracy meant that an ANC government could 'assist us as COSATU to push companies' by applying pressure from above, both to contribute to the RDP and to accept the need for some form of democracy and improvement in working conditions in the workplace. At the same time, organised workers should apply pressure from below, linking their demands in the factories to RDP programmes in the community. This could create a new relationship between employers and unions.¹³

While the ANC was regarded as the leading organisation in the national liberation struggle, and as the natural ally of COSATU, the shop stewards demonstrated a critical awareness of the dangers of elitism, undemocratic and autocratic practices and 'opportunism' within the ANC, and the danger that the ANC could drift towards the agenda of business. In other words, policy and practices within the ANC were contested terrain, and workers and COSATU needed to remain vigilant in ensuring worker and popular interests were pursued.

There was, however, a minority dissenting voice among some shop stewards and workers, ranging from those who expressed stronger reservations about the ANC, to those who thought the ANC would not represent workers' interests and felt union strategy should not change. Among the former was J.J. Mbonani:

After the unbanning of the ANC some of them were acting like bosses, and I hate that. When the leadership is speaking in front of the people, you'll find the guy is speaking like a king, or like somebody from heaven, not from the earth. This is the leadership who we knew ourselves.

This led him to conclude that 'we need to build COSATU stronger than before so that if our demands fail then we must be in a position to take a hard line' in relation to the ANC.¹⁴

Another shop steward expressed a strong scepticism about 'politicians':

Maybe the Alliance should break off after the elections, and let COSATU be COSATU and the politicians be politicians. Politicians

are not predictable. Today they are like this, and tomorrow they are like other people – you won't know them. They are not like unions. We have got shop stewards who know exactly what is the mandate and are there to guide the workers. Now that we are the government, workers must go back to work and leave the politicians alone.¹⁵

This view resonated with another shop steward, who argued that an ANC government would not do anything to improve workers wages. The time-tested strategy of militancy would put pressure both on employers and the ANC to recognise workers' demands. Political exiles gained education while workers struggled and suffered inside the country, and even Mandela should be ignored when he advised workers not to strike because he was paid so much more than the ordinary workers. The town council should be left to the 'politicians'; shop stewards who were ANC politicians had divided loyalties and could not be trusted, and shop stewards should concentrate on representing workers interests, both in the workplace and in the community.¹⁶

This 'workerist' view tended to be based on a general suspicion of 'politicians' and political organisations rather than a specific critique of the ANC. Its adherents advocated that trade unionists should withdraw from active politics and concentrate on shopfloor issues rather than establish a political alternative. If necessary COSATU should put pressure on the ANC government from an independent position. In arguing for withdrawing from the Alliance, such shop stewards were articulating a formal position specific to NUMSA at the time;¹⁷ but while the NUMSA resolution argued for the formation of a socialist political alternative to the ANC, these shop stewards tended to express a general reservation about politics and wanted to see a focus on trade union activities in the workplace and industry. Some argued that the union should not change the strategies evolved during the 1980s, but should continue to mobilise militant actions in pursuit of their demands.

This view was in many respects simply a stronger version of the critical attitudes displayed towards the ANC by most of the shop stewards, and there was no explicit disagreement or conflict among shop stewards over the strategy of reconstruction. However, it did point to some of the tensions inherent in the strategy, and when such tensions erupted in internal conflict

this discourse would be available to those critical of the shop stewards or seeking to build their own power base for whatever reasons.

The new strategy of reconstruction provided the shop stewards with a framework for analysing the range of interests on the terrain of reconstruction, and the consequent need for contestation. As with the adoption of any new strategy, there were ambiguities and silences. Chief of these was whether the unions would be able to influence the policies and practices of the ANC as they hoped – whether the balance of forces within and around the ANC was propitious for their project – an issue that was raised most forcefully by proponents of the dissenting view and is explored in the next chapter.

The strategy of reconstruction at Highveld Steel: the workplace dimension

By 1993 the shop stewards at Highveld Steel and their regional organiser were articulating a radical vision of workplace democracy. Shop stewards talked about a quite diverse spread of goals, which they believed could reinforce each other: worker control of production, a say in the utilisation of profits, economic reconstruction, company competitiveness, overcoming the legacy of apartheid, and better training, skills and pay for workers. Different shop stewards emphasised different aspects of these goals but for the leading strategist among the shop stewards, Mosi Nhlapo, who was the chair of the steelworks committee, the chief goal was to extend worker power and control in the workplace. However, workplace reconstruction also had to benefit the community:

Firstly, our goal is to give more control, more power, to the workers in their activities. Secondly, to make work easier for workers. One of the most important points is to change the relationship between management and workers, so that there should be mutual understanding between them. We want to make sure that at the end the workers benefit from the process of producing steel. The end result will be more productivity and better quality goods. You need to look at expansion of the factory to employ more. You must tie management to social programmes so that they are socially responsible. If you don't do that, whatever you are doing inside is

going to be doomed because those outside the factory will shout at you: you guys are getting so much money, you get houses, you're living well.¹⁸

The transition to democracy should not be confined to the political realm, but should be extended to the workplace:

The political structure outside is changing. We are now going to be involved in everything that is taking place in our country, and we feel as workers that we should also be involved in deciding what we want to see our company doing. We don't want to live in the past, where management had to think and decide for us.¹⁹

Decolonisation made the old apartheid workplace regime unsustainable, and created the opportunity to replace it with a new, democratic and non-racial regime in the workplace.²⁰ Apartheid had denied blacks access to skills and power, and democracy meant this must change. Just as the apartheid workplace regime had been linked to the political and social structures of apartheid beyond the factory, so the ending of apartheid outside the factory had to be linked to ending it within the factory.²¹

Political liberation meant not only that workers wanted more power, skill and control in the workplace, but also that the unions had a 'duty' to help rebuild the economy.²² Reconstruction required a new culture of productivity among workers, and a new attitude to management – but it would not be easy to change the culture of resistance forged during the 1980s:

Now that we have a democratic government, we want to see it succeeding, and of course no political power can be maintained if there is no economic power. Our economy has been devastated by the system of apartheid, and we need to rebuild it now. So I believe that the culture definitely has to change from the culture of resistance and ungovernability to the culture of productivity. One must say that there are problems. It is difficult for the workers to change from that culture, the workers still believe that they must always resist anything that comes with management, be it right or

wrong. A culture of resistance is inherent in the hearts and minds of the workers. I am sure to change that culture there has to be a process of learning.²³

Democracy also meant that members should end their wildcat actions and start following procedures in the workplace.²⁴ The union could not focus solely on extending workers' power. The need to rebuild the economy implied that companies needed to become more productive to survive the increasing competitive pressures of globalisation.²⁵

The goals of economic growth, benefits for workers, and job creation were interlinked.²⁶ Becoming competitive required a new system of production because 'the system we are using here in South Africa cannot compete in the global market'. Apartheid had bequeathed a legacy of unskilled and illiterate workers, and new technology would require new skills.²⁷ According to the new union programme, training and multi-skilling 'would meet the new goals both of empowering workers and improving their pay, and of improving productivity and quality, so building a strong and competitive economy.'²⁸

Multi-skilling and teamwork would also provide the basis for radical democracy in the workplace, with the devolution of power, skill and responsibility to the shopfloor, collective control of production and the elimination of supervision:

Our idea is that you take planning of work out of the offices and into the people. You set up work teams that are able to set their own targets, that can produce quality, that can run the show without the superintendent, the foreman, the assistant foreman standing there and telling you what the manager in the office is saying you must do. The office must give the production order to the people, and they should set their own priorities, their targets. There should be no supervisor within them. If they want a supervisor they can elect someone from amongst themselves. People must not feel a painful responsibility. When they wake up in the morning they should feel that they want to go to work, that they will enjoy it.²⁹

Collective control of production should be matched by participation in the

decision-making structures of management. The right to participate in making decisions at this level would make it possible for the union and its members to take responsibility for the performance of the company.³⁰

The new strategy implied a different approach to collective bargaining:

The union was mainly concentrating on real worker issues, issues that were affecting the members in the factory. Once there was this realisation that you cannot divide the factory from the economics of the country, the approach changed. Merely by forming our own research groups, that's a pointer to say there's a change within the union, we've been unrealistic as a union. We have been a union that demanded this thing here and now, not understanding the problems within the demand, and how long it can take to achieve them. We were sort of negotiating uninformed about what we were proposing to employers. Research has shown us that you need to have a complete approach to things. This is changing the whole focus of the union.³¹

Small observation that at a certain level socialism and capitalism meet
The new approach implied not only that the union needed to be more informed, more open to the concerns of management and more cognisant of the complexities and difficulties of meeting worker demands, but also that there was scope for constructing a shared interest in a more productive workplace, with increased benefits for workers and improved productivity for the company. A co-operative relationship between management and workers, based on compromise, was essential for reconstruction to be a success: 'As the union we can initiate, but if management does not agree, at the end of the day there will be no reconstruction programme.' The danger of not fighting for co-operation was that the union would be unable to protect workers from the hazards of unilateral workplace restructuring, such as health and safety risks or job loss. However, this co-operation could be quite limited since the two parties had different aims and the union would have to monitor and police agreements.³²

Several of the shop stewards at Highveld Steel saw their strategy of democratising the workplace and improving productivity as having a socialist dimension, but were at the same time grappling with what socialism might mean in newly democratic South Africa.

The need to retain white skills and stability was a barrier to radical change. The union project for democratising the company was a way of gradually achieving socialist goals. [In this light, the distinction between capitalism and socialism appeared to grow less:]

not too far from the traditional syndicalist position

Socialism and capitalism are more or less the same. The only difference is that capitalism is a clique of people on top, running the economy, and socialism is about worker involvement. Even now, when we talk about worker involvement in terms of restructuring, it disguises that we are talking about socialism. We want to take decisions about profits, we want to take decisions how to run the factories. It disguises socialism.³³

A second shop steward teased out this reformist theme in the direction of social democracy. If effective regulation of capital met the needs of the people, it should be regarded as socialism:

If the people on the ground are satisfied with the way capital is used and are benefiting from that system in which capital is used, then I wonder what we are going to call it. If it is capitalism but the people are benefiting down there, then I think it is right. If it is communism and the people are benefiting, then I think it is right. As far as the basic principles of socialism are concerned, they are not applicable now.³⁴

A third shop steward had come to an even more limited conclusion: socialism is 'managing our work, or what is it?'³⁵

Problems with the new strategy

Despite their support for the three-year programme, shop stewards and officials recognised a number of problems with it, ranging from the process through which it was adopted, its complexity and the lack of union capacity, to doubts about its internal coherence, and the possibility that it could increase members' workload and lead to job losses.

The research groups had been introduced to ensure workers' involvement in developing the new strategy, but this generated tensions

within NUMSA. They were developing policy for the union yet **they were** not constitutional bodies, nor were they elected. The elected **union** leadership resented the study trips and time off from work enjoyed by the research group participants. There were complaints that too much union money was spent on them. The research groups were first reduced in size, then scrapped.³⁶ The result, according to Nhlapo, who continued representing the union in meetings of the Metal Industries Training Board (MITB), was a further disempowering of workers.³⁷

The concentration of increasingly complex expertise in fewer and fewer hands undermined democracy:

Information is concentrated in a few individuals. Decisions are no longer based on information, they're based on who says it. He might be complicated and say things you don't understand, but at the end of the day you are bound to agree with him because you don't understand. You don't have any way to say, No, I will debate it. That is the change in the union. [Everything will be concentrated in the head office unless we do something very drastic.]³⁸

The rush to draft and adopt the three-year programme before collective bargaining in 1993 left many shop stewards and officials confused:

a well dodge!

It was just discussed at head office level. When it came down to the regions, definitely the majority of the people did not understand what the hell was going on. We just went to our people and said, Listen, we want to reduce the grades, when there are five grades you'll get a lot of money. People said, 'Ja, we'll endorse it!' There was a rush to get this thing through the National Executive Committee and make it a proposal to the employers. It started to alienate our members from the structures and from everything, that's how we gradually lost touch with our members.

This was justified with a promise never before heard in NUMSA – that 'we'll discuss the demands with the members while we're discussing them with the employers'.³⁹ The development and adoption of the new strategy was highly controversial in the union:

The debate in NUMSA about this restructuring was a big debate. It nearly split the union. People just walked out of meetings. The question would be, 'Is this going to be socialism?' And no one could say yes, this is going to be socialism, we will move from here to here. The one who was asked that question would answer by asking another question: 'What do we do in the interim then? Do you think we must take up arms and fight the bosses and kill them and take over the factories? Do you think that's what you want?' Obviously we wouldn't agree to that. That debate was never finalised in the union. Whether at the end the strategy will achieve the goals that we are all striving for is not clear.⁴⁰

This conflict echoes at a more ideological level the comment by the chairperson of the joint shop stewards' committee, quoted above, about the difficulty of replacing the 'culture of resistance' with a 'culture of productivity'. Clearly the new programme entailed a significant shift in strategy and organisational culture for NUMSA, which was reflected in something of an ideological crisis.

Quite aside from its political implications, the new programme was extremely complex and required both a sophisticated technical understanding of the issues, and a nuanced tactical and strategic ability. Shop stewards were quite frank about their weakness in regard to this:

It is confusing because we are not so clear, all of us, about this three-year programme. We still need more training so that we can understand the change of NUMSA. The people who understand this thing are very few in the union.⁴¹

Another shop steward expressed the view that there was only one shop steward, Mosi Nhlapo, 'who is well-informed about restructuring'.⁴² Nor would workers necessarily elect shop stewards who had the skills or commitment to understand the new programme.⁴³ Notwithstanding these weaknesses, the leadership at Highveld Steel was a particularly talented and capable group of shop stewards who had been empowered by the participation of two of them in the research groups. They had more likelihood of successfully implementing the new programme than most other shop steward committees.⁴⁴

Besides the complexity of the programme, there was the question of its coherence. As a programme it sought to achieve a diverse range of goals: laying the groundwork for socialism, increasing the power of workers on the shopfloor and in the company, improving the quality of working life, and making the company competitive. Could all of these goals be encompassed in one strategy? Were they compatible? If not, different understandings of the goals of the programme could make it difficult to implement. Even among the main union strategists at head office there were confusing differences of interpretation.⁴⁵

The strategy entailed a tension between struggle and co-operation: co-operation to achieve competitiveness, struggle to enhance workers' power and lay a basis for socialism. Could these goals be reconciled? Nhlapo expressed reservations about the degree of co-operation that was feasible, because both the union and management wanted greater control over production:

It depends whether the objectives of the strategy are still socialism. In the interim one envisages more co-operation, but management would like to see co-operation between management and workers, trying to sideline the union a bit. Management would like the result to be more co-operation, but no control for unions. A union that is said to be socialist would like to use its power to start driving the process. That is why there is no agreement, because there is uncertainty. We would say, but what is the strategy of management? Where do they want to lead us? Management would say, we must not involve the union too much, we must just consult them but it must end there.⁴⁶

Whereas productivity could be a common goal 'whether you are a capitalist or a socialist', capitalists wanted the profits of productivity for themselves, while 'we would like to share the profit among the people who are making production'. It was to influence decision-making over how profit should be used that the union was demanding participation at the highest levels, not only on the shopfloor.⁴⁷

For Nhlapo, there was also a disjunction between the socialist pretensions of the strategy and the lack of mobilisation in support of it: 'It's

impossible to take a radical stance now, because the workers do not understand the strategy.⁴⁸ The issue of power in the workplace was not explicitly addressed in the programme, and this gave rise to ambiguity (Von Holdt 1995). For some of the shop stewards it appeared possible to persuade management that worker control of production was in their own best interests. In the view of another, the *appearance* of ownership was an adequate goal: since 'ownership by workers is not practical' workers should 'have a feeling of ownership' and work 'as if it belonged to them'.⁴⁹ The similarity of these words to the discourse of new human resource management is striking. These ambiguities reflect an underlying ambivalence in the attitude of the trade unionists to incorporation and institutional participation. On the one hand, they realised that the strategy of reconstruction depended on such processes; on the other, they stressed the need for continuing with the practices of contentious mobilisation forged in the 1980s. Recasting these two dimensions of unionism for the new conditions created by democracy and reconstruction would be a difficult and contradictory endeavour.

Such contradiction did not only surface in ideological confusion or silences, but in the potential for confusion on the shopfloor. Most of the shop stewards acknowledged that company restructuring would increase productivity and therefore result in job losses, and explained that this problem could be resolved by expanding downstream production at the company, or providing substantial training programmes for retrenched workers to enable them to find jobs elsewhere. But in more reflective moments they acknowledged confusion about this issue:

Really, I don't think I am qualified to say exactly what our position is going to be when that time comes. Even now it is my fear. Management was very pleased when a union official mentioned that when the steel industry restructures people lose their jobs. They keep on reminding us what he said, intimidating us. But still we are saying we must restructure.⁵⁰

Other shop stewards voiced fears that the union programme would fail because workers would reject multi-skilling as loading them with extra work. After returning from a company-sponsored visit to steel plants in the United

States and Germany, shop stewards expressed anxiety about **retrenchment** and the increased workload and stress that could be the consequences of increased productivity. The result could be conflict and confusion on the shopfloor, divisions within the union, and the growth of rival unions.⁵¹

There were, therefore, anxieties among the shop stewards that the new NUMSA programme had been adopted too hastily, that it was extremely complex and that very few shop stewards or officials had sufficient understanding of it to negotiate or implement it in the workplace, and that it was contributing to a decline in union democracy. Technical complexity was compounded by diverse and possibly incompatible goals, uncertainty about the real objectives of the strategy, and a very real fear about the consequences of retrenchments and increased workloads, both for workers and the union.

Conclusion

The strategy of reconstruction provided a framework for contesting the process of working-class incorporation through attempting to ensure that workers' interests – and broader working-class interests – were recognised and accommodated. Its goals were to entrench workers organisational autonomy, power and voice in workplace and industry, and beyond this in the ANC, the town council and in the community. This would provide the basis for continuously negotiating, contesting and shaping reconstruction in post-colonial South Africa. It attempted to blend the established union vision, practices and meanings forged in the resistance of social movement unionism to apartheid, with new goals, practices and meanings required for reconstruction: on the one hand, transformation in a post-colonial society; on the other, competitiveness in a more exposed economy. This implied substantially recasting the relationship between institutional participation and contentious mobilisation.

The attempt to blend contradictory goals and practices accounts for the ambiguities and contradictions of the strategy – and the internal conflict and uncertainties articulated by unionists in this chapter. This illuminates what a major shift in strategy and vision entails for a mass organisation like a trade union. The social structure of a trade union is built around its vision and goals, and is embodied in its organisational culture and practices.

The adoption of a new vision and goals necessarily entails a new

that this could be unilaterally imposed by the bureaucracy, how useless formal democracy was in keeping their power in the hands of a few

organisational culture and practices, disturbing the social structure and provoking internal contestation and negotiation in which elements of the historically constituted social structure are carried forward in uneasy co-existence with elements of the new. This itself generates uncertainty and conflict. The danger is that it may so deeply undermine or damage core aspects of organisational culture that it weakens or destroys the organisation.

More specifically, the adoption of 'strategic unionism' by the Australian trade union movement was a project to reconstitute the terms of incorporation of the Australian working class under conditions of globalisation – but the tasks facing South African trade unions were substantially different: contesting and shaping the founding moment of class incorporation on the terrain of post-colonial reconstruction. Was 'strategic unionism' an adequate project for meeting this challenge?

The collective bargaining programme actually adopted by NUMSA had a narrower focus than the ambitious vision articulated both nationally and by the Highveld Steel shop stewards, and more closely resembled the programme of the Australian unions.⁵² Imported into a social movement unionism with a more radical, militant, democratic and contested social structure than that of the Australian unions, it threatened to disrupt practices and cultures that had been forged over the previous decade of union struggle, undermining collective identity and solidarity.⁵³ Nor was it clear that the collective bargaining programme was adequate for the specific problems of the transition in the South African workplace – especially the prospect of retrenchment from restructured workplaces in a society already suffering from extraordinarily high levels of unemployment.

Notes

1. Interview, Albert Makagula, 29/3/94.
2. Interview, J.J. Mbonani, 7/6/94.
3. Interview, Tshagata, 10/95; see also interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 5/5/94 and interview, Jerry Mogoleko, 10/95 for similar comments.
4. Interview, Philip Mkatshwa, 7/6/94; see also interview, J.J. Mbonani, 7/6/94; interview, Johannes Phatlana, 7/9/94.
5. Interview, J.J. Mbonani, 7/6/94.

6. Interview, Ambrose Mthembu, 26/4/94; interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 15/4/94.
7. Interview, Hendrik Nkosi, 14/6/94; see also chapter 10.
8. This account of the new NUMSA strategy is based on Bird (1990); Joffe et al. (1995); Lloyd (1994); Von Holdt (1993a, 1995); and the interviews with shop stewards at Highveld Steel.
9. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94, 5/5/94, 23/11/95.
10. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94, 5/5/94.
11. Interview, Meshack Malinga, 15/3/94; interview, Leslie Nhlapo, 12/95; interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94, 5/5/94; interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94.
12. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94; interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94; see also interview, Meshack Malinga, 15/3/94; interview, J.J. Mbonani, 7/6/94; interview, Ambrose Mthembu, 26/4/94; interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 5/5/94.
13. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94, 5/5/94; see also interview, Hendrik Nkosi, 15/4/94.
14. Interview, J.J. Mbonani, 7/6/94.
15. Interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94; see also interview, Phineas Mabena, 12/5/94.
16. Interview, Philip Mkatshwa, 7/6/94, 8/95.
17. This resolution was adopted by NUMSA and motivated at COSATU's 1994 congress, where it failed to find a second union prepared to support it. NUMSA later replaced this resolution with one endorsing the alliance.
18. Interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 8/5/94.
19. Interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94.
20. See also interview, Hong Kong Kgalima, 3/7/94; interview, Hendrik Nkosi, 14/6/94.
21. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 23/11/95.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview, Meshack Malinga, 12/5/94, 14/5/94.
24. Interview, Ambrose Mthembu, 14/5/94; interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 10/7/94.
25. Interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 10/7/94.
26. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 23/11/95.
27. Ibid; interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94; see also interview, Johannes Phatlana, 15/4/94.
28. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 15/4/94; see also interview, Jacob Skhosana, 26/4/94.
29. Interview, Bunny Mahlangu, 12/5/94; see also interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 9/3/94.
30. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 15/4/94; see also interview, Johannes Phatlana, 15/4/94.
31. Interview, Bunny Mahlangu, 12/5/94.
32. Interview, Ambrose Mthembu, 26/4/94; interview, Johannes Phatlana, 15/4/94.
33. Interview, Ezekiel Nkosi, 23/11/95.
34. Interview, Ambrose Mthembu, 15/3/94.
35. Interview, Jacob Skhosana, 14/4/95.
36. Interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 15/3/94, 5/5/94.
37. Interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 15/3/94.
38. Interview, Mosi Nhlapo, 8/5/94.
39. Interview, Bunny Mahlangu, 12/5/94. Criticism of the way the three-year programme