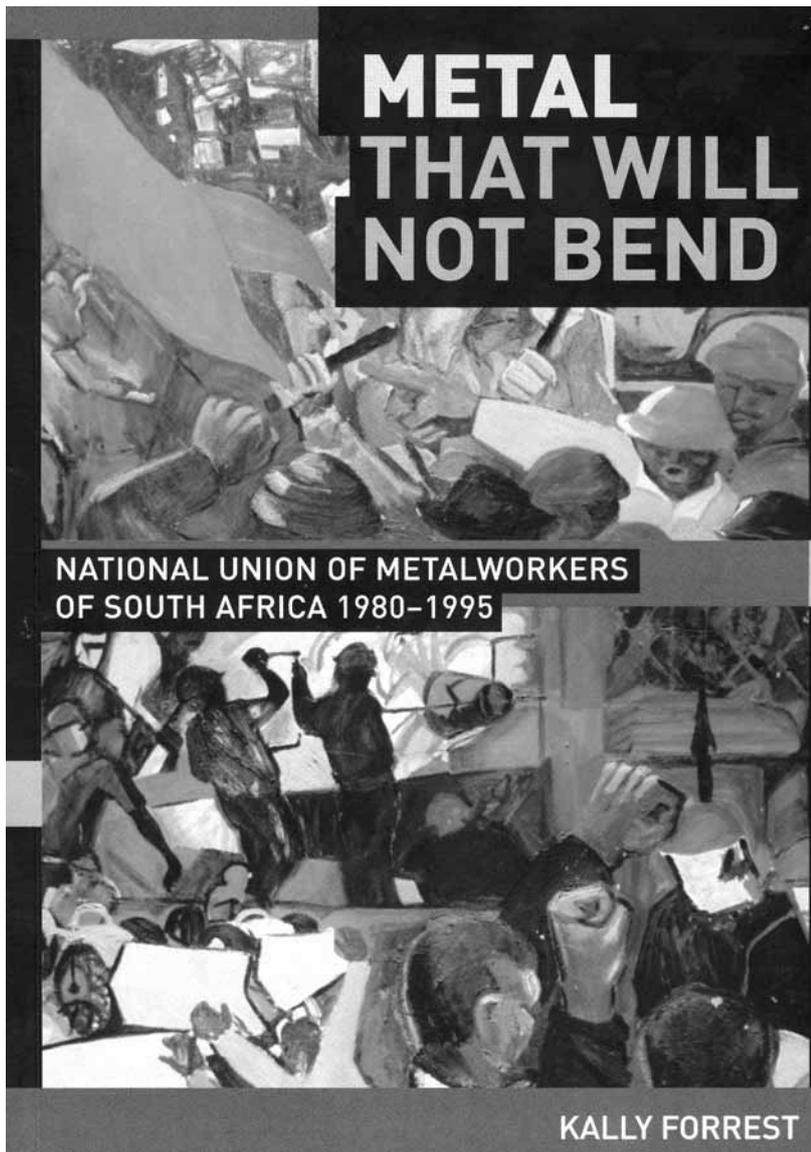


# Asserting their metal

## Building union power through numbers

At the beginning of the 1980s the new metal unions, later to merge to form the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), were small and weak. **Kally Forrest** tells how they built power through mass recruitment campaigns, and how this protected them from being smashed by the state and forced employers to grant basic worker rights.



All unions needing to change members' conditions have to address growth. In the early 1980s growth for the new metal unions, especially Mawu (Metal & Allied Workers Union), posed a dilemma.

In the 1970s as a survival strategy Mawu had built power in selected factories and concentrated its resources. The challenge now was how to grow rapidly and build power without losing organisational coherence.

As the 1980s dawned, unions faced barriers to growth as the economy entered a deep recession. Also, between 1982 and 1986 South Africa suffered a terrible drought. Up to 16 companies a day were folding and survivors' profits were slashed.

Retrenchments exposed members and shop stewards to victimisation. Commented a Mawu organiser: 'Many factories are trying to get rid of union members. They will say this guy has skills and we can't retrench him. And the workers know it is only because he is not a member of the union.'

Employers saw job loss as a market issue. One employer spoke for many: 'No negotiation at all over retrenchments. That's a purely financial matter and up to management.'

The few bosses who agreed to procedures generally did not follow



*Mawu organiser Moses (Moss) Mayekiso.*

them. They gave little or no notice. The TMF foundry, for example, informed workers on the morning they were laid off, and then locked them out when they protested.

Mandlenkosi Makhoba recalled the desperation, 'When you are out of a job, you realise that the boss and the government have the power to condemn you to death. If they send you back home, there's a drought, and you can't get any new job, it's a death sentence. The countryside is pushing you into the cities to stay alive; the cities are pushing you into the countryside to die. You get scared. It's a fear that you come to know after a week without food.'

Members of the metal unions were hard hit by this recession. More than 35,000 workers in auto and motor retail lost jobs as did 76,000 in engineering.

Yet in defiance of worldwide patterns, these unions entered a phase of huge growth. Black workers turned to the militant new unions out of desperation and also because they gave them a voice which apartheid denied them. For metal workers on the East Rand, many of them migrants, unions brought control over their insecure working lives and the unpredictability of white foremen.

In the 1970s migrants doing manual work in heavy engineering formed the core of Mawu's membership. Now African semi-skilled operators joined factories in large numbers and opened the way for huge growth in the unions. Such workers had a bargaining power which unskilled workers lacked.

#### MASS RECRUITMENT

Three Acts passed between 1979 and 1981 called the Wiehahn reforms offered an important opportunity. These laws for the first time recognised African unions and so eased the fear of joining.

The laws also allowed for registration of African unions that could now enter into recognition agreements with employers, which gave important protection against dismissal.

The unions now broke cover. No more recruiting behind bushes outside factories or in secret cells in company departments. Unions now had the right to recruit and growing numbers shielded them from state attack.

A Highveld Steel shop steward described how Mawu grew: 'After Wiehahn... it decriminalised things. I'd recruit a few then... someone was dismissed and these

guys waited to see what the union would do. We went for the appeal and won. After that stop order forms were coming in left and right.'

Growing inter-union rivalry also fuelled Mawu's recruitment drive. In the early 1980s, the openly political Eastern Cape general unions arrived in the Transvaal. They staged huge meetings in communities where people were urged to join the union to fight off apartheid and their capitalist oppressors. Thousands joined. Mawu was impressed.

Mawu focused on organising East Rand factories, the hub of the metal industry, and central to its drive was Moses (Moss) Mayekiso, a fired Toyota worker who became an organiser in 1979.

Said organiser Bernie Fanaroff: 'We decided we would out-organise the general unions using their tactics. We'll stay factory-based, but we'll now organise in the hostels. So Moss would tell workers he was coming to Katlehong hostel and then organise everyone in that factory from the hostel. Moss was one of the most powerful figures in the hostels - we really controlled the Vosloosrus, Katlehong hostels, Daveyton, Wattville.'

Hostels, designed to control workers, ironically herded together large concentrations of workers. The Vosloosrus hostel, for example, housed 15,000 men.

In this way Mawu moved from painstaking company-by-company recruitment to mass organisation.

The Mawu Transvaal branch began holding general meetings in Kwesine Hostel. Eventually up to 9,000 workers were attending Mawu rallies on the East Rand.

A further incentive to rapid recruitment was the fear that once the government lost faith in the Wiehahn reforms to control unions, it would smash them. There was safety in numbers.

Another push to organise large plants was that managements



*A Mawu shop stewards meeting in the Transvaal.*

would only recognise the union with majority support. 'We were going through factories of more than a thousand in a week,' organiser Alec Erwin recalls.

Because of Mawu's emphasis on shop-floor strength, it was able to retain members in a way that the general unions could not.

#### **REGISTRATION AND GROWTH**

Registration under the Wiehahn laws divided Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions, to which Mawu and the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) were affiliated) from other emerging unions.

In the late 1970s, when the government threatened to exclude migrants from unions, emerging unions united in rejecting registration. This forced the government to drop the threat.

Fosatu now broke ranks. Many companies argued that they would not recognise the new unions because they were not registered. Fosatu therefore took the tactical view that registration should be measured by how much it enabled recognition agreements which would entrench workers' rights and serve as a platform for further gains.

Radical Cape unions however argued that registration meant state control and would force unions to operate bureaucratically thus weakening workers' control. Bitter controversy raged including in *SALB* (Volumes 7.1 to 7.3).

Naawu and then Mawu submitted an application to the state to register.

Such registration on top of the Wiehahn laws softened employers and brought a sharp rise in recognition agreements in Fosatu's metal affiliates. In 1980 Mawu signed its first agreement with Precision Tools and agreements with Tensile Rubber and Henred Freuhauf quickly followed. By 1984, 122 of Mawu's 180 factories were recognised.

Recognition agreements gave important rights, including shopsteward recognition; access to factories; stop orders; dismissal and grievance procedures; right to report back to membership and other important clauses such as retrenchment provisions.

These agreements policed by shop stewards advanced workplace organisation and were a significant strategy for building power. Binding contracts meant employers had to adhere to dismissal procedures.

Recognition agreements usually gave company stop order facilities with employers deducting union dues from workers' wages. This was a significant right. In 1975 Mawu's income was R1,000 per month, with little money for organisers' salaries, rent or other costs. With stop-orders, Mawu's finances improved.

By 1984, Mawu had 20,000 members on stop order. More money meant more staff to service growing membership. Mawu moved from simple to more complex organisation.

#### **GROWTH AND ORGANISATION**

The Fosatu unions were open industrial unions and so they grew rapidly in the 1980s. At the heart of this unionism were the structures and principles laid down in the 1970s - strong democratic worker structures which allowed for stable organisation and empowered members. At the centre lay the shop stewards' committee.

A Mawu booklet wrote: 'Each factory must be a school for democracy. The leaders are a voice in the factory: the workers are the union. The shop stewards are our leaders and workers through their shop stewards must control



University of the Witwatersrand academic Phil Bonner conducts a Fosatu workers' education seminar.

the union. Leadership does not stop at the factory floor. It extends to the entire organisation. Union branches are controlled by a branch executive committee of shop stewards; our union as a whole by a national committee of shop stewards.'

A key task of shop stewards was to establish a relationship with management and take up workers' day-to-day grievances.

Shop stewards sometimes struggled with this as organiser Les Kettleidas recalls, 'The concept of the shop steward was still not understood... when Naawu organised at CDA the MD said: 'Shop stewards? What are shop stewards?' We said: 'No, those are people that are elected by other workers to represent them when they have problems.' He says: 'Problems? Workers with problems don't work in this factory!'

As elected representatives, stewards operated with workers' trust. This meant being fearless and having acceptable political views. Richard Ntuli, a Mawu shop steward remarked, 'I hated this thing of apartheid and workers knew this... Also I was not afraid to take things to management that workers asked me to take and

to come and report back what management said.'

Members removed stewards if they thought they were in management's pocket. Workers in a foundry in 1981, for example, struck to remove a steward because he was an 'impimpi' (spy).

Mtutuzeli Tom, a Naawu steward at Mercedes Benz, described the grievances he handled: 'The majority were about favouritism. Supervisors would upgrade guys because they were good at giving information about troublemakers. Also racism. We had right wing supervisors using words like *kaffirs*, *baboons*.

'The other common grievance was theft accusations. Sometimes things were put into workers' lockers to get rid of them because they were a problem. Also issues around damage on the production line. You fix your car and then it goes to the next station and it's scratched. The worker at the next station is accused of damage to company property.

'Dismissals because workers were under the influence was common, because of frustrations that workers were experiencing. It's not so common now. Workers were forced to work overtime. If

they refused: 'Listen here, there are thousands outside the gates, if you don't want to work take your jacket and fuck off.'

Shop stewards conveyed union policy to members and educated them on their rights. They had to 'present the ideology in simple and readable terms... linked to what they were doing practically on the factory floor', Mayekiso recalls.

Education offered workers the rare opportunity to express their ideas. Mbuyi Ngwenda, former Numsa general secretary, recalled being a new member: 'I was impressed by the way the shop stewards conducted meetings where every individual had time to express their views. Even where there were different views the chair would encourage discussions.'

Shop stewards' committees were the unions' mobilising force and by 1980 these structures were fully empowered, and on the East Rand officials no longer controlled the union.

The development of shop steward leadership gave rise to an army of recruiters and the total identification with the union made them enormously effective and

creative. A Barlows steward for example used a Mawu T-shirt to recruit because workers wanted to know what this union was, and then he explained what a truly representative union was.

### GROWTH AND COUNCILS

An organisational innovation which contributed significantly to the growth of Mawu was the shop steward council or local. It was on the East Rand in the Katlehong/Germiston/Wadeville/Alrode/Alberton area that it made the deepest impression on Mawu's organising drive. These structures operated outside of factory, affiliate and Fosatu constitutions.

The Katlehong local developed in 1981 in response to a capacity problem in Mawu where only one organiser, Mayekiso, serviced the fastest growing area in the country. The council brought together stewards from Fosatu factories across industries to debate strategies and learn from each other. It met in the Fosatu offices near Katlehong in a hall called Morena Stores.

Its main aim said Fanaroff, '... was to assist the union recruit members, to build union structures in the factory, and help with basic education about unionism... We took the decision that the way to organise was to get workers out at lunchtime and organise all factories in the area and help workers on strike because Moss couldn't do everything. It started with Henred (Fruehauf) - a worker owned a car which took shop stewards to other plants to recruit during lunch hour.'

The Katlehong council was a creative response to an organisational problem. It was a revolution in union organisation - it was an organ of workers' power. For the first time, workers tasted working-class power through rapid growth in union numbers, but also by mobilising, discussing, sharing, resolving problems, formulating tactics and lending solidarity.

### EDUCATION AND GROWTH

Education was hugely important in recruitment and retaining membership. Some came through formal union structures, but much of it took place organically.

At BTR Sarmcol for example the grassroots intellectual or 'imbongi' (praise poets) educated workers. They provided a bridge between the battles in the factory in the 1960s and later recognition struggles in Mawu in the 1980s. The continuity between past and present shaped younger workers' consciousness.

Such influences were not common to all workers however. Some had no previous contact with unionism, politics or activists from the past.

Experiential learning however was taking place. The assessment of tactics, evaluation of failures, finding relevant information and debating future moves was on-going.

Organisers were important as they disseminated legal, economic, strategic and technical information in discussions with workers. Such learning reached new heights in shop stewards' councils.

These experiences developed alongside more formal education provided initially by Fosatu and later by the unions themselves.

In 1980 Fosatu launched national and regional education committees. They comprised a worker and organiser from each union, who guided a full-time national education officer accountable to the education sub-committee of Fosatu's central committee.

Fosatu provided education for all affiliates through seminars and meetings. Alec Erwin, national education officer in 1983, prepared material, ran educational projects and coordinated seminars for shop stewards and organisers, sometimes using specialists from the universities of the Witwatersrand and Natal. Courses covered the history of worker

organisation, unionism and the law and organising and bargaining practices.

By mid-1980 unions influenced by free-flowing discussions in shop steward councils were conducting less formal education. The hunger for education gave rise to marathon sessions or 'siyalalas' (we sleep) where delegates continued throughout the night.

Union media also played an educational role. Publications such as *Fosatu Worker News*, *Umbiko we Mawu*, *South African Metalworker* and *Naawu News* spread information about union activities and educated workers on union policies and campaigns, labour laws and international working-class struggles.

Both Mawu and Naawu also made effective use of the press to inform the public of workers' grievances and as a tool to keep members informed during disputes.

These unions also promoted working-class culture as an educative and unifying weapon. Activities included cultural days, workers' choirs with the production of records and cassettes as well as workers' plays performed countrywide, and the publishing of workers' writing.

Education was linked to organisation and campaigns which made it hugely relevant to these unions' aims.

Educational drives hugely boosted growth. Major policy decisions crucial to growth, such as the decision to register, were always preceded by the national executive council and educational meetings. 'To exercise power,' Mawu organiser Enoch Godongwana emphasised, 'you have to understand the issues'. <sup>18</sup>

*Kally Forrest is author of 'Metal that will not bend: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980 -1995'. SALB will be running a series of extracts from this book.*