

Metal workers' power in action

Breaking the apartheid mould

Strikes are the way trade unions build power. **Kally Forrest** tells how workers in the metal unions, later to become the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), built power in three critical strikes and strike waves in the early 1980s, which also deeply undermined grand apartheid.

The strike is the cornerstone of union power. Its power lies in worker solidarity as individual workers have no muscle and are easy to replace. Wildcat strikes are often the most effective because management has little opportunity to plan.

In the early 1980s strikes returned in force to South Africa. More spontaneous strikes broke out on the East Rand in 1981/2 than in any other period in South African history.

In the metal unions these were pivotal disputes, which struck at the heart of capitalist exploitation while also rupturing grand apartheid at its height.

The strikes expressed workers' new determination to assert control over their working lives. The metal unions emphasised workers' control and brought a blossoming of ideas, demands, tactics and innovative struggles on a scale never witnessed in the South African labour movement.

At the heart of this creative energy was a relationship between union intellectuals, leaders and members. Militant worker action sometimes took union strategists by surprise but it prompted new thinking and a reformulation of demands and strategies.

Such rethinking was often not what workers first demanded but was a refocusing that struck more directly at the heart of their exploitation.

Many struggles were lost or not immediately resolved but remained in the unions' memory to return to later when the opportunity arose. Unions sometimes lacked the resources to cope and yet creative approaches opened new strategic opportunities which pushed forward factory control.

Mawu (Metal & Allied Workers Union) used a range of tactics including go-slows, working to rule, grasshopper strikes, trials of strength, demonstration stoppages, consumer boycotts, legal action, sleep-ins, negotiations, community solidarity, house visits, fundraising strategies and international solidarity.

Sometimes they used a battery of tactics in one dispute and devised new ways of sustaining solidarity.

At first unionists relied on surprise, using their superior knowledge of labour relations' procedures and laws. As employers became more sophisticated, unions had to revise their tactics and view defeat as an opportunity to evolve more effective ways forward.

The unions' political independence gave them flexibility

to respond rapidly to alter strategic and policy directions. They debated freely with their members to whom they were alone accountable. This freedom to manoeuvre allowed for an explosion of innovation.

Strikes enabled the unions to force their way into factories. Every act of defiance or success spurred on other workers to stand up to their white employers. This hugely increased the size and power of the metal unions which in the 1980s expanded all over South Africa.

Three disputes were central to the rise of the metal unions in the early 1980s.

1980: GREAT VOLKSWAGEN STRIKE

The strike at German multinational Volkswagen (VW) Uitenhage, the Eastern Cape's largest employer, had a large impact on bargaining demands and the style of industrial action in the 1980s. Two black unions existed in the plant - Numarwosa, the coloured union, and UAW the African one.

Pay was the main grievance. VW paid just above the Poverty Datum Line, but workers pointed out that this did not include clothing, furniture, schoolbooks, entertainment and other everyday expenses that whites took for granted. They resented academics



A riot police officer warns VW workers to disperse outside the company's Uitenhage plant in June 1980 (Jack Cooper Evening Post).

remote from their poverty calculating their living costs.

Before 1980's industrial council (IC - now bargaining council) negotiations workers drew up a R2-per-hour 'living wage' figure based on a survey of workers' needs. However, after weeks of bargaining, talks deadlocked with employers offering R1,40 per hour.

On 15 June the chief magistrate banned a report-back meeting in Uitenhage's Jubilee Hall. Frustrated, workers struck illegally the following day. About 3 500 African and coloured workers gathered outside the MD's office waiting for a shop stewards' report back and fearing lockout if they left.

Meanwhile news of the VW action spread and unrest erupted throughout local industry. About 1 000 workers downed tools over wages at 11 other plants including at Goodyear and SKF.

Numarwosa organiser Les Kettledas recalled, 'The whole town became an operational area. The army was flown in. Barbed wire was put on the streets to keep workers from entering into town. Newspapers were blacked out.'

Strikes petered out within 10 days except for VW. The unions then contacted their sister German union, IG Metall. Knowing that the German unions were monitoring the strike, management restrained the police from acting against workers.

The company tried to divide strikers by offering pay rises to

those who returned to work and a helicopter dropped leaflets on townships promoting its offer. Only 50 workers responded.

After three weeks, the dispute was settled. Workers accepted a R1,48 per hour minimum and employers agreed to increase this to R2 within 18 months.

The dispute was remarkable for several reasons.

The idea of demanding a living wage was new. *Fosatu Worker News (FNN)* noted 'these increases are the largest achieved by the union, but more important the company accepted that a reasonable living wage must be paid'. Like VW many plants began negotiating pay outside the IC.

It was through this strike that the idea of a 'living wage' was born which still dominates bargaining agendas today.

It was also the first major example of coloured and African worker unity previously divided by apartheid. It spelled the end of racial parallel unions - coloured and African workers united into one union.

It was a trial of strength which was unprecedented in South African labour history and remarkable under high apartheid. Workers banked on employers finding it difficult to replace their skills in a booming car market.

The strike was notable for the disciplined use of power. At daily meetings outside the plant strikers heard reports from negotiators and

made decisions. These methods to maintain solidarity foreshadowed many future struggles.

Strikers made strategic use of the Uitenhage Black Civic Organisation where many UAW shop stewards were leaders. The civic held meetings to inform residents, distributed pamphlets, conducted house visits to stop scabbing and collected money for strikers and their families.

Workers learnt valuable lessons about wielding power. Many spoke of how they wanted to confront white power head on. But older activists and experienced unionists educated members on the dangers of undisciplined action.

Above all, the strike gave workers and Uitenhage's townships their first taste of power. When strikers staged an illegal march from the factory through white Uitenhage to the townships, the police stood back.

Buoyed by this victory, VW workers waged other successful actions over disciplinary and retrenchment procedures, protection from supervisor assaults, wage increases, reinstatement of shop stewards, pension rights and new technology. VW was the first South African workplace to permit full-time shop stewards.

International solidarity had proved a powerful weapon. The strike also pressured German firms in South Africa to recognise unions and give them the same rights as German workers.

The strike deeply challenged apartheid. It brought African and coloured workers together and affirmed the right of the oppressed to a share of South Africa's wealth. Black workers had outwitted management, Uitenhage's white residents and the security forces.

PENSION STRIKE WAVE

The early 1980s also saw other significant industrial action which challenged government policy - the pension strikes which engulfed South Africa.

Government reforms in the late 1970s prompted employers to set up pension funds for black workers to supplement the small state pension of R66 every two months. In 1981 government introduced the Preservation of Pensions Bill to stop workers withdrawing their pensions until 65 to protect them in their old age.

Government's hidden agenda however was to remove retirement provision from the state and also to create huge funds from which government and business could borrow and invest.

Government also proposed prescribed assets which required pension schemes to invest a percentage of contributions in government bonds.

In a mounting wave, black workers downed tools and demanded that employers pay out their pension money before the Bill became law. In 1981, 30 000 workers struck in 27 companies countrywide.

The strikes took the unions by surprise as they were absorbed in recognition and wage issues. They viewed the pensions uproar with bewilderment.

A dialogue then developed between organisers, shop stewards and pension experts. Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions) produced a report *Pensions Panic* which pointed out that while skilled white workers had little fear of redundancy, Africans often faced retrenchment and their pension money was a means of survival.

Also, many Africans died before 65 and fund administrators often did not inform family members to claim the money.

The Bill required pension schemes to invest 53% of contributions in government bonds, a big sum in the R10-billion industry. Fosatu made the discovery that most bonds went on buying equipment for the SA Defence Force. Black workers were funding their own oppression!

Fosatu called for the dropping of prescribed assets and urged talks between unions and employers on pension reform. It noted that black workers had no say on pension boards where white businessmen and white unions spoke on their behalf. It demanded majority worker representation on provident funds and pension boards, so that elected representatives could say how money was invested.

Employers at first insisted that workers did not understand the Bill and they often fired strikers. Under union pressure, however, business started to rethink. When the strikes persisted, the Federated Chamber of Industry called for the scrapping of the legislation and prescribed assets to which government agreed.

The Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce also came out and backed the idea of worker representation on pension boards. It urged companies to negotiate with unions on pension policy and suggested pension funds should invest in township upgrading.

Mawu discovered that Seifsa (metal employers' association) had two racially constituted pension schemes and that black workers had no say over their fund worth R586-million. It called for the restructuring of the Metal Industries Pension Fund Board to allow for majority worker representation.

In 1983, long after the pensions

Bill was dropped, the union forced Seifsa to change fund rules so that workers who left the industry could claim their contributions.

The union also argued that white unions should not have a say over a fund where they had no members and it forced them off the board. Mawu then put union representatives onto the metal industry pension board where they had a say over assets of R800-million.

In 1984 Mawu's mainly migrant membership demanded that this fund contribute to rural housing. The white unions tried to block this but the board finally invested in workers' housing through the KwaZulu Development Corporation.

The move to provident funds and worker representation on pension boards was far from strikers' original demand. Union leaders had deepened their demands while exposing the state's hidden agenda.

The pension strikes had deep political implications. Underlying members' demands was the principle of transparent consultation. By forcing the apartheid government to back down, black workers regarded as children, forced adult recognition.

Winning representation on pension boards gave them an adult status denied them in the workplace and wider society. It showed that worker power could shift state policy.



Tension was heightened by the mysterious ransacking of Fosatu's offices in July 1981 (Wits archives).

EAST RAND STRIKE WAVE

News of the VW R2 living wage strike fell on fertile ground in Mawu's East Rand stronghold. A spontaneous strike wave followed in June 1980.

Strikes first broke out at Rely Precision, Vaal Metal Pressings, Hendler and Hendler where the company agreed to pay talks outside of the IC. Colgate followed; then 2 000 struck at Salcast Smelter while at Hall Longmore strikers won 10c an hour more than the IC offer.

'When... other factories heard about this, they also began demanding increases and this was the beginning of the wave of strikes... It started in Wadeville and spread to Benoni, Alrode and Isando,' said organiser Moses Mayekiso. Between July and November 1981 over 50 strikes erupted on the East Rand involving 25 000 workers.

Many strikers were migrants living in hostels in townships such as Tembisa, Vosloorus and Katlehong. There was excitement as workers told stories. One worker recalled: 'Groups of people would gather at night and discuss the latest news. Each had a story to tell. Each worker was giving his own sermon, some angry, some laughing. Talk mixed excitedly with song.'

Pay, rising food prices and rentals were the main grievances. Another spark was the 1981 metal IC agreement which set a minimum of R1.13 per hour - well below the inflation rate.

The right of the IC to set wages for the industry went to the root of Mawu's battle for power. By demanding increases above council rates, the union was challenging the right of white business to control black workers' lives.

Seifsa instructed companies to resist pay demands, and they forced most strikers back to work without increases. But strikes had shifted the balance of power in the workplace and Seifsa began urging companies to recognise unions who agreed to join the council.

'Management prerogative' was the issue in about half the strikes over dismissals. Workers also downed tools over retrenchment, conduct of foremen, shift changes and workloads and they won many concessions.

About 25 of the metal strikes revolved around dismissals, often by racist white foremen, and more than half of dismissed strikers were reinstated.

Employers were disappointed that the Christmas break did not cool off workers. As the recession deepened and job cuts became common in 1982, the strike wave intensified.

In Wadeville 14 000 workers struck and they now focused more narrowly on wages. This probably reflected Mawu's success in winning factory recognition.

The revolt on the East Rand was comprised, organised and unorganised workers. The wildcat strikes were however influenced by Mawu's organising drive and union officials responded tactically to unorganised action and unplanned strikes.

Yet the scale of the unrest startled union organisers. Organiser Bernie Fanaroff commented, 'management didn't know how to handle the unions and they usually gave in'. In many cases, recognition negotiations followed.

Large strike numbers meant workers ran ahead of the union and so the shop steward councils, especially in Katlehong, played a critical role.

The power of the shop steward councils lay in their flexible, action-oriented approach. Workers shared factory grievances which allowed for the formulation of common strategies and the building of unity.

When the union won a victory in one factory, workers set out to organise those nearby. Soon committees were organising one street in an industrial zone at a time. *FWN* noted, 'Mawu and Fosatu have become so strong in Wadeville that management has found it very

difficult to recruit scab labour to break strikes.'

Through the shop steward councils an activist core emerged who worked with Mayekiso. They assisted workers to strike in a disciplined and united way, and to return to work immediately the company agreed to negotiate.

The East Rand strike wave popularised unions and their role in fighting for workers' rights and established Mawu as the union of choice amongst metal workers. Workers now organised themselves and came to the union office.

Thousands of workers learned lessons about the wielding of power during the upsurge and many layers of worker leadership emerged.

The strikes were also deeply political. The shopsteward councils allowed workers to talk openly about politics for the first time since the 1960s. For many, the factory struggle was continuous with the struggle for liberation.

This political awakening was not identified with any organisation but rather as the Katlehong chair put it, 'We are not fighting only for a 20c wage increase, but for our rights and for our country.' Yet Fosatu's non-racism dovetailed with the ANC tradition and so boosted the revival of the ANC in opposition to the black consciousness movement.

For migrants their political awakening came through experiencing power in collective action. As one said: 'Other workers see that these workers have got for themselves power over management during the strike... This was a challenge to them to do the same, to go on strike to get their own power.' ■

Kally Forrest is author of 'Metal that will not bend: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980 - 1995.' This is the second in a series of shortened extracts from the book. The book is available from SALB.