Creative new directions

Metalworker research groups

This is the third in a series of articles on the history of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa). Once the union became the major bargaining partner on the engineering industrial council in 1987 it turned its attention to restructuring its industries and the economy. **Kally Forrest** explains its experiment to achieve this by means of worker-driven research groups.

'And we really screwed the white unions... from that day on there was no way that Seifsa (metal employers association) was going to agree to anything unless Numsa agreed. And so, the white power block just disappeared. And it was a very dramatic process.' So commented national organiser, Alistair Smith, after Numsa became the major bargaining partner on the industrial council following an industry-wide strike in 1988.

In consequence Numsa turned to serious engagement on the engineering industrial council and the 1989 talks were for the first time settled harmoniously without dispute.

Metal-workers saw how Numsa used this centralised forum to win victories – a long way from the toothless council that it had entered in 1983. For the first time in almost a decade Numsa signed the industry-wide agreement. As a result over the next 18 months its membership swelled from 70,000 to 235,000, becoming Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) largest affiliate.

However, outside the negotiations on the industrial council, an industrial war had erupted. Part of the reason for these numerous strikes was Numsa's rapid growth in small firms governed by inexperienced managers, which gave rise to disputes of right.

Many employers reacted to strikes with mass dismissals. The union was caught in a contradiction.

On the one hand it was pursuing a more consensual style in the industrial council in the hope of engaging employers on industry restructuring. On the other it was coping with divided plants where hostile employers produced an ever more militant workforce. This undermined Numsa's ability to raise members' awareness of what it was trying to achieve at a national centralised level.

DEVELOPING NEW VISION

In was in this polarised labour market that Numsa leaders began to develop a vision of reconstruction of its sectors and of a rationally planned economy.

Numsa had attained institutional power in centralised collective bargaining where it could now shape engagements. Here it aimed to negotiate the restructuring of its industries and ultimately the country's economy.

Numsa's president Daniel Dube at the 1989 Bargaining Conference commented: 'Now that the future society is coming closer, we must ask ourselves: "What kind of society do we want?" … Our resolutions say that capitalism cannot solve the problems of our country and cannot provide a good life for all our people… One of the basic differences between socialism and capitalism is that socialism is based on planning – the planned use of the wealth and resources of the country for the needs of all our people... We must lay the foundations now for a restructured economy.'

For workers to increase their control over production the union needed to engage in detailed planning while South Africa was in transition. In order to engage employers on change Numsa needed to understand its sectors

Cedric Nunn

Participants in the Training Research and Development.

and the economic environment they operated in. The union wanted to move away from defending individual jobs to the development of a broader strategy which grappled with the creation of sustainable jobs.

The union however lacked research capacity, and it quickly concluded that little research was available, or in progress, to help it develop a blueprint for the economy. It was in this vacuum that one of its most creative ideas took shape.

UNION THINK-TANKS

Numsa was facing the relentless retrenchment of its semi- and unskilled membership. It realised that the acquisition of skills was an important way to move workers to the centre of production and give them the ability to control it.

The union however knew little about training as its members had always been excluded from industry training boards. Employers meanwhile had done little to remedy the skills shortage which they loudly complained about.

By 1982 formal job reservation for whites no longer existed, except in mining, but it was informally enforced in the metal industry by racist white unions.

Of the 5,517 apprentices trained in the engineering sector in 1982, only 390 were Africans. A tiny 3.3% of Africans had passed matric, compared to 30% of whites, while just 0.2% had tertiary qualifications. This skills shortage meant that skilled white workers commanded whatever pay they wanted.

In 1990 the government, under pressure from employers, set up joint employer-union-government Industry Training Boards (ITBs), including one in the metal industry, to oversee apprenticeships, introduce modularised training, develop syllabi, evaluate training and oversee its financing. This opened opportunities for the union to influence training policy.

In the late 1980s black workers saw employers importing skilled foreigners at high rates of pay. They realised that acquiring skills could bring higher pay and give the retrenched a better chance of finding work.

The union thus decided to upgrade the skills of its members and its education secretary Alec Erwin urged Numsa to formulate training policy, '…the climate's changing … they're already starting to talk about a negotiated settlement. And we'd better start thinking about constructive proposals.' He suggested to Adrienne Bird (Numsa Witwatersrand regional educator) and a group of shop stewards that they take three months to come up with 'a big project'.

Bird arranged for the metal industry's training board to speak to the union's Witwatersrand education committee, which resulted in Numsa creating its first

Research & Development Groups (RDG) on training. Said Bird, 'RDGs gave a shot in the arm to education in the union and a large part of this was making sure that workers' experience was reflected on.'

Over time the union created a number of different research groups of 10 to 15 members which were ratified by its Central Committee in 1988. The groups brought together academic researchers, service organisations and worker leaders in what a shop steward described as 'a powerful combination'. The union also facilitated study tours abroad.

The task of RDGs was to identify problems, draft proposals for tackling them and then forward recommendations to constitutional structures for discussion and endorsement. Once endorsed, union structures would implement the proposals through collective bargaining and campaigns.

The aim was also to develop worker researchers who would acquire a detailed knowledge of their industries and so be able to present a union response at the negotiating table.

Numsa set up RDGs on housing, land and shelter and on other matters. Shop stewards investigated company housing schemes, how to finance worker housing, the benefits of medical aid versus medical benefit schemes and how to raise worker awareness on HIV and AIDS.

It established separate RDGs to investigate the industrial restructuring of the auto, electrical and metal industries. These worked closely with the collective bargaining RDG to formulate proposals for negotiations with employers. They also explored recognition agreement policy, best levels for collective bargaining and the concerns of skilled workers.

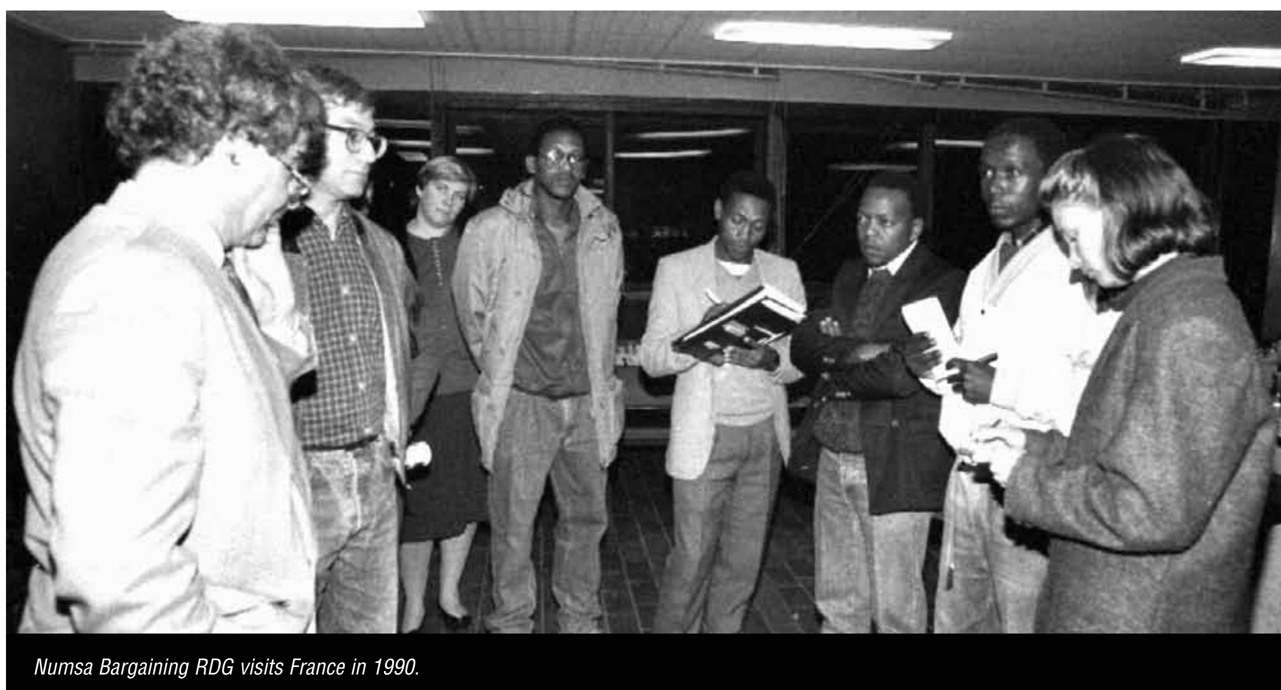
A Polecon RDG was created which researched the economy and privatisation and deregulation and collated all RDG proposals for discussion at national policy workshops.

The RDGs advanced important new information and perspectives. At Numsa's 1989 Congress and in Central Committee meetings in 1990 and 1991 delegates adopted a range of resolutions from their proposals.

In time Cosatu introduced participatory research groups based on the Numsa model, and Polecon linked with Cosatu's research into politics and economics.

As Numsa strengthened its RDGs by working with other affiliates, it saw the need for Cosatu to promote industry-wide policies. Numsa's housing and health RDGs were absorbed into Cosatu's Goods and Services Commission, and the federation set up other commissions on workers' rights, revision of the Labour Relations Act, drafting of a workers' charter, the living wage, human resources and industrial restructuring.

There was a flourishing of ideas as affiliates reported findings and formulated proposals to Cosatu's National Campaigns Committee.



William Matlala

Numsa Bargaining RDG visits France in 1990.

William Matlala

Enoch Godongwana talks in the Collective Bargaining RDG in November 1990.

Numsa's new strategic orientation offered the chance to seize the initiative with industry, the state and political formations. It had developed a new base of organisational power – the power of intellectual engagement to evolve new ways of approaching problems.

The union had previously set up campaign structures to promote policies to membership and now it had the internal means to generate ideas to take the union forward. This was in the metal union's creative tradition – intellectual engagement with issues, ability to analyse, assess, synthesise and move in seemingly contradictory directions. It thought creatively and independently around tough problems and persuaded membership through the logic of a position.

DECLINE OF RDGS

Why, then, did the RDGs decline and disappear?

Many believed that the research was not communicated to ordinary members and so proposals were not implemented on the ground. Remarked bargaining coordinator Alistair Smith: 'The RDGs started developing their own agendas. They were not articulated with collective bargaining processes… that is why they got schnied [abandoned] in the end. Worker leaders couldn't relate to this academic research. And so they stopped research and development, which was a fucking big mistake.'

Victor Kgalima, coordinator of Numsa's education and training unit, put it bluntly: 'I doubt that a lot of people understood these things. The issues were complex. We came from the tradition of simple demands.'

The RDGs were not elected constitutional structures and this sparked tension between them and elected bodies. Some elected leaders resented the research groups and complained about their study trips, time off work and the money spent on them.

Kgalima believed more time was needed to allow the research to filter down to members and that RDG participants should have taken on a big education role.

For research officer Geoff Schreiner 'the basic idea was good' but the complexity of issues meant leaders grappled with the concepts and often failed to communicate them to members.

Erwin took a different view: 'I think the RDGs were a successful approach. There were problems because as leadership we often ran ahead of rank and file. But I think that's a tension that you must live with. You can't remain where rank and file see things because at rank and file you've got an immense experiential richness, and you can take that and through dialogue and a process you can convert it into theory. But you can't just stay at that level, and say that's where we'll be.'

There was general agreement however that Numsa failed to mobilise its members and worker leaders on the implementation of RDG proposals. To communicate more complex policies, Schreiner argued, the union needed 'people who know the area, team leaders or research leaders, who have developed a bottom-up methodology and who interact well with people and build teams'.

Numsa needed time and resources to educate and consult workers on their priorities, and both were in short supply. By 1992 the RDGs were dead. Political events began absorbing union leaders' attention and they were often otherwise occupied in tripartite forums.

The ideas generated by these research groups however lingered in the union's memory and were revisited in a different manner in its future policy making and strategies. LB

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