

Shop stewardship

Some benefits?

Although being a shop steward is a voluntary position that you are elected into by members of your union, there are some benefits that come with it, writes **Nunurayi Mutyanda**.

In his book, the *Paradox of Victory*, Sakhela Buhlungu, alluded to the various benefits that came with full-time positions with the Congress of South Africa Trade Union (Cosatu) which he used as a case study. 'The introduction of full-time positions for workers holding union office such as full-time shop stewards and full-time office bearers has resulted in similar changes at the lower levels of the union. In such cases the perks that come with these full-time officers – such as cars, cell phones... provide the outward indication that those who occupy these positions are important people'.

Buhlungu assumes that all the above mentioned groups are accorded monetary benefits, but does this apply to all shop stewards? What sort of perks do shop stewards receive? Do union members become shop stewards in a bid to access the said perks? If not, what are the reasons for becoming shop stewards? Using National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), one of Cosatu's largest affiliates as a case study, I tried to establish the situation on the ground.

NO PERKS POLICY

Within Numsa all union structures have deliberated and agreed that there should be no monetary or

material benefits to shop stewards. In fact, it has been adopted as a resolution at one of the congresses. A senior local official Zikhali says: 'The matter was debated by all structures (local, regional and national). There is no resolution in the trade union (Numsa) that allows shop stewards to get any benefits other than those enjoyed by other employees in that workplace.'

This being the case, why then did Numsa structures adopt a resolution that there should be no benefits for shop stewards? Could it be that the union feels it does not have sufficient resources to cater for the large volumes of shop stewards? Or does the union feel it unfair to transfer the enormous liability to the plant?

While the financial constraints could be a factor, one of reasons was to stop the likely strife and jostling for the shop stewards' positions that will be created by the availability of perks. A senior official at regional level, Du Toit says: 'In the automobile sector shop stewards are put in a particular grade and this creates competition amongst employee[s] and you don't have stability. A shop steward will get the benefit of a car that is serviced by the company.'

Zikhali also made similar conclusions: 'If employees know that there are benefits, they will

stand for the position. It will also be difficult for employees to remove certain stewards who will use all within their means to stay in power.'

Thus the union structures saw it as unwise to introduce perks for shop stewards, fearing the strife that might ensue as members fight to undo each other in order to become shop stewards. So if shop stewards do not get benefits, why do members accept nominations and appointments to the position?

WHAT ATTRACTS WORKERS?

There are a number of factors why members want to become shop stewards. These seem to have nothing to do with material benefits or possibility for growth. The reasons range from political reasons, family influence as well as what Karl Von Holdt called the 'apartheid workplace'. Loan Davies, argued that, 'at every turn, African unions find themselves deeply involved in politics – a fact as true today as it was under the imperial administrators.' Thus the political arena had a significant influence on the behaviour of every facet of the economic social and psychological aspect of workers and the general populace in South Africa.

Writers such as Jeremy Baskin, Eddie Webster, Sakhela Buhlungu, and Martheanne Finnemore, argue that Cosatu entered into an alliance



Numsa shop stewards at a jobs conference.

with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC), similar to the one between the National Party and white unions, which goes a long way in showing how worker struggles and political struggles were knotted. It is against this background that workers became union members.

'Before I became a union member I was a revolutionary from a community-based organisation. As an SACP local secretary I was motivated to help others when I joined this company. I don't want to see people suffering, especially when I know that I can help using my knowledge, experience and understanding of the pain that people go through, which I gained during the struggle. So when I joined this company and saw how women were treated I decided to voice out whatever the situation,' said Sibongile a female shop steward.

According to Sibongile, gains from the struggle complemented workers' rights. It is in the political arena that members have learnt that they have particular rights and if they don't fight for them, no one will hand them to the workers on a

silver plate. Moreover, the statement by the shop steward shows that there is a tendency by society to oppress women. The political slogan of freedom for all then acted as a drive for the steward to fight for workers' rights.

A family plays an essential role in socialising members in society. It provides an opportunity for family members to influence each other and mould each other's character and beliefs along certain lines. It is through this process of socialisation that some shop stewards were influenced, as exemplified by the following statement from Maqoba: 'It was because of my brother. Most of my brothers were working in this industry and I liked the way they used to do things. I always wanted to defend people even when still at school. During my research I came to the conclusion that most workers from the company were from rural areas and came to Gauteng for greener pastures. They didn't even know their rights. Therefore, I wanted to be there to defend them and tell them about their rights.'

Maqoba's account shows that the workplace is not an even play ground. It seemed the powerful

and the clever always hunted for opportunities to abuse the weak. There seemed to be insincerity by the predominantly white-top-management in implementing fair labour practices.

A statement by Sanele, one of the shop stewards confirmed this: 'You experience problems in the department and feel that your case was not handled in the correct manner. For example, I was offered a position previously held by a white worker. They said I could not be promoted because I had never been in the army so my grade would remain the same.'

While shop stewards gave different reasons for becoming a union member and subsequently a shop steward, all their answers pointed to political influence, influence by family members as well as unfair labour practices at the workplace. However, there is a link between the country's political history and that of the workers' struggle that continue to shape workplace relationships. While members are motivated by other factors to become shop stewards, are they aware of benefits associated with this seemingly voluntary position?

BENEFITS

While political and family influences as well as the desire to correct 'the apartheid workplace' are the reasons why members choose to become shop stewards, they have their own understanding of benefits. While responding to the question pertaining to the benefits and perks that they receive as shop stewards, their answers indicated some measure of material expectation. All the nine male and two female shop stewards that were interviewed said they were getting nothing. The answers showed despair and hopelessness.

A reply by Methembe was rather conclusive: 'Shop stewards don't have benefits and are treated like other workers. There are no special benefits for shop stewards. You go in the office as shop stewards by being elected so it's up to you whether to agree or not but there are no benefits.'

Instead the position is one of sacrificing for better working conditions for workers. It is merely a moral obligation to struggle with management over issues that affect their (shop stewards) life as workers and the general workforce at the workplaces.

The workshops and labour education they receive as shop stewards was given a lower rating: 'The only thing I see as a benefit is the type of education or information I am exposed to. Getting exposed to all these labour laws and acts and the experience with getting to engage with management during deliberation, explained Thamsang.

That there exists a fully furnished office(s) designated for union use at most plants was not construed as a significant benefit that is only available to shop stewards. These offices are fully furnished with basic communication items and furniture and fittings like telephones, computers, fax machines, tables and chairs. These offices are for use by shop stewards and are paid for by the company.



Continuous learning: A shop steward takes notes at the jobs conference.

Regardless of absence of tangible benefits, shop stewards have considerable non-material benefits, which shop stewards made little or reference to during the interviews.

NON-MATERIAL BENEFITS

Shop stewardship comes with opportunities of a lifetime to some. Buhlungu rightly points out that most shop stewards have the privilege of spending days in state-of-the-art hotels attending regional, national or international meetings. There are various workshops

that allow shop stewards to take turns and attend and leave the workshops with bags and T-shirts and at sometimes with money from allowances.

During the interview period, I observed that some members of the Local Shop Steward Committee office bearers from Wadeville Local went to Germany for a gender workshop. The gender workshop aimed at improving the knowledge, attitudes and skills of trade union officials so as to create gender-responsive officials in trade unions,

across the globe for example shop stewards from Johannesburg flew to meetings in places like Cape Town. All these privileges cannot be enjoyed by ordinary union members.

The union expects the Shop Steward Council to enter into agreements at plant level that benefits the workers. Shop stewards are well educated in tactics to avoid being bought by management. It is this type of education that distinguishes a shop steward from ordinary union members as she becomes knowledgeable in the labour laws of the country. S/he is conversant with government blue prints like the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) and the Skills Development and Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

Ideally, this instils a culture of reading in shop stewards. Most will use the new information to further their studies in human resources and sometimes end up being human resources personnel in the sector. At one of the plants that the interviews were held, the industrial relations manager is a former shop steward.

Shop stewards are also taught skills and tactics to engage with management. They gain knowledge and approaches to present arguments and tackle management. They practise this during their tenure of office and sometimes become experts. Their engagement with management and other stakeholders give shop stewards a platform to showcase their talent and potential. This makes them the target for absorption by management and other interested parties.

Due to their role and good leadership skills, there are other opportunities in the offing for them; as one local office official noted: 'Shop stewards are getting first preference when opportunities arise to start businesses. As you know that the law has been

expanded, there is now the Broad Based Economic Empowerment (BBEE) Programme. If there is a certain department they want to outsource, they give first preference to shop stewards to become the BBEE in this company. They will say the reason why we want you to be part of this is your knowledge and experience you gained from the trade union.'

Thus by becoming a shop steward, one increases his/her chances of accessing other opportunities ahead of other ordinary members.

There are also a lot of opportunities that are available to shop stewards. The walk-through-the-open-door policy has given shop stewards permission and room to manoeuvre their way upward. Within the union itself, a quick run down through the Numsa constitution shows that there are a number of positions that are held by shop stewards or former shop stewards. At all structures, the local, regional and national, there are various committees where one or more shop stewards are elected.

Shop stewards can also stand for election to become the president of the union. The current president, Irvin Jim, is still a shop steward. Those shop stewards who showcase their potential by participating in the union structures, get opportunities to be absorbed in the civil services and other sectors. These potential absorptions have created what writers like Etienne Vlok and Buhlungu refer to as a brain drain that is affecting unions. These writers see no end in sight for such a brain drain.

CONCLUSION

It can therefore be concluded that shop stewards do not have monetary or physical rewards in all but one sector of Numsa. However, there seem to be a pool of opportunities and privileges shop stewards are exposed to.

Firstly, they have the privilege to stay in state-of-the-art hotels while attending union meetings and workshops. They do this on full pay. Shop stewards may also get opportunities to attend international workshops organised by the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) where Numsa is an affiliate. They return from these workshops with bags, T-shirts and other related allowances.

In terms of education, the workshops and meetings expose the shop stewards to labour laws (both local and international) as well as government blue prints that govern the relationship between workers and employers. Their role as shop stewards gives them diverse skills such as negotiating, organising, communicating and leadership. The shop stewards are taught a number of approaches and tactics to tackle management. These are life-time skills which they can apply in different arenas in their life. It also gives them the ability to explain issues and, as a result increase their chances of absorption into management or government.

The Numsa structure allows for shop stewards to stand for election at different levels. Being a shop steward is therefore just the starting point for leadership training. Opportunities to become politicians are at the disposal of shop stewards due to the close link between the ANC and Cosatu. Their role as shop stewards exposes them to these organisations and some end up absorbed by them. While they receive no material benefits shop stewards indeed do have rewards. These range from opportunities to influence which they can later use to get the material benefits that Buhlungu says the union gives them. ¹⁸

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