

What one hears instead is that 'the time was not ripe'. However, it is also clear that a developed class consciousness is not a *precondition* for establishing centralised bargaining: rather, centralised bargaining

provides a terrain on which workers consciousness of, and involvement in, broader social and economic issues can develop.

Centralised bargaining certainly has a role in our future,

if only because there is no other way to further develop collective bargaining and the economic and social role of trade unions. ☆

A decade of struggle at Mercedes

Full-time shopsteward MTUTUZELI TOM talks to Karl von Holdt

Between 1981 and 1989 there were two unions organising in the Mercedes factory - as there were in many factories in East London. One was the SA Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), an independent general union aligned with the 'national democratic struggle'. The other was National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU), an industrial union affiliated to the Federation of SA Trade Unions, which adopted an 'independent working class' policy.

When Mtutuzeli Tom, currently a full-time shopsteward at MBSA, started working in the factory in 1983, he first joined SAAWU. However, he quickly changed allegiances and joined NAAWU when he realised it was a big national industrial union which was part of the unity talks which would later give birth to COSATU. NAAWU was at that

time the majority union. However a year later its membership was dropping as SAAWU activists made inroads. "They attacked NAAWU for not being community based, for being affiliated to FOSATU."

"Survival of the fittest"

A year later, in 1985, management gave limited recognition to SAAWU shopstewards "in order to keep workers divided". "All through that period we were at loggerheads," says Tom. "Activists were motivating workers to join their union, putting their positions everywhere - in the trains, at the gates when workers went to buy food. It was survival of the fittest, it was a very healthy debate. In the train one comrade would put his position, then another would get up and oppose it. We were at loggerheads, we did not even greet each other.

There were not comradely relations."

The arguments centred on registration of unions, affiliation to FOSATU, general unionism versus industrial unionism. "SAAWU was claiming to follow the Congress line, supporting SACTU. We also understood SACTU started trade unions. Our argument was, why don't you come as revolutionaries and join the masses in these unions, and challenge those whom you call 'reactionaries and bureaucrats'?"

All the activists supported the ANC and SACP. "The only difference was on trade unions." But these divisions and others plagued East London politics - in the early 1980s women's and youth organisations split into two, although they all shared a Charterist political orientation.

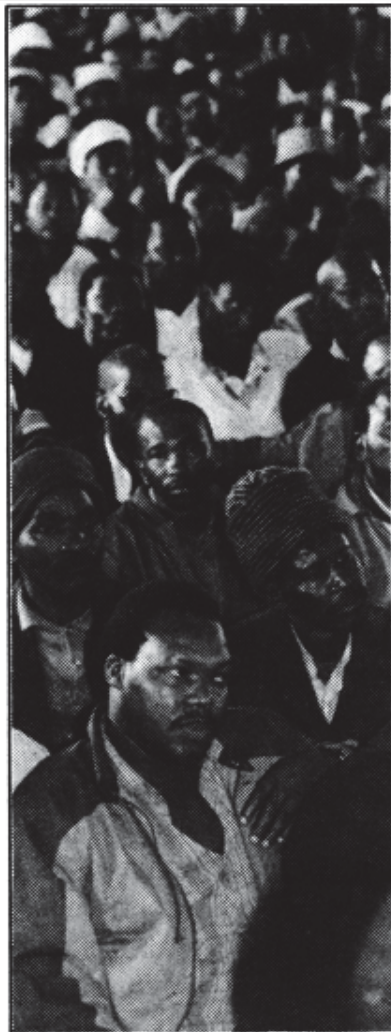
Worker activists were often also youth activists. It seems

that SAAWU activists tended to be closer to the EL Youth Organisation, while NAAWU activists were involved in the rival EL Youth Congress.

For example, Msitheli Non-yukela was elected chair of the NUMSA shopstewards at Mercedes in 1985. At the time he was publicity secretary for the EL Youth Congress, and later its president. Tom was elected vice-chair at Mercedes in the same year, and was also an ELYCO activist with a history of COSAS activism. ELYCO actually paid for a group of Mercedes workers to go to COSATU's launching rally.

The launch of COSATU as a giant federation in November 1985 gave a boost to NAAWU: "COSATU was a weapon in recruiting. We told workers NAAWU was part of COSATU and the whole working class - COSATU was supported by the ANC and the SACP. People didn't want to be isolated, so they joined us."

After the launch of COSATU, NAAWU was involved in talks with Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) - also a FOSATU affiliate - and Motor Industries and Components Workers Union (MICWU), a former TUCSA affiliate. "The Eastern Cape comrades pushed for SAAWU to be included, for the unity of the workers. It was difficult to persuade the others because SAAWU was not strong in other areas, but eventually the other unions agreed." But at the launching congress of NUMSA in 1987 SAAWU failed to submit



MBSA workers listen to their union and political leaders

Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin

membership figures and was barred, "despite the arguments of Eastern Cape comrades".

The marathon 1987 strike

Then came the "historical moment" of the 1987 strike: "we were stimulated by the living wage resolution at the launching congress, we wanted to show our appreciation of our leaders' hard work in establishing our giant union." The strike was planned a month in advance, in H plant, and activists were deployed to other sites to discuss it. H plant is the body shop, where production starts. Workers were demand-

ing a minimum wage of R5, way above the new minimum of R3,25 established at the Eastern Province Industrial Council.

"The IC established minima, there was nothing to stop a bigger increase at MBSA - but management refused to bargain at plant level." At this stage "it was NUMSA everywhere, NUMSA in every corner." Workers downed tools in H site at tea time on 3 August. By the following day 1 800 were on strike. The next day, production was suspended, and all workers joined the strike.

The strike lasted a marathon 9 weeks, during which management tried every trick to avoid meeting workers' demands (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 13 No 1).

Tom has vivid recollections: "I still remember coming out of the doors of the plant, after meeting with management. The workers were there in their thousands, sitting in the sun, some with umbrellas. As we appeared they started whistling, coming together, so that they were ready even before we reached the stage. It was dead quiet, they listened to every word, you could see in their eyes they were committed. If we had said at any stage that this is a waste of time, lets go back to work, some of them would have fallen over dead. They were that committed."

Eventually agreement was reached on a R4,50 minimum, a 42% increase. Workers went back with the highest wages in the auto industry.

Challenging management

"The strike changed many things. Workers had unity, and confidence in their strength, their shopstewards and the union. NUMSA became very powerful. Workers felt they could control the plant. Workers also developed a clear understanding of discipline. They saw that the organisation was not there to defend drinking or theft or fighting - you cannot use the militancy of workers to defend a drunken person." The union also won the right for shopstewards to be elected from constituencies, rather than in a lunch-time general meeting.

Throughout 1988 the workers used their new found power to challenge management. There were frequent stoppages. "Management was very repressive. There was a lot of racism, insults, unfair discipline. Workers would simply down tools when this happened."

SAAWU, NUMSA in battle

In the middle of 1988 a shop-floor battle erupted between NUMSA supporters and SAAWU supporters. The spark was a decision by NUMSA members to stage solidarity action with dismissed NUMSA workers at an MBSA supplier. They refused to handle components from this factory. "Management started bringing in workers from other sections to handle these components, and they were identified as SAAWU members. The comrades decided to strike. They marched to all sites to say, 'Join the

strike'. There was resistance from SAAWU members. There was a terrible fight, people were stabbed and injured. We decided to suspend the strike, we had to heal the rift."

Eighteen workers were dismissed for their role in the battle, including Nonyukela.

At the end of 1988 the company realised that industrial relations was completely out of control (see pp...), and called in consultants. The management team was changed and industrial relations was restructured. "Things improved after that, although there were still many problems. We had to challenge many things." As a sign of the new approach management was prepared to negotiate the return of 17 of the workers who were dismissed after the

shopfloor battle (the eighteenth, Nonyukela, became NUMSA regional secretary). During 1989 the union negotiated a new agreement with the company, hailed as one of the most advanced agreements in the country. It gives the union the right to strike without dismissals, the right to picket, and commits both parties to avoid using provisions of the Labour Relations Act.

Another development in early 1989 was the final integration of SAAWU into NUMSA in East London. New shopsteward elections were held, and both former SAAWU and former NUMSA members were elected. This seemed to promise a new era of unity in the factory - a promise which was rudely shattered by the events of August and September this year. ☆

Coloured and white workers

According to Tom, "The coloured comrades have helped build the organisation we have today. They have a long history in the plant, going back to the days of NUMARWOSA, before it helped to form NAAWU. They are a corner-stone, no-one can take them away from the union. In fact, they were at the forefront in the 1988 battle." Some coloured workers did participate in the sleep-in though.

Unlike many factories, at MBSA African and coloured workers do the same jobs, and there are more African artisans. There are also some white workers doing the same jobs on the assembly lines. About 15 have joined NUMSA - "because NUMSA negotiates conditions of employment and reports back on this. They do not see Yster and Staal doing this." But while the white workers may join the union they do not support the struggle against apartheid: "They are not comrades," says Tom.

He contrasts this with the Volkswagon plant, where workers elected one "white comrade" as a shopsteward. Workers later decided he should stand down, because he was being threatened in his white neighbourhood.