

Did Numsa's strategy hit its targets?

*It has been ten years since the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa) introduced its much heralded three-year bargaining strategy and skills-based grading system. The strategy will be debated at the union's upcoming national congress in September. In the interim, the **Labour Bulletin** spoke to the union and those associated with the strategy to see if it has delivered the desired results and how the union plans to engage in the current round of wage negotiations.*

Influenced by Australian trade union researchers, Numsa decided to adopt a new collective bargaining strategy which sought to link wages to skills training, changes to the grading system and job security. Viewed at the time as a radical shift in the approach to collective bargaining the change occurred against a backdrop of major restructuring (and job losses) taking place in the sectors in which the union was organising.

The strategy sought to 'reorganise' grading along skills (and not task) lines, and push for more and better training that created career-paths for workers. It was expected that with more training, workers would gain more skills and be eligible to move up and across the various jobs in the industry and economy. Better trained workers would enable better utilisation of human resources, efficient organisation of work, bring about improvements in

productivity, help to make companies more viable and competitive, and therefore bring about job security. The strategy therefore aimed for this crucial link between wages, skills/training, grading reforms, work organisation and job security.

Numsa's collective bargaining co-ordinator, Bafana Ndebele, says that the strategy has been partially successful in automobile manufacturing and the tyre industry where a five grade system is in place. The problem in these two sectors, he says, however, is that workers get stuck at level 4 and very few move up to level 5 (artisan level). The situation in metal and engineering has been very different with little success being achieved in implementing the strategy. Bafana says that in 2000, the union agreed to a voluntary approach to the implementation of the strategy because of the diverse nature of the sector and

the cost implications of moving to a five grade system. With the introduction of the metal and engineering sector education and training authority – Merseta – the costs should however, be reduced.

A former Numsa official says that in the early years those involved in developing the strategy argued that its success was being hampered by a lack of institutional and policy framework. However, that is no longer the case with the introduction of the Skills Development Act and other institutions. He argues that the strategy has not worked because the union did not drive it hard enough. It required the constant commitment of the union's senior leadership and it is questionable whether that was present.

Ndebele says that it was not a question of commitment but rather that a repeated change in leadership affected the union badly and created

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instability. This affected the implementation of the strategy as the centre was supposed to drive it. In addition, Bafana says the strategy required proper co-ordination between and within regions. It is as a result of the numerous problems that the union decided in 2000 that the strategy should be reviewed. If the strategy is retained, he says, it will be decided upon at the September national congress.

Ndebele's views are endorsed by a number of formal Numsa officials who were involved in driving the strategy. They argue that once the strategy was developed, the new leadership (at the time) became distracted and failed to drive it forward. It is also questionable however, whether they had sufficient intimate knowledge of the strategy as opposed to those who developed it. Attempts to drive the strategy also

small employers and family businesses it is critical that workers are protected by a basic set of minimum standards while at the same time enabling workers to negotiate at plant level on other issues not covered by the main agreement.

The further entrenchment of centralised bargaining and other developments since the early 1990s has led to a paradigm shift, he says, which poses both challenges and threats for the union. He says unions have not been able to adjust sufficiently to the paradigm shift (away from the adversarial 1980s) to see where the opportunities and constraints are. The challenges facing unions are different and things are not so clear cut as they were in the 80s 'when we knew who our enemy was'. Now it is not always clear, he says, and very much depends on the

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reveal however, that it is a good guideline for sector level negotiations but ultimately, its success depends on strong company or shopfloor level engagement. This would then imply sufficient capacity building amongst shop stewards and proper buy-in from employers.

Did the strategy fail or succeed? What strides have been made? Does the strategy remain relevant? These questions will be answered at the congress.

Centralised bargaining

Ndebele says the union remains committed to centralised bargaining. For example, he says, in the engineering sector, where there are

specific issue being dealt with.

Ndebele says these dynamics manifest themselves in different ways on the shopfloor. For example, the type of shop stewards we have today are different from those in the 1980s as is the case with local organisers. Shop stewards today are far too dependent on their organisers as, at times, they do not have the basic knowledge of the labour laws. This is of course a case of education. Local organisers are increasingly spending their time dealing with the CCMA, handling disciplinary cases. The union, he says, is attempting to deal with this capacity issue to ensure improved service delivery to members on the ground.



*The SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) is currently embroiled in disputes in a number of sectors. The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to the union's collective bargaining co-ordinator **Fachmy Abrahams** to find out how negotiations are progressing and to get a sense of the union's collective bargaining strategy.*