

**F**rame Textiles is the largest textile manufacturer in SA, employing some 8 000 workers in the cluster of factories at Frametex, Pinetex and Seltex at New Germany, Pinetown, as well as factories in Durban and Ladysmith. But Frame is not only the largest textile group, it was also the scene of one of the toughest recognition battles in the history of our labour movement.

In 1973 thousands of Frame workers participated in the strike wave (see p20). At that time some 30 000 people worked for Frame. For thirteen years after that they

# Frame: *shopstewards make proposals*

continued to struggle for the recognition of their union, the National Union of Textile Workers (since merged with other unions to form the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union, SACTWU). Finally, after strikes, dismissals and a series of court cases, the union won recognition in 1986.

With recognition came dramatic changes. The company was listed on the stock exchange, conservative senior management was replaced by what union president Amon Ntuli calls “moderates”, and relations improved. New management had to “face facts”, negotiate with the union and improve wages and conditions.

But not all the workers could share in the fruits of the struggle they had all fought together. Whereas Philip Frame’s philosophy had been to employ as many as possible but pay as little as possible, the new management adopted a philosophy of ‘A better future for fewer workers’. There have been several waves of retrenchments to reduce the workforce.

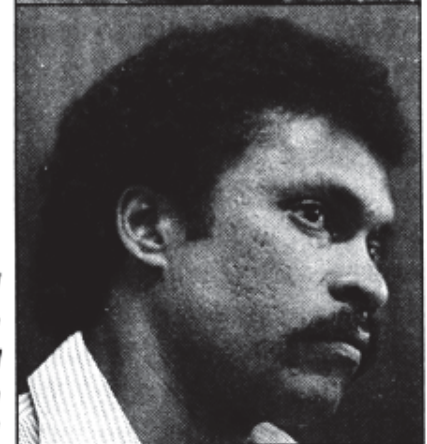
Management also assessed the profitability of various sections, and closed a number of factories. The introduction of new spinning and weaving technology also took its toll.

Now some 8 000 workers work for Frame. Management took us on a tour through the spinning and weaving mills on the Frametex site. We passed banks and banks of blending,

*Amon Ntuli,  
SACTWU  
president and  
senior  
shopsteward  
at Frame  
Photo: William  
Matlala*



*Shopsteward  
Purin  
Jankipershad  
Photo: William  
Matlala*



drawing and spinning machines through which the bales of cotton and artificial fibre are spun into yarn. We then went through the weaving mills, where row after row of looms spew out cloth. Figures of workers move up and down tending the machines. The mills are enveloped in unceasing rhythmic sound, like a mechanical sea – this impression is reinforced by the rising and falling motion of the looms, and the cotton dust like white spray through which the workers move.

It is difficult to believe, seeing the cluster of factories, the rows of machines with hundreds of workers tending them, producing kilometres of yarn and piles of cloth, that the company is in “survival mode”. But it is. Over the past two



*Police confront Frame strikers in 1980: one of the many disputes on the long march to improved working conditions and recognition of their union*

*Photo: Courtesy of Historical Papers, Wits University*

years Frame has made no profit. Management is battling with cheap imports, with trying to enter highly competitive international markets, with trying to cut costs.

### **Getting cheaper**

"The only way we can survive is to get cheaper," says Spinning Business Unit chief executive Dave Duncan. "The big trick is to get the real world onto the shopfloor. Aspirations are out of tune with reality." Getting cheaper means doing things better, improving technology and training – as well as cutting labour costs and ending the disruption of mass action.

Group human resources manager Quentin Baxter echoes these concerns. He believes the union leadership understands the crisis in the textile industry, but questions whether union

membership has the ability to do so. "The union has a tremendous role to play in changing the industry. Management and the union will have to look at how we become a least-cost producer. Labour costs are a major factor. We have to look at wages. Our concerns centre on unrealistic aspirations."

### **Restructure management**

SACTWU shopstewards at Frame tend to define the issues differently. According to Amon Ntuli, SACTWU president and senior shopsteward at Frametex, there have been "tremendous achievements and changes in favour of workers" since recognition in 1986. "Our relationship with management on a day-to-day basis is not really an issue. But we do believe the industry must be restructured, and that includes management. From top to

bottom management has been structured by apartheid. We have foremen, managers and directors who don't qualify. We need to restructure in terms of real knowledge and capability, and providing proper training for workers. Then we will achieve better productivity."

Both Ntuli and shopsteward Puran Jankipershad are monthly paid staff members.

Ntuli was a weekly paid worker until recently. The monthly paid bargaining unit was organised in 1989 (see LABOUR BULLETIN Vol 17 No 2). They say because monthly paid staff are closer to management it is easier for them to spot management problems. They feel there are too many managers and many lack ability and motivation. "If there is no motivation at the top there will be no motivation at the bottom," says Jankipershad. Although the workforce has been reduced to a third of its size, the number of managers has increased dramatically, according to Ntuli. "If they close a company they retrench the workers, but they transfer half the managers." Managers get high salaries and company cars. "If they are serious about the crisis they should look at their structures first."

Baxter believes such views are "often due to misperceptions".

He also says it is management's responsibility to manage, but he believes that it is important for management to discuss and explain its structures with the union and all employees. One of the big challenges facing the company, he believes, is to change the management style: "management needs to be educated. With affirmative action an African management style will come in". What does this mean? "We have only the vague outlines of something that can be developed. Most foremen are black and they cannot impose an

authoritarian or instruction type of style. Communication in the mother tongue is also important."

The shopstewards are also concerned about the role of line management, but they believe this is part of a deeper management crisis. "The foremen and supervisors were always made to feel like gods over the shopfloor workers," says Ntuli. "But their authority is

challenged on the shopfloor. The weekly paid workers are stronger than the monthly paid. They see the monthly paid as management's boys. The monthly paid also see themselves like that. At the same time senior management is confused, so line management gets nothing from above and nothing from below." The



Dave Duncan (left) and Quentin Baxter of Frame management

Photo: William Matlala

shopstewards say these conflicts prevent supervisors and foremen from playing the role of a shopfloor leadership – they fear criticism and they fear stoppages.

This view was echoed by one of the managers who took us around the plant. He told us that the political unrest was very disruptive for production. When asked what that meant, he said "For example, when the foremen exert their authority or discipline, they are warned that they will find trouble at home. Their windows will be smashed or something."

### "Reviving the confidence of line management"

The fact that the union has organised a majority of monthly paid workers at Frame has brought these issues into the organisation. Shopstewards have made ambitious proposals to tackle the problem. They want the monthly paid workers to attend workshops at the union, shift by shift, where they will learn how to handle their role and their relation with the weekly paid workers. The union wants the

company to provide a paid days leave for workers to attend the workshop to ensure that all are present.

The shopstewards say the workshop would have three aims:

- To revive the confidence of line management. "They have lost confidence because they have been pushed around. They need to gain confidence in themselves and in the company."
- Line management should change their approach as managers. "Their training as supervisors was shaped by apartheid - to suppress fellow workers. This must change. You do not get good production out of people through harshness."
- Although the majority of the monthly paid workers have joined the union, it only communicates with them during negotiations. "We need a day to look at the rights and role of these workers in relation to the higher management and in relation to the weekly paid workers. This can help solve some of the productivity problems." "We need to change the attitude of the

monthly paid workers to the weekly paid workers," says Jankipershad, "as well as their attitude to production. The foremen are the key in getting the message to the weekly paid workers." He claims the union's proposal to run a workshop for monthly paid workers was made more than a year ago, but management has not responded. "I believe management is not ready," he says. Top management knows the problems and they feel threatened."

Baxter raises some similar issues in relation to the company's programme of multiskilling workers. "The implication is that workers gain a better understanding of processes and of workloading, of the number of people needed. They will also learn tolerance for other people's work." However he is much more cautious about the need for changing the role of the supervisor. "Eventually, yes, multiskilling would create the possibility for that," he concludes.

In fact skills and training may be the area where the views of management and shopstewards converge the most – but still with significant differences. Both agree that

### Frame: responding to the textile crisis

Over the past three years Frame Textiles – the largest textile group in SA – has been experiencing the competitive pressure of cheap imports as tariffs have been lifted. "The only way we can survive is to get cheaper," says spinning chief executive Dave Duncan. "We have to reduce costs every day and every week." Frame has made no profit over the past two years.

The company has already undergone "really big changes" – rationalising, closing down under-utilised plants – and is aggressively pursuing the export market. Still, Frame will have to further rationalise in the face of cheap competition from the Pacific Rim countries such as India, Malaysia and Pakistan. "Labour is cheaper – R150 per month. Their technology is different and productivity is higher," says Duncan.

Cutting costs means changing the way

things are done, investing in technology where possible ("we don't have the capital") – and reducing labour costs. According to Frame human resources manager Quentin Baxter, "Labour costs are a major factor. The problem is that worker aspirations are out of touch with the reality of wages around the world."

Frame already exports "a lot" of yarn but does not show profit on this because of cheap prices. The company is "aggressively" pursuing international niche markets in fabric and cloth, but this requires costly marketing infrastructure.

Frame believes there has to be an element of protection for the SA textile industry while companies modernise and restructure so as to become world competitive. A lot will depend on the policies of a future government. "The trick at the moment is to survive. It is a holding action," says Duncan. ♦

developing skills is the key to increasing productivity, but they disagree on whether company training is adequate. Baxter says the company is embarking on a two year programme to ensure that every person has the level of skills required for his or her job. He adds that Frame has the most advanced operative training programme in the country and that it is used by other textile companies.

But Ntuli says the training is inadequate. "Four weeks to train a weaver is ridiculous compared to training overseas."

### **Worker participation**

While both management and shopstewards have concerns about management style, the role of supervisors, and the need for training and skills, these exist

within a framework of fundamental disagreement about the degree of worker participation in management decision making. For management the main forum for worker participation appears to be the green areas.

"We have a high level of communication on the shopfloor," says Baxter. "Communication is the key. In some factories the green areas work better, and in others not so well, but we always have that sort of discussion ongoing."

However for Ntuli green areas are completely inadequate. Shopstewards want to see worker participation in decision making much higher up in the company. "Green areas are not the place to reach a good relationship and to communicate. If workers want to raise an issue to management they have no right to do so. But when management wants to raise an issue they call the workers to the green area. The manager decides whether the green area should meet monthly, weekly or daily. Many problems are raised and not addressed."

Weekly paid shopsteward Columbus Mbutho also argues vigorously against the

green areas. "Management uses them to try to undermine the confidence of workers in the union," he says. "But we achieve nothing through the green areas. Management uses them if they want to brief us about production or about 'no work no pay'. Ntuli says the green areas were instituted unilaterally without discussing it with the union. "If they want to deal with problems they should talk through

the union. They should channel it through the shopstewards," he says.

Ntuli believes the problems facing the company will only be resolved if labour can sit with the board of directors. He wants equal participation in making decisions about the company. "There may be a need to take very sore decisions, for example retrenchments or short time. Workers

should be involved in those problems and decisions. Then everyone will realise they need to dedicate their lives to their job and do it properly as it should be done."

It may be that exclusion from company decision-making contributes to the everyday tension and conflict that shopstewards experience on the shopfloor despite the relatively good relation between the union and management at Frame. Weekly paid shopsteward Nosipho Msomi, for example, told us shopstewards have to "fight like mad" over discipline. She says managers often breach the recognition agreement, especially with new shopstewards. "If I am not there as the senior shopsteward, the manager can easily pressurise an ordinary shopsteward."

She tells of one worker who had worked for the company for 20 years. She was dismissed for stealing half a toilet roll. "The manager took no notice of her service or the production she has done in 20 years. He simply dismissed her. She was only taken back after appeal. This means there is no friendship between us and



*Weekly-paid shopstewards Nosipho Msomi (left), and Columbus Mbutho*

*Photo: William Matlala*

management." Msomi complains that when the managers act unprocedurally, they do not get a warning whereas shopstewards who do so are given warnings.

### Complex tensions

Together with everything else in SA, Frame is undergoing transition. The bobbins in the spinning mills spin and spin, singing like insects in a forest. The looms crash and crash like a mechanical sea. Workers move up and down, up and down, tending the rows of machines. As night falls the day shift leaves the factory in a flurry of noise and rushes to the taxis. The night shift workers clock in – unlike the real forest or real sea, night never falls here, under the factory lights.

But underlying this apparent order and regularity are complex tensions. The union has a stable collective bargaining relationship with management. Yet on the shopfloor there are conflicts over discipline, over authority and the role of the supervisors and foremen, over 'participation' and communication.

All of this is linked to a fundamental difference over participation and decision-making. Both management and shopstewards agree that the textile industry is facing a crisis, that Frame is in "survival mode". Management knows it needs the support of the union and workers in order to survive and grow. But it sees this support in a narrow way:

- Union involvement in the tripartite forum on restructuring the industry;
- union involvement in getting the "reality" of lower wages and increased productivity onto the shopfloor;
- worker co-operation with managers in solving productivity problems in "green areas";

- generally a higher level of co-operation created by a new "management style" which puts more emphasis on communication and partnership.

The shopstewards argue for much more far-reaching change. The workers' demands for more radical participation are fuelled by the



*The day-shift heads for home, while in the factory, the night-shift workers clock-in, ready to take their places at the machines*

*Photo: William Matlala*

experience of exclusion and oppression under apartheid: "It is all caused by apartheid," says Columbus Mbutho. "Management believes a black man has got black brains."

Shopstewards want disclosure of information about finances, customers, markets and production. They want equal participation in all decision-making about the company. They want to fundamentally re-organise the relation between management and workers.

If that happens, says Ntuli, "everyone will dedicate their lives to the job. If not, management won't get the confidence of the workers at Frame Group."

However, Ntuli believes there is a "no movement" in the direction of equal decision making "only talk". He says this is a chance to stabilise the company, but that top management does not want to confront the issues. "We like Frame and we want to work," he says. "We have no hidden agendas." ☆