

ISCOR violence: *union splits,* *shopstewards die*

SNUKI ZIKALALA traces the events leading to the brutal killings of National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) shopstewards in the Vaal earlier this year.

On 5 June 1992, a NUMSA leader was performing his routine duties at Kwamasiza flats in Sebokeng, distributing toilet paper. France Monakedi did not know his life was in danger. But three assassins were admitted into the flats and shot him.

"They shot ten AK47 bullets into him and made sure he was dead before they left," says Iscor's hostel manager, Dries Steenkamp.

After Monakedi's death, NUMSA's shopstewards left Kwamasiza flats, now controlled by an anti-NUMSA faction, the 'Top 20'. So far eight NUMSA stalwarts have been murdered.

NUMSA was previously so well organised at Iscor that it was able to force the company to build an entire zone of family flats, Kwamasiza, to house workers at Sebokeng. Rent for company housing dropped from R48,50 to R20 a month. The union got Iscor to implement job descriptions for workers as well as training and medical schemes, provident funds and annual leave. Since 1987 the minimum wage has been raised from R349 to R981.

Because of the level of organisation at Iscor, the NUMSA shopstewards' council was the driving force in building the ANC and the civics in the township. They organised

marshals for rallies and demonstrations from 1987. When residents decided, in 1988, to form defence committees, they turned to the NUMSA shopstewards.

But the union's gains are now in jeopardy. This year Iscor's management unilaterally decided upon the annual wage increase without consulting NUMSA and the workers. NUMSA shopstewards now do not venture into what was once their stronghold – the Kwamasiza hostel.

Internal problems began to develop in 1988. According to NUMSA shopsteward, Livingstone Mthonga, from the 'Top 20' faction, workers were unhappy with the three-day national stayaway, which resulted in the dismissal of 134 workers. Till late 1989, workers demanded shopstewards fight for the reinstatement of the dismissed workers. They felt shopstewards were not ensuring dismissed workers received provident fund pensions.

Management proposals aggravate tensions

In early March 1990, Iscor management proposed that the 190 NUMSA shopstewards should attend a seminar on the Omega quality circle programme, a variation of the new

Japanese management style stressing worker participation. Some shopstewards and most of the rank and file opposed this.

At a meeting in Autumn 1990 between shopstewards and workers to discuss Omega, most workers voted against participation. Senior shopstewards disregarded this, which angered workers. As Maxwell Qangase*, a worker-leader, put it: "Ndamase and the other shopstewards are now managers."

In June 1990, a meeting of 500 dissatisfied workers demanded the resignation of the four shopstewards. Eight workers, some former shopstewards, were elected as an interim committee. However, NUMSA's regional congress overturned their decision and continued to recognise the previous

shopstewards' committee. Tensions within the union began to get out of control.

According to Lucas Tabane, NUMSA's regional organiser, the meeting held by the 500 workers was unconstitutional - it did not constitute a quorum and shopstewards should be elected at plant level meetings.

Attitudes harden

Immediately after this, Inkatha supporters who had been ejected from Kwamasiza launched two attacks on NUMSA members. This made the issue of defence committees - and who controlled them - even more pressing.

On 22 September a powerful local political figure, former MK operative and ex-Robben Islander, Ernest Sotsu, addressed workers at

* Qangase was shot dead at Sebokeng Hostel on 22 October and his body burnt

The Omega Man

Iscor management defends Omega

"Omega is what we call participative management. It gives workers a chance to participate in all decision-making processes. Omega, our quality circle concept, is not the reason for dissatisfaction among our employees.

Omega was introduced to Iscor's white workers in 1983 and to blacks in 1988. Quality circles is a foreign concept to South Africans; that is why we started introducing it to skilled workers, who are whites.

So far, 70% of white workers have accepted Omega, and 12% of blacks. In Omega, workers are practically involved in problem solving.

Some of the union shopstewards were working in the department of Omega as facilitators. That may have created an impression that these shopstewards were promoting it.

In 1988, we had a five-day conference with the shopstewards, where we introduced Omega. The shopstewards were very sceptical. We asked them to sell it to the workers, but most workers rejected the idea. NUMSA's official position is that

they are neither for or against Omega. They see it as management's tool and won't participate in it.

At Iscor we failed to convey the Omega programme properly to black workers. 60% of our black force is not well educated. To train a man in Omega with its financial concepts, brainstorming principles, is difficult. Later we discovered we should have started giving our workers basic literacy training, so they could understand certain concepts. It was a costly mistake.

Participative management can bring about magnificent results. If a person feels he is taking part in the decision-making of the company, he changes his whole attitude to the company. It becomes 'us' and not 'them'.

At Iscor we have an advantage because the company belongs to the workers. The majority of workers own shares. When the government sold the company, Iscor gave 200 free shares to every employee and a discount of 20% for shares bought by workers. We want workers to feel they own the company and can take decisions, but this can only be done through Omega.

Kwamasiza hostel. According to Ndamase, Sotsu told workers NUMSA was ineffectual and undemocratic, and that workers had the right to democratically elect shopstewards in general meetings. He called for the "elimination" of the current shopstewards' council and said civics should negotiate directly with management on housing issues.

Says senior shopsteward, Michael Maloka: "Sotsu's intervention added fuel into the fire. Workers were agitated and demanded we be removed from our elected positions. We don't even know who invited him to this meeting. He is not a worker and yet he talked on behalf of the workers."

At Sotsu's suggestion, some Sebokeng residents urged workers in Kwamasiza to form block committees and self-defence units

(SDUs) under the banner of the Sebokeng Civic Association instead of depending upon NUMSA's shopstewards.

According to NUMSA shopsteward Daniel Makgele, "there was a problem when block committees wanted to meet Iscor management to put civic demands. They were turned back and conflict arose between the block committees and our shopsteward council."

Regional congress reverses shopstewards' suspension

NUMSA held a regional congress on 24-25 April 1991. This reversed the suspension of the NUMSA shopstewards involved in the Omega programme and dissolved the anti-NUMSA Interim Committee of 8, which was now called the 'Top 20'.

NUMSA and the current problems

We are concerned about NUMSA. My opinion is that workers became disillusioned with their leadership. It is alleged that NUMSA never consulted with workers. The shopstewards took decisions on their own, without a mandate.

This is what the other group is saying.

The other problem is that there are personality problems related to ethnic differences inside Kwamasiza. The fight was between the Pondos and the Pandomse which eventually led to the breakaway and to the violence.

Workers lost confidence in the shopstewards and demanded new elections, but NUMSA refused. There are allegations that we gave them cars, houses and walkie-talkies. It is true we gave them certain things but it was to promote good working relations. This made workers suspect they were being bought.

Productivity has not been affected

I am not really surprised the violence has not affected our productivity. Once workers get into the factory there is no sign of conflict. Iscor has very strict rules against violence and intimidation inside the company.

We are very concerned about what is

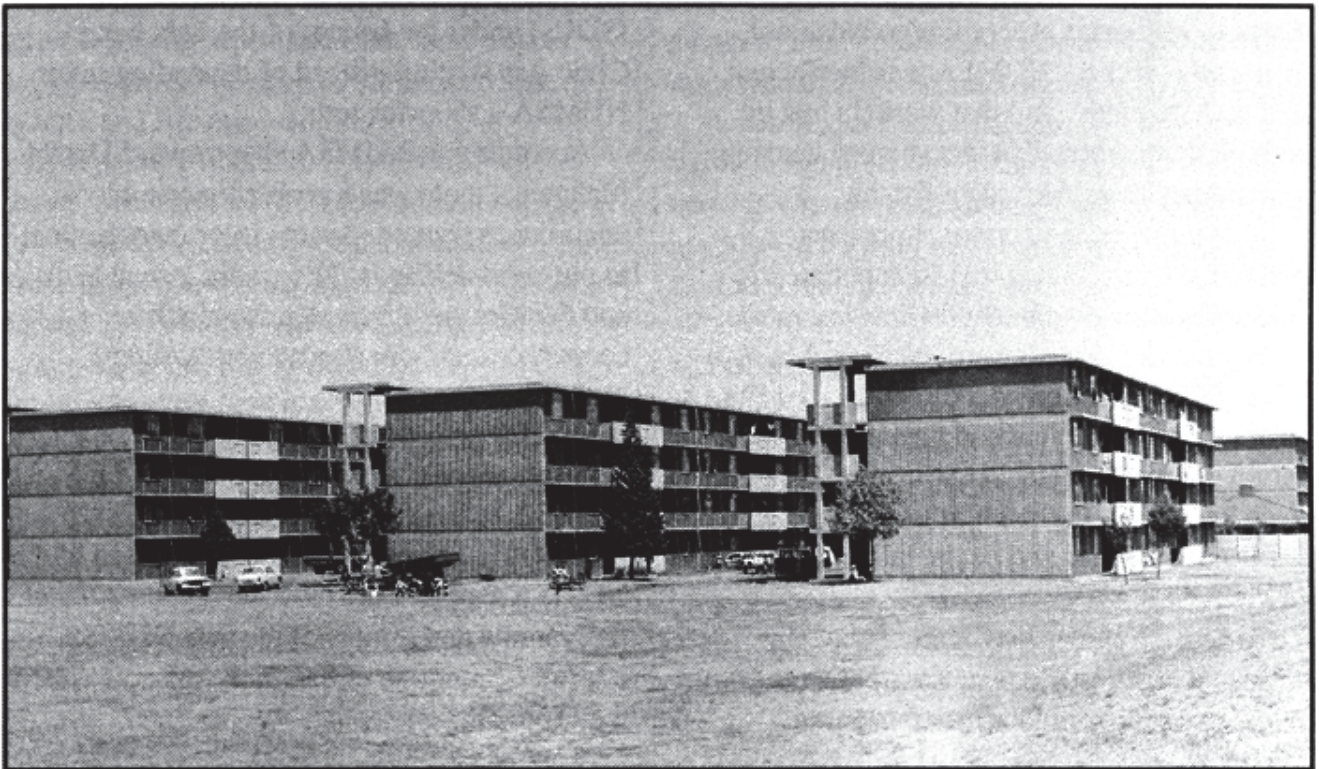
happening after work, that is why we have increased our security within the hostels. We protect workers when they travel with our buses, but we can't go inside the flats or hostels and search for armaments. We are not really responsible for what happens inside the flats. That is the work of the SAP.

On the breakaway group

Iscor has accepted one principle; it is best to have no union, and the second best thing is to have one strong union. The worst thing you can have is two or three unions. This is a very important industrial relations principle. In a split union you get an agreement with one of the unions and the other one runs away. I am not saying we are going to recognise SAAWU, we are far from it.

SAAWU has handed over 2 500 stop orders. We have a recognition criteria at Iscor; a union must be registered and SAAWU is not. We will not give them stop orders.

We begged NUMSA for months to solve this problem. NUMSA reacted very slowly. We are worried about who we are going to negotiate with. Wage negotiations are around the corner. All we need is a strong union and that is NUMSA. ♦



Kwamasiza flats: scene of death for NUMSA shopstewards

Photo: William Matlala

Congress resolutions were communicated to workers in a general meeting on 1 September 1991 addressed by regional office-bearers and a NUMSA head office representative.

Says Sam Maqhubela, a 'Top 20' member: "This was the last straw. We were told the decision was final and those who were against it had the right to leave the union. It was outrageous. The majority of us could not accept it. We felt congress was imposing people we had no confidence in."

This decision had a negative effect on the workforce. Workers became more divided and consolidated their factions around another power struggle that was developing.

In July 1991, Sotsu's wife and two children were shot while he was attending the ANC consultative conference in Durban. Sotsu was taken into Sebokeng hostel by supporters.

After the massacre of Sotsu's family, a meeting was called at Kwamasiza, where the supporters of the NUMSA shopstewards – under whose control the SDU's fell – were disarmed.

The 'Top 20' sided with Sotsu. The union split into two opposing factions.

MK members in Sebokeng initially involved

in training the SDUs also sided with Sotsu. This exacerbated the conflict.

NUMSA shopstewards marginalised

NUMSA could no longer take up worker-related issues with the management, which used the conflict situation for its own ends. There were dismissals without representation. Rental at the flats was increased without notice. Shopstewards were increasingly viewed with suspicion by workers.

The 'Top 20' seized the moment to 'represent' workers. They met management on several occasions and discussed workers' problems. To a large extent they co-operated with management. Most workers did not respond to the 1991 anti-Vat campaign strike or the 3-4 August 1992 mass campaign action.

The minutes of a meeting on 26 November 1991, when the 'Top 20' asked management to disregard the official shopstewards' committee and recognise them as the official worker representatives. Management advised the 'Top 20' to form a workers' council.

NUMSA takes a firm stand

On 28 March 1992, the Vanderbijlpark



Jeffrey Ndamase (centre) leader of NUMSA shopstewards at Iscor, now on the run

Photo: William Matlala

NUMSA local council expelled 'Top 20' members from the union and informed management.

According to regional organiser Lucas Tabane, this decision was taken after the 'Top 20' failed to appear before a disciplinary inquiry in mid-March 1992. "We were going to discuss the manner in which they were undermining shopstewards, disregarding union structures and the destructive role they were playing."

The expulsions were not taken lightly. Some of the 'Top 20' members were founder members of NUMSA at Iscor and senior shopstewards. They could not accept they were no longer members of their union. They mobilised more vigorously against the older shopstewards' committee and their lawyers appealed against their expulsions.

There followed a series of well-planned killings of top NUMSA shopstewards and activists:

- On 5 May 1992, senior NUMSA shopsteward, Colbert King, was shot dead at Kwamasiza.
- On 20 May 1992, NUMSA shopsteward,

Jeffrey Ndamase's house was riddled with 26 bullets. He survived but is on the run.

- On 3 June 1992, NUMSA member, Manqontshane Nobengane, was kidnapped and murdered outside Kwamasiza hostel.
- On 4 June 1992, NUMSA activist, Atwell Bheshe, was shot dead at Kwamasiza hostel. His small child was also killed.
- On 5 June 1992, NUMSA shopsteward, France Monakedi, was killed at Kwamasiza flats.
- On 6 June, NUMSA worker, Gwebu Ngwenyama, was shot dead outside the Kwamasiza hostel.
- On 7 June 1992, NUMSA shopsteward, Simai Sokaza, was shot dead in broad daylight at the sports ground near Kwamasiza.
- On 26 June 1992, NUMSA shopsteward, Alfred Maxaka, was shot dead at the Kwamasiza hostel.
- On 5 July 1992, NUMSA shopsteward, Michael Mantu, was shot dead at the Zone 17 hostel in Sebokeng.
- On 22 September 1992, Stanley Tyelentombi, NUMSA's legal officer in the

Vaal Region was kidnapped, but managed to escape. It is alleged his kidnappers carried ANC membership cards.

After Monakedi's death, NUMSA shopstewards and supporters of his group left Kwamasiza flats. They felt they had been sitting ducks since they no longer had weapons.

"We fled. Our lives were and are still in danger. We can't enter the flats, we can't represent workers at plant level. We are even afraid to use the Iscor buses that ferry workers to the plant. MK cadres are killing us.

Reconciliation committee formed

During the week of June 14, two high level ANC and SACP delegations visited the Vaal triangle. One delegation, led by Nelson Mandela and Cyril Ramaphosa, met local ANC representatives. The second, which included Chris Hani, Tokyo Sexwale and Sam Shilowa, visited the hostels and met with residents. A local peace committee was formed which included the leaders of both factions, Ernest Sotsu and Jeffrey Ndamase.

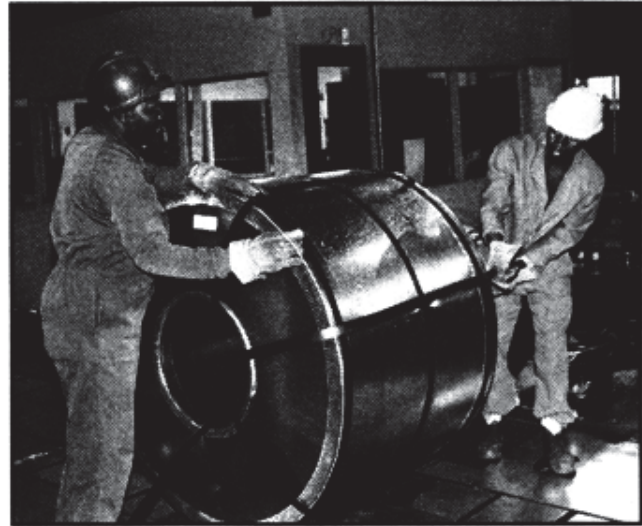
The Boipatong massacre complicated the reconciliation process, which resulted in a stalemate. The ANC/SACP/NUMSA grouping has since appointed a commission of enquiry to look into the Vaal violence and report to the relevant structures.

In the interim, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) is trying to make inroads at Iscor. SAAWU is an independent general union, formerly strongly aligned to the now defunct South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

The 'Top 20' faction invited SAAWU's general secretary to address workers on 5 October.

"We have submitted 2 500 stop orders to the management and in two weeks we will gain recognition," says Livingstone Mthonga. But Iscor management will not recognise SAAWU unless it is registered. SAAWU still sticks to the old SACTU principle of non-registration.

Mthonga says Kwamasiza residents are joining SAAWU because they are frustrated with NUMSA. Another shopsteward, Sam Maqhubela, claims there is no worker control



Iscor workers, no longer defended by their union

Photo: William Matlala

in NUMSA.

With the current crisis at Iscor, workers' morale is very low. The 'Top 20' workers have started a reign of terror at Kwamasiza flats, where NUMSA has become a swear-word.

Those who can assist in the crisis are:

- NUMSA. As the strongest union in the country, it has the power to unite the two factions. But it must admit to several mistakes: simply upholding and not reviewing the original shopstewards' elections; siding with the NUMSA shopstewards instead of investigating the conflict impartially. New elections are needed at plant level and more consultation with the workers is essential.
- SDUs falling under the civics. They must be made accountable. The murdered shopstewards were ANC members. Members of the SDUs are also ANC members yet they are believed by many NUMSA workers to be responsible for the killings.
- Management owns the flats and hostels at Sebokeng. Just as it protects workers when they travel to work, so should it protect them in their flats and hostels.
- The ANC/SACP/COSATU alliance, which must put an end to the internecine strife, take a resolute decision on members who use violence and defend the lives of workers. ☆