



SAMUEL MTHETHWA, chairperson of the NUMSA shopstewards at Dunlop, spoke to KARL VON HOLDT about his participation in the 1973 strikes, about organisation at Dunlop, and about a management which "has not changed".

SAMUEL MTHETHWA *twenty years of struggle*

Where were you in 1973 and what was happening?

In 1973 I was not employed at Dunlop. I was working for Durban Engineering at Jacobs. I participated in some action at that time. There were about 200 workers in the company. We had a strike for about one week. When the company gave an ultimatum we said, look our jobs are in danger. Because at that time, unions were not that strong, it was just the beginning of the unions.

So you did not win the demands?

Well, they gave us very little but it was not the same as people who did not do anything. We would not have got that little if we did not participate. In that company there was no organisation. It was something that came at that time, there was nothing before. When I left Durban Engineering in 1974 the union was beginning to organise.

What were the conditions like in the factories? What was it that made

people feel they were struggling and must go on strike?

It is not easy to say exactly what was the condition of employment. At that time we did not know what was forcing us to do what, except to say when you got a job in a factory you just had to listen to what your boss was saying and nothing else.

When the strikes began at other factories with people wanting more money, we also realised that we were getting less. We needed to get more, like everyone. The money that we were getting at that time was too little. At that time when one tells you what your rights were you could not even recognise them.

Today you will find that it is the young people who are militant, who always want to make things happen. I remember one of the people was very old, Mr Nzimande, and he was very active. It was not the young people only. When that thing happened everyone was just saying no, we want money.

Mr Nzimande did not have any position



Samuel Mthethwa, Dunlop shopsteward and worker leader

Photo: William Matlala

amongst the workers. He was just an ordinary worker and, when this thing happened, he just stood up and took initiative. When people were getting together he conducted the meetings, and made people come together.

Was that simply because he was such a person, or do you think that he had some organisational experience or something that helped him to do that?

As far as I remember he was an illiterate, he could not even read or write English. He was an ordinary person but he was very active.

When the union came in 1974 he was the one organising because he said he has seen the reaction of employers against the workers and you could see that he wanted to help workers. In fact he became like an inside organiser. He

was the one who was recruiting inside.

What was the response of the bosses when workers downed tools and said, we want higher wages?

Firstly they sent their indunas and the foremen to tell us that we are not going to get what we want and they will not be pressurised by us and they will not talk and they want us to get back to work. We resisted until they sent the indunas to say, tell these people that we can only give so much, but they must go back to work.

Some kind of negotiations started there and that is when Nzimande took part and said, yes we understand what the management is offering but that is too little. At least we can consider it if they can give so much. In our case we said we want 50 cents, then we can go back. Of

course at that time 50 cents was too big. The employers were coming with 7 cents.

My wage was R18,40 but that was the highest. On top of that I was going to get 7 cents per hour.

In 1975 when you came to Dunlop, what kind of situation did you find there, how would you describe that?

In Dunlop at that time there was nothing happening organisationally. There were just people called counsellors who were the speakers for the workers. But they did not do that because they were just called and told and went back to tell the workers. We lived in that situation until 1982 when MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union) came and organised in that company.

Well, there were old guys also at that time. I could remember Mr Khumalo and Mr Khanyile who were active in organising for unions to come in. Then there was resistance from the company and it took a long time. People realised that they were being oppressed, they were joining, because MAWU at that time had a very good strategy of organising. I remember on a chosen day it used to bring all Natal organisers to one company that was targeted.

They came to the gate, the employers and the police were chasing them away saying they should not be next to the company, they should be right over the road. But they were issuing pamphlets inviting the workers to their offices. Workers began to join. In early 1983 we then had a majority and introduced the union to management.

If you look at the current situation, and you think back how it was when you came, how do you see the position now?

Well, in Dunlop I see it in two ways, one way on the workers' side. If I compare the workers they are now much clearer than they were before about what is happening in the country, in general politics, in economics, in history. But when I look at employers' attitude towards the workers, whether they have changed or not, I would say nothing has changed in Dunlop. The people that were the directors of the company are still directors of the company today. I would say those directors are still as before, they have not changed at all.

In Dunlop not a single year ends without a



1973 strikes in the Jacobs area, Durban: with no union to speak through, five fingers means 'Five Rands more!'

Photo: Local History Museum – Natal Newspapers Collection

strike or three or four days of stoppages. When people know their rights they have to enforce that right, and management will always resist. People have to embark on action.

Did you act last year as well?

We did not get our year end bonus, just because we went on strike for the same things. The management dismissed a guy unfairly and workers went on strike.

Then, when we discussed the issue with the management, management did not want to admit that they were wrong. It was clear, in fact management had breached the procedures. They could see clearly that they were wrong and they brought the dismissed worker back.

So we said workers should not lose money for striking. The workers were saying, look you have made us lose money for your mistake. You knew it was wrong because the top management was saying the shopfloor management was wrong. We said we should not be penalised for the management problems. So that is why the strike stretched over two weeks for that demand. The company refused to pay us for that.

INTERVIEW

When Comrade Mlazi (see box on this page) was saying, because of the economic situation, the union is weaker now and management can see that and is trying to push workers back. How do you see it?

I won't say workers are weak. It is a normal thing that, when there is a demand for production, the workers become stronger because they have their weapon with them. When you strike, it is easy for management to talk seriously. I am saying the workers are not weak because we have been on short time for almost three years, but we have been able to go out to face management.

I would say, even today, the workers are

still in a position to take action if there is a need for that.

Has management introduced any worker participation projects at Dunlop?

We do not see that much participation in Dunlop except to say we are forcing management to consult us if there are any changes going to take place. But at the moment they just consult in order for us to understand. We are still fighting against that. There is no structure that has been established where we are participating in some other programmes. Workers want participation because we know that it is needed to work together because all

A symbol of intransigence

Dunlop has become a symbol of intransigence. According to shopsteward Ian Mlazi, "We have to fight all the time. There is nothing that we negotiate with them and get it without pushing them hard". Last year the union tabled a range of wage and non wage demands. The only issue that reached settlement was wages. "For example, we wanted a long service allowance," says shopsteward chair Samuel Mthethwa. "That was rejected as a communist idea".

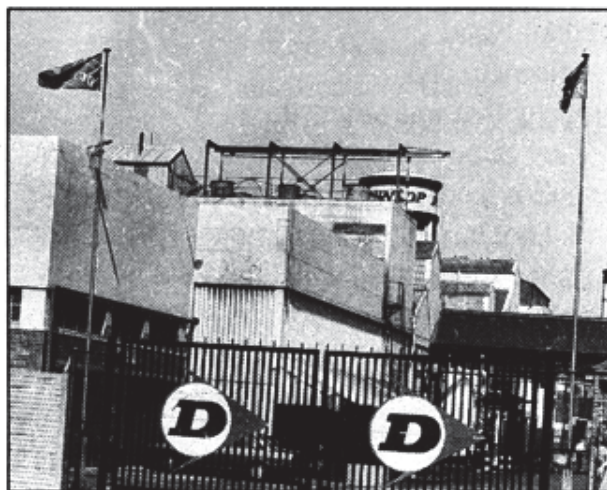
Dunlop is the only tyre manufacturer in South Africa that remains outside the industrial council for the industry, and flatly refuses to contemplate joining. According to Samuel Mthethwa, two years ago shopstewards from all Dunlop factories (the company also manufactures sportswear and equipment) passed a resolution for Dunlop to be nationalised "because it is intransigent and eats the fruits of production alone".

Like the whole tyre industry, Dunlop is under pressure from the recession and the threat of removing import protection. There are about 1 200 workers at the plant and 926 are union members. Workers have been on short time for three years. Mlazi says workers are not sure whether this is caused by the economy or if it is a management tactic to weaken the union. He believes the same number of tyres is being produced, as workers work faster to earn bonuses to make up the pay lost through short time.

The shopstewards say only one department, which produces steel belt radials for trucks, has new technology. A production manager told them that the survival of the company depends on this department succeeding in the market.

"We have written to the company head office requesting a meeting to discuss deeply the company's future," says Mthethwa. ♦

● Management refused a request for an interview.



parties need one another. Even in the new South Africa there will still be workers. We wish to participate because we want to learn how things are being done, so that if need be we will be able to do things without certain people of management deciding for all the people. Today we are saying we should move away from the old style where we were saying the employers are the enemy of workers. We need to know what the management is doing so that we can learn and be able to do it ourselves.

Do you think that management at Dunlop is ready for the new South Africa?

The answer is no. When you discuss with those young men of management you could hear they are prepared to adapt to the situation of today, but of course they do not have powers to implement any new ideas. They are there just to take the ruling from the door. Now those directors of Dunlop, I do not think that they even talk or think about change.

You said that in the early 80s the union would target a factory and all the organisers would come. Speaking as a shopsteward, how do you think that the union has changed over all these years compared to the past?

This is a hard question. I do not have a clear answer in my mind. In MAWU, when the union was small, it was easy. When you telephoned the office, you found the organisers, you discussed the issue with them, and it was easy to arrange a meeting with the employers. But today, in NUMSA (formed by a merger between MAWU and other metal unions), your diaries are always full and people working for the unions are so few compared to the membership and they cannot cope.

I remember one day we were trying to criticise the organisers for not working. We were receiving complaints at the plants that there was a poor service from the organisers. So we had a meeting and one organiser said to us, look, I am responsible for more than 80 plants myself.

I have made my plan where I targeted at least 50 to be visited in one month. I have

aimed to see the workers before they start work, to see the workers during their lunch, to see the workers when they knock off. I aimed to visit at least four companies a day, or three.

Then he said, I have done that for three days. When you visit the one factory, the workers give you their problems inside the company and you have to go back and write a letter to the company requesting a meeting with them. You go to the second one, you do the same. You find lots of problems, workers demand, you go to the office, write letters to the employers.

He said to us, I have done that for the whole week. It was less than 15 companies for the whole week. The second week I could not visit 15 because I received the response from the first companies that I visited. I set up the meetings. On the first day you find that maybe the meeting is not finished and you have to adjourn it for tomorrow and clash with the other day. You have to postpone that one to another day, postpone that one also. So I could not visit the 50 companies within a month. It is impossible.

The way he was explaining it, it was clear. That alone gives a lot of problems – not having all information or poor service. Once the people do not see their organisers near the factories when they are having problems they will say, we are paying the union, we are getting poor service, why should we go to the meetings? It makes it very difficult for every establishment to know exactly what is happening throughout the union. I would say COSATU is trying but it is not as what it is supposed to be.

Do you have Indian workers in DUNLOP and have they joined the union?

Most of them and the coloureds are members of the union. They are about 10% of the black workers. When we have some actions they are participating in the action. I do not know whether they have learned from what has happened before. But when there is nothing that is happening, like having normal general meetings, they do not attend. It is only a few that attend the meetings. ☆