

Isithebe: hell for workers

COSATU affiliates organising in the bantustan industrial area of Isithebe face intense repression from employers and supporter of UWUSA. LAYLA SONI reports.

The progressive unions began operating in Isithebe in 1982, organising under the Federation of SA Trade Unions (FOSATU). The first unions in the area were the metal workers union, then known as MAWU, and the paper union, PPWAWU. The other unions, ACTWUSA, FAWU, CAWU and CWIU, began operating in the area between 1986 and 1987. Initially, union activity and organising were slow. Towards the end of 1985, now under the banner of COSATU, the unions began to enjoy success, when the area started growing and developing.

Isithebe

Isithebe lies near Mandini, roughly halfway between Richards Bay and Durban. It was designated an industrial development point in KwaZulu early in the 1970's. Today its 135 manufacturing plants employ a total of 20 200 people. 105 new factories

are due to be established this year.

The main categories of industry in the area are clothing, metal, wood-working, textiles, paper and packaging, chemical processes engineering, furniture and plastics. Isithebe offers major advantages to employers. It is one of the few sites in KwaZulu which boasts enough flat land for industrial use. It is well supplied with water from the Tugela River. It is close to the national road and to port facilities at Richards Bay and Durban. It is the only decentralised area with extensive rail facilities.

In addition incentives offered to industrialists include:

- a rail rebate of 50%;
- a non-taxable cash reimbursement of 95% of the total annual wage bill up to a maximum of R105 per month per employee;
- an interest rate subsidy on projects of up to R7 million;
- non-taxable cash reimbursement of 125% for training schemes;
- and a reimbursement of relocation costs from the



PWV or Durban/Pinetown areas of up to R500 000.

Heaven for bosses, hell for workers

Most importantly, Isithebe lies in a region of high unemployment. Many of the industries that move to the area are labour-intensive. This reservoir of easily exploitable labour is certainly a major incentive for employers. As one industrialist said: "...the labour is cheap - you can't do the same in Durban."

Whilst Isithebe is a paradise for the industrialist, it is hell for the workers. There are no basic wage stipulations for the area and wages range from R25 to R90 a week. "No one can live on the wages they pay here. Employers are making super profits", said one NUMSA shop steward. A

PPWAWU organiser added that most workers in the area are saddled with "disgraceful living conditions as most of them live in shacks in the Sundumbili location where they pay rent of R45 to R50 per month."

Not surprisingly, COSATU has become a significant force in the factories of Isithebe. But it is under severe pressure to withdraw. All forms of organised resistance, including COSATU's presence in Isithebe, are being rigorously challenged by an alliance of the KwaZulu Finance Corporation (KFC), UWUSA and the majority of managements.

"We demand union recognition"

For workers in Isithebe, joining COSATU structures means becoming involved in a long, bitter battle for

union recognition. Workers suffer dismissals and selective re-employment, and also face harassment from UWUSA supporters and Inkatha supporters in the factories and in the township.

The struggle for recognition at metal company KIC early last year is just one example. NUMSA organisers explained that: "After we wrote to the company telling them we wanted to negotiate about representing our members, the company started to harass union members - giving them warnings." The company issued notices to 150 union members, stating that due to 'economic reasons' they would be retrenched the following Friday.

"Sympathetic supervisors in the plant had, however, informed workers that the company's target was union members. This angered the membership, who downed tools. Our members then approached Mr. Palmer, the managing director, asking him if this information was correct. Mr Palmer did not want to discuss the issue - he said that they had all attended an illegal gathering. He then closed the factory, saying that he would only re-employ within 7 days."

After a tremendous amount of pressure from the union, the company re-employed people selectively. But "they started to retrench, using the same old story, and they were going for the union members. Out of 25 shop stewards, 19 were dismissed. All negotiations with the company have been futile, because Mr. Palmer is one of those people who is not prepared to talk to the union."

ACTWUSA wins recognition

ACTWUSA (now SACTWU), has seen similar problems. In January 1988 workers at Kingswear Clothing factory (one of five Isithebe-based subsidiaries of the AMM group) went on strike over non-payment of wages. Management's response was to fire all striking workers. ACTWUSA, according to an organiser, managed to "track down the owner of the company, who was holidaying in Singapore at the time. The issue made headlines in the newspapers overseas, and he was confronted by foreign journalists on the issue."

As a result management re-hired selectively, and agreed to meet workers' demands. But not long after this management made it compulsory for all workers to sign a contract with the company. Apart from agreeing to do anything that the supervisor ordered, working overtime and agreeing not to steal, workers were compelled to accept stipulated wage levels, working conditions and working hours (a 43.5 hour week).

ACTWUSA has had a special problem at Isithebe. The clothing companies all belong to the Isithebe Clothing Manufacturers Association (ICMA). Initially the association insisted that the union get a 50% + 1 majority within the association as a whole. This was difficult to do because some of the industrialists belonging to the association refused to disclose the number of workers employed. When members of the association were approached for com-

ment, I was met with this reply, "I cannot disclose any information about this factory, or the clothing manufacturers' association, or anything else you want to know. And you won't get the information from anybody".

ACTWUSA however continued to apply pressure. After a series of delaying tactics on the part of the ICMA the union managed to win an industry-wide recognition agreement with the association early in 1989. "What this really means", said a representative of the union, "is that we will be able to bargain collectively on wages in the industry for the entire workforce employed by members of the association - provided we can get a majority membership within the industry. Only if we can demonstrate a majority at the factory level will they offer us organisation facilities - stop order deductions and so on. But that would not mean that we can negotiate for wages on a plant level."

Dismissals backfire

PPWAWU had a similar battle to organise Ply Products. The company's first response to the union was that "they are not interested in talking to the union, because they cannot expose their workers to COSATU, which intimidates workers and organises strikes resulting in job losses", according to a union organiser. After a lengthy struggle workers went on strike, demanding union recognition, as well as the dismissal of the UWUSA supervisor, who they allege was encouraging UWUSA members to attack PPWA-

WU members in the factory.

Management's response was typical - mass dismissal. The following day they selectively re-employed. Nevertheless, after a long drawn out battle PPWAWU emerged victorious on October 26th, when the union won an out-of-court settlement, reinstating all the dismissed workers. In addition to this the company has agreed to pay those workers a 6 week severance pay. This has won tremendous support for PPWAWU, who have a membership of 550 out of a total of 600 people employed in the factory. Management has realised the strength of the union and its members' determination, and have agreed to enter into dialogue.

Employers who refuse to negotiate with unions may be creating other problems for themselves. Management in such industries complained about the rising rate of stealing - "it is astronomical", said one clothing manufacturer, "and the rejects - there are boxes of rejects laying in my factory". And the management of a plastic firm complained that he would have to open up a special department to "get rid of the reject products".

Apart from stealing and messing up the job, employers also complained about late coming to work, getting sick on the job and absenteeism. Supervisors complained that, because of the language difference, most workers pretend not to understand instructions. Hence they either perform a task incorrectly, "or they just refuse to do it", said a supervisor. "When you talk to them they just ig-

nore you, pretending not to understand English. But the very same workers will talk to you in English outside the factory.”

Management responds

The industrialists in Isithebe held two meetings during 1988, in order to deal with the growth of unions. In the first meeting five industrialists, representing the Isithebe Clothing Manufacturers Association (ICMA), met with the KwaZulu Finance Corporation (KFC) in Ulundi. At this meeting the clothing industry threatened to withdraw from the area, if the KFC did not get rid of COSATU.

After this meeting the KFC sent COSATU a letter evicting them from their premises, which were owned by KFC. ACTWUSA took the KFC to court, winning temporary occupation of the offices. The lease has since expired.

The second meeting was attended by Isithebe industrialists. NUMSA organisers explained: “The second meeting was chaired by Mr. Palmer, from KIC. It was held in his private club - the Mandini Country Club. At this meeting he explained why he does not want any meeting with NUMSA.” According to organisers a leading industrialist asserted that “the unions are one of the terrorist organisations who threaten the lives of people. NUMSA has intimidated a number of managers and supervisors. Talking to unions is not worthwhile.”

Other employers felt that this attitude could cause severe problems for

the area. Their arguments were dismissed. It is alleged that this meeting was attended by an unknown group, carrying guns. According to organisers “a group of employers walked out in protest because of the hostility towards the union. They immediately informed us about the nature of this meeting, warning that the unknown group was in fact members of the special branch. These people repeated that the unions are going to make this place totally and completely uncontrollable. They said they suspect the occurrence of terror actions in the future”. Subsequently KIC - owned by Mr Palmer - has refused to talk to the union.

As the PPWAWU organiser said - “We have to deal with employers that do not understand anything about how we function, and what our aims are.”

UWUSA: the solution to the problem?

When UWUSA was launched, some employers felt that it would be a solution to their problems in the area. If there must be unions in the area, UWUSA would be used to replace COSATU structures in the factories. “Where UWUSA does not have a presence, the existing COSATU structure must be destroyed in order to establish UWUSA in the factory”, said a COSATU organiser.

This is exactly what happened in Silver Ray stationery. PPWAWU started organising the factory soon after UWUSA’s inception. Supervisors started “employing UWUSA

supporters for the sole purpose of destroying PPWAWU structures". Management rejected PPWAWU's claims that they had the majority, insisting that UWUSA has the majority. But in July 1988, PPWAWU defeated UWUSA in a secret ballot.

Organisers explained that they were able to achieve this "when shop stewards in the factory approached the biggest UWUSA agitator in the factory and won her over to our side. She was the very same person who beat people up and painted them in the name of UWUSA. Of course we were accused of dirty tactics, but this member had her COSATU T-shirt on days before the ballot."

In interviews employers clearly preferred UWUSA to COSATU: "I don't think that COSATU will be of much use to my workers. It claims to do good, but in fact its just hog-wash," said one. Another asserted that between the two unions, he would choose UWUSA because "it is the lesser of the two evils." He mentioned UWUSA's slogan, "Jobs not starvation", which is in fact its anti-strike slogan. Employers approve of Buthelezi's support for free enterprise, and opposition to disinvestment.

But the support of management does not guarantee success for UWUSA. For example one company was organised by UWUSA on management's request. After signing stop-order deductions with the company, workers wanted to negotiate a wage increase. UWUSA showed reluctance. Workers then convened their own meeting, and decided unani-

mously to withdraw from UWUSA and join NUMSA. The latter has won a recognition agreement with the company and is in the process of negotiating a wage increase.

"UWUSA is like a toothless dog"

The above is merely one example of UWUSA losing ground in Isithebe. As a worker said: "UWUSA is like a toothless dog. It tells us that the chief minister introduced factories here to create job opportunities. But the factories are coming from areas where they pay high wages, like Pinetown. They come here to exploit us, not to create jobs. It is better to go to the urban areas, instead of the factories coming here." UWUSA's notoriety grew during the violence that flared up towards the end of last year (1988). The problem had its origins in the COPAK factory which PPWAWU is organising, and later spilled into the Sundumbili location.

On 21 November, workers in this factory challenged the dismissal of a fellow worker. Management then re-employed the worker on the very same day. According to a PPWAWU organiser, "The UWUSA supervisor, seeing this as a victory for PPWAWU, organised for some of her members from the nearby CERAMICS factory to attack our members after work. Our members were however escorted home by the South African police who were informed about the attack, as well as by other COSATU members, who waited

for workers from COPAK to finish work. On the same evening PPWAWU members were harassed by UWUSA supporters in the township”.

The following day after work UWUSA supporters confronted workers at the gate, attempting to rip their PPWAWU T-shirts off. The violence then sparked off throughout Sundumbili on Tuesday night. People were beaten up simply because of the incidents at COPAK.

An organiser continued: “Wednesday morning workers staged a work stoppage in order to get management to address the situation. Management then issued a warning stating that if they don't go back to work, they will all be dismissed. Workers were however holding their ground, demanding that the supervisor be dismissed. Management refused to budge, saying that she has been with the company for a long time now, and was a ‘loyal’ worker. At 8:40 a.m. the second warning was issued, after which workers were dismissed.” The SAP intervened. They removed everybody from the factory and dispersed them with tear gas outside the factory gates. The violence continued in the location the same evening, but this time many shacks were burnt down.

No offices for COSATU

1986 saw the beginning of attacks and harassment of COSATU offices. In mid-1986 the Catholic church in nearby Sundumbili township, where the union offices were based, received anonymous calls threatening to burn

the church down if COSATU remained on the premises. The unions then moved to an office in a shopping complex, also in Sundumbili. After a while the owner of the building received the same calls, threatening to burn the complex down if the unions had not moved out within two months. These two incidents prompted the belief that Inkatha supporters were behind attempts at removing the democratic unions from the Isithebe region.

Undeterred, COSATU then applied to the KFC to rent an office in the Apex building. This was granted towards the end of 1987. Early in 1988 the unions received a letter from the KFC stating that they had until the end of May to vacate the premises.

Lengthy negotiations with the KFC were fruitless. An alternative was to operate from one of the companies, CAPPASACKS, whose labour force is organised with PPWAWU. Management backed out of this plan, fearing expulsion from the area. NUMSA and PPWAWU have also been evicted from their Stanger offices.

“To register or not to register”

A new labour law was promulgated by the KwaZulu government on 1 April 1989. Now, the progressive unions are confronted with a ‘registration debate’. Cosatu affiliates find the law objectionable. Any union which wants to operate in KwaZulu must register and have its head office in the bantustan. The law also stipulates that

each 'race group' must form its own union.

If unions do not register, they cannot qualify for stop-order deductions. Further, choosing non-registration means that the unions would not be able to make use of section 39 of the legislation. As an organiser pointed out, "We will not be able to make applications to the minister to set up a conciliation board, nor will we be able to get the court to make an order concerning an unfair labour practice."

The unions have not yet taken a final decision. There are however strong sentiments in favour of *recognition* as opposed to registration. The legislation makes provision for a registered trade union from South Africa to apply for recognition in Kwazulu. As a NUMSA regional representative said, "Recognition at this point does seem a viable alternative to registration. It would mean that we can operate in the area like we do anywhere else in the country. But recognition depends entirely on the KwaZulu government and we cannot predict the outcome at this stage." So with all these issues to tackle and debate, Isithebe's labour force and the progressive unions still do not have any labour legislation, nor can they refer cases to court.

Workers pour in like rain

Yet despite this opposition the progressive unions have managed to organise the workers. The most active unions in the area at present are

NUMSA, with a membership of approximately 2 563, that is 54% of all engineering and metal workers, and ACTWUSA, having a membership of roughly 3 500, which constitutes 43% of all clothing and textile workers. Organiser say that "...despite the intimidation and fears about supporters of UWUSA and INKATHA, most of the workers are aware of what we in COSATU stand for and workers continue to pour in to our organisation like rain." ☆

Sources

This article is based on:

1. Interviews conducted with ACTWUSA, NUMSA and PPWAWU organisers and industrialists, who preferred to remain anonymous, in Isithebe in January, February, May and June of 1988 and then again in June of 1989. UWUSA officials refused to be interviewed.
2. KFC publications on industrial decentralisation in the Kwazulu region.
3. Pamphlet distributed in Isithebe and Sundumbile in April 1988.
4. Employment contract signed by workers in clothing industry, after the 1988 strike.
5. Green, P: "Northern Natal: meeting UWUSA's challenge" in South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 12 No. 4 Nov/Dec 1986.
6. Mare and Hamilton: *Buthlezi's Inkatha and the politics of 'loyal resistance'* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987)