

Looking back at VW

to honour German/South African union solidarity

This year the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) celebrates its 20th anniversary. In celebrating its history it also commemorates the 30th anniversary of the emergence of contacts between German and South African auto unions, which were forged by its predecessors that later merged to form Numsa. **Chris Bolsman** traces this relationship and records some important outcomes.

The Volkswagen Beetle was first produced in Uitenhage in 1951. In 1956 Volkswagen in Germany acquired a controlling interest in the plant and it later became known as Volkswagen of South Africa. Volkswagen was the first German auto manufacturer in South Africa. It took another ten years before trade union contacts developed between the Uitenhage subsidiary and plants in Germany.

COLOURED AND AFRICAN UNION RECOGNITION

In 1967 the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) pressurised the Trade Union Council of South Africa (Tucsa) to form a separate industrial union for coloured and Indian workers. By 1969, 50% of Volkswagen's coloured workers were organised, and in turn the company recognised the union. Three years later VWSA management established a Bantu Liaison Committee which was dominated by future shop stewards of the United Automobile, Rubber, and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (UAW).

At the 1977 Munich Congress of the IMF a number of affiliates called for more effective action against apartheid. In the same year, the IMF

sent Werner Thönnessen to South Africa. He visited the Uitenhage plant and with Johnny Mke, the president of UAW, requested facilities to organise, access to the plant and meeting rights. The union gave a 1 016 stop-order list to VWSA management. Thus the UAW was recognised, stop-order facilities granted and the Liaison Committee abolished. Mke went on to tour Germany and made contacts with IG Metall, the German metalworker union in Volkswagen plants.

IMF TAKES A STAND

As a response to the developments in Uitenhage, the IMF Munich Congress, IG Metall and the IMF sent a delegation to South Africa in January 1978. The party included Eugen Loderer, chair of IG Metall and president of the IMF; Hans Mayr, vice-chair of IG Metall; Herman Rebhan, general secretary of the IMF; and Albert Schunk from the union's International Department. This high-ranking delegation visited, DEMAG, Ford, General Motors, Mercedes Benz, Siemens and Volkswagen. It rejected economic boycotts of South Africa and encouraged the building of black trade unions.

From this, Hans-Jürgen Uhl, an IG

Metall official and Wolfsburg Works Council member in the Volkswagen plant arranged a 14-day programme for a South African delegation to visit Volkswagen plants in Germany and Belgium. The delegation was made up of black and white trade union representatives and management.

Uhl was able to meet with the Uitenhage activists John Gomomo (later to become president of Cosatu) and Jurie Harris. One of the outcomes of the visit to Europe was the scrapping of certain forms of petty apartheid in VWSA. This included scrapping separate vending machines, drinking water fountains, time recorders and serving hatches of tuck shops. In addition, salaried staff of all races used the same dining room. This was most unusual at the time. The relationships that were established in this way came in good stead when the Uitenhage plant embarked on industrial action in June 1980.

STRONG GERMAN LINKS EMERGE

The coloured and African VWSA unions, working together, deadlocked over wages. The union, in a significant demand for future South African wage struggles demanded a 'living wage' of R2 per

hour. The magistrate however banned a June 1980 report-back meeting to the workforce. In frustration workers struck and the union alerted the IMF and IG Metall. This led to a rash of strikes in the area and in the neighbouring Goodyear, Hella and SKF plants the South African police tear-gassed workers who were dismissed or forced to return to work under police escort. At Volkswagen things panned out differently.

Volkswagen head office in Wolfsburg had warned its South African subsidiary to maintain restraint and not to dismiss workers on strike. Each chairperson from the Works Council at the six German Volkswagen plants signed a telex addressed to workers on strike. It wished them well and stated that they had discussed the situation with German management.

Volkswagen workers stayed out on strike for more than three weeks, and returned with a wage increase, no loss of jobs, and a more powerful union. The IMF and IG Metall were able to influence the outcome of the strike. Karl Casserini of the IMF took part in the negotiations with VWSA and over £38 000 was collected for the strike from abroad. As a consequence of the strike a direct telex link between the Volkswagen shop stewards in Uitenhage and their German counterparts in Wolfsburg was set up. A little later in September the Uitenhage unions signed an agreement, again most unusual for the time, for the appointment of full-time paid shop stewards.

From the contacts that emerged in the late 1970s the Uitenhage plant was thrust into the public eye in Germany and this meant South African management fell under increased pressure from company headquarters and also from the emerging trade unions within the plant which had direct access to



John Gomomo from Numsa talks to Hans-Jürgen Uhl, an IG Metall official who strongly promoted German-South African links

German trade-unions.

Representatives of the Protestant Church in Germany were engaged in the anti-apartheid movement and organised an important visit to South Africa in early 1982. An 11 member delegation made up of works council and IG Metall members, including Uhl, embarked on a four-week study tour of South Africa. A number of the delegates recalled the lasting impression the experience left on them.

Uhl met with members of the ANC underground and attended the funeral of the murdered Food and Canning Workers' Union organiser, Neil Aggett. The church visit shifted the German's focus to broader socio-political concerns. As a result of the church-initiated visit, three International Solidarity Groups (Intersoli) were established by IG Metall Wolfsburg for South Africa, Brazil and Mexico. Bank accounts were set up and the groups regularly met to discuss issues in these countries.

Intersoli groups went on to visit the Uitenhage plant on three occasions from 1988. The group was closely linked to the German anti-apartheid movement and called for the downgrading of the German embassy in South Africa to observer status; introduction of visa requirements for South African citizens coming to Germany; the suspension of landing and flying rights over Germany by South African Airways; and the suspension of Lufthansa services to South Africa.

GERMAN ANTI-APARTHEID STRATEGIES

Calls for a cultural boycott of South Africa were made by the anti-apartheid movement in the 1950s, a sports boycott came into being in the 1960s and the disinvestment and sanctions movement emerged in the 1970s. In an attempt to side step calls for disinvestment and monitor the activities of foreign investments in the country, codes of conduct for foreign multinationals in South Africa were developed.

The Swedes were the first to suggest codes of conduct for foreign firms in South Africa. Such Codes emphasised wages, benefits, and training. In 1973, *The Guardian* in Britain ran an exposé on South African wages and reported that certain British multinationals were paying wages below the poverty datum line. This in turn led to an Inquiry by the House of Commons' Committee on Expenditure and as a result the British government initiated the first employer codes in 1973.

In 1977 the European Economic Community Code of Conduct attempted to regulate foreign investment in the country. In the same year the Sullivan Principles, developed by Leon Sullivan, a member of the General Motors Board of Directors, was formulated in addition to the Urban Foundation's South African Employees Consultative Committee on Labour (SACCOLA) code.

The German unions energetically debated the sanctions issue but



Walter Hill, chair of the Wolfsburg Works Council talks to Gomomo at a May Day rally in 1986



John Gomomo addressing the Volkswagen World Auto Council in 1993

decided not to go this route. A number of US companies disinvested from South Africa in the 1980s, most notably General Motors, but German multinationals were never under as much pressure as their American counterparts to disinvest. German companies operating in South Africa did however engage with EU codes of conduct and submitted reports on their activities in South Africa.

The codes made employer responsibilities public and worker rights visible. However, they had serious limitations in that they did not explicitly call for the recognition of trade unions representing black workers.

In 1988 a new Labour Relations Act was passed by the South African government which amongst other things curbed workers' ability to use the strike weapon; outlawed sympathy strikes and consumer boycotts; encouraged minority unions; and removed protection offered to workers against unfair dismissal and retrenchments.

In Germany Franz Steinkühler was elected president of IG Metall in 1986 and he increased the pressure on apartheid South Africa. In response to the passing of the new LRA, Steinkühler was responsible for initiating the Minimum Standards for Labour Relations and Labour Conflicts for

South African Subsidiaries of German Companies made up of 14 points as a means of guaranteeing the rights of employees and unions in German subsidiaries. IG Metall and the South African Co-ordinating Council of the IMF worked together and in 1988 made the Minimum Standards public. The first principle renounced apartheid.

The Minimum Standards was an important intervention on the part of IG Metall in South Africa. Firstly, Minimum Standards strengthened the position of Numsa in German plants. Secondly, the German union avoided potentially costly disinvestments with the loss of South African and German jobs. But it also actively participated in recognising the role of black trade unions and in circumventing the restrictions placed on them by the LRA. In turn, the German public saw such Standards as proactive thus alleviating the pressure on IG Metall's leadership. Finally, the Minimum Standards shaped future South African labour law such as the right to strike amongst others.

More importantly, especially in the case of Volkswagen, discussion around the Minimum Standards was replaced by the need to sign a Recognition Agreement to bypass the LRA. Ironically, Volkswagen was one of the last employers to sign the Minimum Standards and the Recognition Agreement in November

1990. Numsa reported that the signing of the Minimum Standards was an important event but that there had been problems with certain employers attempting to water down the Agreement.

FINAL COMMENTS

The German trade union contribution to the struggle against apartheid was important. Through its dominant role in the IMF, IG Metall was able to aid the recognition of a black trade union and the establishment of full-time shop stewards in Volkswagen's Uitenhage plant. Certain elements of petty apartheid were abolished due to the relationships that had emerged between German and South African unionists. In addition, the IMF played an active role in the settlement of the 1980 strike which left the union in a far healthier position than before the commencement of the industrial action. The Uitenhage plant captured the imagination of German trade unionists and activists especially because of the close relationships that had emerged with shop stewards such as John Gomomo and Jurie Harris. LB

Chris Bolsman is a sociology lecturer at Aston University in Birmingham. This article is drawn from research done for his PhD.