

# 'My life is for rent: a cycle of debt'

## Transnet workers speak



During the Transnet strike in May **Katherine Joynt** and **Mariane Tsoeu** went to interview some workers. What they reveal explains why these workers were so determined to continue their strike, even in the face of an imminent Fifa World Cup.

**A**s men in suits and ties smoke and watch from the windows above, an angry crowd of singing workers gather. 'We enjoy being together and the singing keeps us strong,' says one worker. 'It is almost like a religious thing – we believe in ourselves. When we are burning from behind we won't take it forever. We are people standing up for our rights.'

Led by South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) and some of the time by the United Transport and Allied Trade Union, the recent May 2010 national Transnet strike saw 35 000 workers down tools. The financial impact of the two-and-a-half week strike has yet to be calculated by the parastatal, but it is rumoured to have cost millions. Other sectors in the economy also took a knock. Retail, in particular, lost business due to undelivered stock.

The strike received plenty of media coverage, which often sympathised with Transnet management.

However, interviews with workers striking at Transnet head offices in Johannesburg and workers at Koedoespoort Freight Rail in Pretoria paint a shocking picture of how the multi-million transport parastatal treats its workers. Work at Transnet is characterised by low wages, allegations of discrimination based on race and union allegiance, unfair promotions, minimal training, safety issues and insecure contracts.

### WAGES AND CONTRACTS

Mandla Simelane, a machine operator earns R3 500 per month. He has worked at Transnet for seven years without a change in real income. He cannot go to a private hospital on his medical aid, nor access housing loans, nor apply for an RDP

(Reconstruction & Development Programme) house. His transport costs 13% of his income. With the remaining money he cannot fully support his wife and two children. As he expressed it, 'So I must rent my whole life... my life is for rent. I live in a cycle of debt. I cannot come off debt because I simply cannot afford simple living expenses on this salary. I live on loan sharks and they live on me. This is the life Transnet wants for all of us.'

One of the main demands of the strike was a 15% wage increase. Workers received 11% in the final settlement. Many workers indicated that they earned so little that they had to work overtime just to survive.

The lowest earners at Transnet are the contract workers. They are hired by a branch of Transnet called the Transnet Capital Projects. Their pay ranged from R2 600 to R3 700 per

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month, yet there are rumours that some take home R1 900 after deductions. Transnet reportedly hires over 5 000 contract workers with contracts ranging from one month to one year.

Contract workers expressed discontent about their situation, 'I work just for transport. I move out the gate every day but at the end of the month I cannot take my children to university. That is just a dream. We want to be able to support our families... if we cannot even do what we came here for, what is the point?'

Many contract workers also indicated that they were hired on renewable one to four month contracts for three years.

One elderly worker reported that

he has been working as a driver for 32 years on an operator's salary of R4 000. For the last 20 years he has been working as a contract worker. After deductions he only takes home R2 000 which is not enough for him to send money home to his family.

If a contract worker is sick or complains, their contract is terminated. It is shocking that this major parastatal can operate in this way and keep workers permanently on fixed short-term contracts. As one furious contract worker said, 'They are raping us without wearing condom'.

Workers in certain parts of Transnet such as the Foundry in Transnet Rail Engineering where metal is melted, cast and welded,

revealed that if you are a contract worker you get told that if you join Satawu you will remain on contract but if you join Utatu you will be hired permanently. Utatu is commonly considered a weak 'white' union which represents about 40% of Transnet's organised workers. As the Transnet strike showed, Utatu which settled one week before Satawu, did not have the same strength and perseverance as Satawu which represents about 60% of Transnet's organised workers.

### RACISM AND NEPOTISM

There are also allegations of racial discrimination in Transnet. In Foundry, black workers noted that all but one of the managers is white. As a black worker you will not be promoted to a managerial position but the same white worker who you taught, becomes your manager. As one worker indicated, 'My manager is white and he only promotes other whites - even those that came after us and who we have to teach how to work. He does not use Transnet policies; he uses his own rules.'

Reportedly, the head of Foundry, a white man who has been working for Transnet for 38 years, hurls racial abuse at workers: 'He treats us as though we are in his backyard, like dogs.' He also forces them to work without safety gloves if theirs are damaged. The safety equipment store is only open for half an hour at 1pm every day so working without safety equipment is common.

Nepotism is endemic in Transnet. According to most workers on strike many white and Indian employees work with their relatives in the same section, 'My white boss works with four of his children in our section. When we have problems with one of these children they always say to us that they are going to tell their father to "sort us out". Sometimes these white boys do not come to work but they are never prosecuted because

their father is the manager. We still work under apartheid here. There is another guy who also hired his son as a planner even though he is not qualified for that position.'

Problems with regards to management were also expressed. Workers were frustrated that managers and CEOs were hired on five-year contracts after which they leave to work at the next parastatal such as Eskom. They argued that these managers 'Do not have the love of the company and do not add any value - they just want to enrich themselves and then go'.

These managers reportedly make promises about changing working conditions and then resign before anything is implemented. Workers also believe that the black managers who tend to resign one after the other are not leaving out of their own will. The workers are never told why these managers resign but they assume that it is under the influence of an 'invisible hand' at a high managerial level.

Bonuses were also a source of tension. Many workers argued that managers were getting very high bonuses. According to Satawu, of a total bonuses paid last year, 51% of the amount was paid out to 4 500 managers and 49% was shared between 50 000 bargaining unit workers.

Workers at Inyanda in Parktown said that bonuses need to be shared more equally as workers also contribute significantly to the profit-making of the company. Workers argue that there needs to be a narrowing of the gap between managers' bonuses and shopfloor bonuses.

### SKILLS AND TRAINING

The issue of skills and training is also a source of tension for Transnet's workers. One truck driver explained, 'Transnet is in the habit of training people for particular work but then

they do not want to pay them at the salary level of that work'. Workers reported that low-skilled workers are also rarely trained.

'The training is only to fill gaps such as fork lift training... they do not invest in the youth. Training is done to keep you busy but it adds nothing to your portfolio because they train you on the same work and level you are already doing.'

Another worker, an artisan, said that training is done at their levels to cut costs for the company, 'The company trains us for electrical (heavy and light current) mechanical electronics and pneumatic engineering in order to cut costs, so we become jack of all trades but our salaries remain the same even though we are flexible and valuable to the company.'

### THE STRIKE

Transnet, frustrated with the strike, reportedly intervened in order to provoke the workers. At Koedoespoort in Pretoria management hired a security task force with big aggressive dogs to harass workers, 'When we are marching to the other gate, just singing peacefully, they try to make us violent by setting the dogs on us. We will not play into their hands. We will not stop striking until our needs are met.' Shop stewards at the site claimed that this was a scare tactic to provoke workers to go out of line and become violent so that Transnet could get a court interdict to kick them off their property.

For Satawu and its members, the success of the Transnet strike was a true working-class victory. Not only did workers receive 11% wage increases, but other demands were met such as extended medical aid, 1 000 contract workers to be employed permanently by October and the lifting of the minimum wage from R38 000 per year to R50 000.

Satawu members expressed satisfaction with their union during the strike. They pointed out that the Satawu leaders were responsive to them, arguing 'The strike is ours, not our leaders. They give us feedback after negotiations and if we reject it they must go back. The leaders don't get to decide, we do.'

This strike was reminiscent of the 1987 and 1989 Transnet strikes which lasted between three and four months respectively. Despite the 'no work no pay' policy, workers continued to strike. This can be linked to a broader need by workers for a moral order in the workplace and the belief that justice must triumph. There was also a strong emphasis on the future. 'Those children employed here in the future must not earn this. They must find things better than what they are now otherwise they will blame us and ask us what were you doing?'

During the strike Pradeed Maharaj, the Transnet human resources group executive, implied that employees need to worry more about working harder in order to deserve all the money being lavished upon them. However, as one contract worker noted, 'Towards the end of your contract term you can't give one 100% because you fear your contract expiring anyway and you are not really part and parcel. But if you are permanent you have greater respect for the company and will work harder.'

Perhaps the lesson Transnet needs to learn is that dignified working conditions and improved organisational ethics can lead to a more dedicated workforce. LB

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