

# Rail safety

## Missing link in Transnet transformation?

Rail safety is in crisis believes **Chris de Vos**, general secretary of Transnet's largest trade union – the United Transport and Allied Trade Union (Utatu). It is dangerous for staff and regular commuters and his members wonder how a safe and efficient transport system for World Cup 2010 will come about.



**T**he ideal of a public rail system is one where railway professionals pull together to achieve safe, efficient, reliable and economic transport services. Transnet Freight Rail and Metrorail measure poorly against this yardstick.

There is not sufficient management/worker team work on rail issues in either company. Most equipment is sub-standard, training levels have declined and safety standards are on the brink of criminal neglect.

There have been several safety hearings where findings went Utatu's (United Transport and Allied Trade Union) way with harsh words for management. The union also has a vast collection of unanswered communications on safety sent to various levels of management, cabinet ministers and President Mbeki. In 2002, we had to take Transnet to task for not sending a representative to an International Rail Safety Day held on its own Johannesburg Station.

Yet with all its faults, we prefer the new Transnet order to the old SA Railway and Harbours era. The current approach is more businesslike and provides better opportunities for improvements for our members as happened with our

2007 strike and our recent breakthrough on train drivers' salaries.

But the new system has brought problems. Whatever its faults, Transnet's old order was staffed by mostly career railway professionals who understood railways. By contrast, the main strengths of Transnet's new management is its political affiliation and business qualifications. Lacking a background in rail, they prefer to concentrate on their comfort areas – cost-cutting, downsizing and affirmative action.

Although Transnet and its operating divisions regularly issue safety statements, they regard safety as more the workers' responsibility. This is noticeable when things go wrong. It is always someone at the operating level who is blamed, never the system that has given the worker sub-standard equipment, worked him or her to the point of exhaustion or has thrust poorly-qualified employees into positions of responsibility beyond their training and experience.

Sub-market salaries, restructuring, downsizing and over-zealous affirmative action have combined to create a serious skills drain. As a result, some of the remaining key personnel are working up to 170

hours overtime a month and are stressed and exhausted which, in itself, is a safety hazard.

Feeling unwanted and insecure, many skilled and experienced white workers have sought new pastures. In some instances, in refusing to appoint whites in pursuance of affirmative action targets, the company has created skills shortages.

The situation has sometimes moved black members to speak out against the unfair treatment of white colleagues. Regardless of colour, the new generation of Transnet workers values the opportunity to learn from older hands. They realise that qualifying as a train driver, railway artisan, train control officer or traction linesman is the first step on a long road to professionalism. Mastery of these functions comes only after years of practice and problem solving.

The recently improved train drivers' salaries, up to 30% increases in some cases, will help to retain skills. But the situation of our technical workers remains critical.

Early in 2002, after a train disaster, we published what we believe are the causes of accidents. That list, which regrettably remains valid, includes:

- Obsolete, unsafe and unhygienic locomotives.

- Obsolete rolling stock.
- Obsolete and inefficient signalling systems.
- Inadequate protection of railway lines and property.
- Exploitation of key operational employees to a point where they are chronically fatigued and unable to perform their jobs with optimum efficiency.
- Over-zealous application of transformation that is placing company agendas ahead of commuter safety.
- Managerial cover-ups which compel employees to bear the consequences of operational shortcomings.

As with the train hijacking epidemic a few years ago, the time and place of many copper wire thefts is predictable. Yet little is done to prevent thefts. Some employees see government's support for the Gautrain ahead of replacing the national copper wire grid with fibre optics as a sign of its disinterest in rail safety.

A real safety concern involves the transport of explosives. Yard personnel have pointed out potentially disastrous breaches of safety regulations in the carrying of explosives but management has not responded.

Our members read assurances that South Africa will have an efficient transport system for World Cup 2010 and wonder how this will come about. Judging by what is not happening, many believe that Transnet has a chance of becoming the second Eskom. LB

*Utatu is the result of a merger between the SA Footplate Staff Association and Technical Workers Union, two historically white, skills-based unions. Utatu grasped the transformation challenge and now has many more black than white members.*

## Scope of problem

A Transnet report revealed 561 derailments from 1 April to 30 December – almost 10% increase over the same period in 2006. Six of the collisions were serious train-on-train accidents.

Transnet attributes these accidents to human error caused by signals passed at danger; trains admitted into occupied sections; movement not under control especially moving at speed down hill; unauthorised movement; conflicting movement control and trains standing foul (when two lines run into one another in the shunting yard, drivers who cross the clearance bar can cause serious accidents).

Other accidents are caused by perway defects such as railway sleepers and bolts; washaways caused by a rain storm; obstructions on the line; unevenly loaded wagons; points not correctly set or faulty points; buffers by-passed (couplers at the end of wagons are mismatched causing shunters to lose limbs when caught between buffers).

Transnet is planning to reduce accidents through a 'focused' safety programme. The new Rail Safety Regulator has also started to make a difference but it needs a 'whistle blowing' channel. Shop stewards are increasingly threatening management with reporting unsafe situations to the Regulator.

## Excerpts from Utatu letter to Labour Minister

"... In January 2004, you made an on-site inspection of TFR locomotives... Shocked to experience first-hand noise levels of more than 50% above the legal safety limit, you instructed TFR to rectify the problem. You warned the company that if it did not make its locomotives hearing-safe, you would invoke your powers to remove faulty locomotives from service.

... TFR instigated its 'Noise Mitigation Plan' and gave assurance that all of its locomotives would be installed with the necessary safety equipment and locomotive staff would be issued with hearing protection devices by December 2004.

In the Utatu boardroom I asked you: "What will happen if they do not honour that promise?" Your reply was: "A CEO does not lie to a Minister"...

Four months into 2008 many locomotives are still not safety compliant. Worse still, TFR seems to have stalled its Noise Mitigation Program.

... many of our train driver members are registering reduced hearing at each testing. When their hearing fails to meet the acceptable standard, they are deprived of their jobs and placed in the company's Risk Pool at greatly reduced salaries and are made prime candidates for being boarded...

Failing immediate... corrective action... this Union will have to act... Our response might have to be via industrial action.

Yours sincerely...

