
Men of steel

Witbank's battle against apartheid

The role of organised labour in the struggle against apartheid is widely acknowledged. Peter Alexander reviews Karl von Holdt's Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa which provides an account of how Numsa operated at Highveld Steel in Witbank. This account goes beyond the dynamics in the workplace and explores some of the political tensions which emerged pre- and post-1994.

Karl von Holdt, former editor of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, has produced a lucidly written and theoretically challenging book, which, in time, will doubtless come to be regarded as seminal. Based on a Wits doctoral dissertation, it blends the strengths of serious scholarship with the best of activist journalism.

At one level, this is the story of one factory and one township in the years that led up to and immediately following South Africa's transition to democracy.

On another level, the author raises important issues about the internal dynamics of the crucial part workers played in the overthrow of apartheid. At least by implication, this is a celebration of that part, but it is also a

critical examination.

Von Holdt reveals the messiness of relationships between different groups and individuals within the factory, and how these were further complicated by township politics. However, he also makes sense of this complexity, and in the process raises important questions, some of which he answers, albeit tentatively at times, and some he leaves hanging for further research and contemplation.

Von Holdt's focus is primarily on the workers of Highveld Steel in Witbank, but in order to understand their militancy and organisation he also had to look at events in the local township, KwaGuqa. This is interesting because, hitherto, social scientists have dwelt mainly on the local politics of our major

conurbations, ignoring a place like Witbank. Yet, the town has a population of 250 000, and is an important industrial centre located at the heart of the country's major coalfield and sources of electric power.

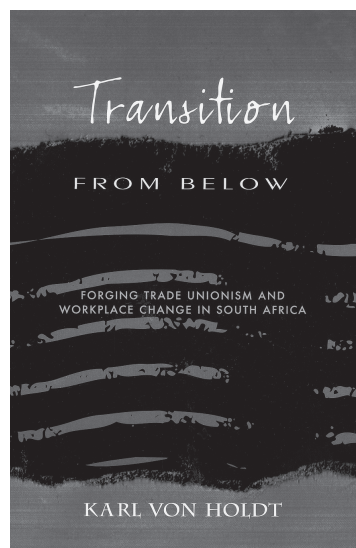
Research was based mainly on interviews with workers, and observations of their meetings conducted between 1993 and 1998. What is missing is interviews with Highveld Steel managers, but this says as much about the furtiveness of the company's owners, as it does about Von Holdt's standing as a committed journalist. He was forbidden entry to the factory, though on two occasions this injunction was broken, when, through the militancy of the workers, the author was obliged to play a

minor role in this account.

Some might argue that the failure to gain access to the factory and its managers imposes a fatal limitation. But this is to miss the point. The restrictions were the other side of the coin that allowed the workers to trust the author, enabling him to produce a convincing analysis of their actions, 'warts and all'. Moreover, the quest for knowledge always has limits, and the mark of research excellence is what breaks existing conceptual boundaries, compelling us to think in new ways; something this book clearly achieves.

Von Holdt's narrative begins, in chapter two, with a description of the factory. Racial oppression was coupled with job demarcation and physical separation that divided migrant workers, mostly Pedi speaking, from township residents, predominantly Zulu speaking. But there were chinks of light. In 1977, local youths were recruited as workers, but, politicised by Soweto and the period, they soon initiated unrest. By the end of the decade, members of the factory's liaison committee – a product of the 1973 Durban strikes – had become frustrated with management responses to their requests, and in 1981 they mandated three of their number to 'look for' the Metal and Allied Workers Union. chapter three, entitled 'The Messiah Comes', shows how, concentrated in hostels, migrants were the first to join the union in large numbers. Among these men, it quickly gained respect for defusing a conflict between Pedi and Xhosa migrants.

In chapter four we learn that, in 1984, shop stewards from the plant were central to the formation of a local branch of the union, and soon set about organising collieries and other factories in the area. By the



beginning of 1986, union activists were participating in community politics, mainly through a Cosatu local, and that February workers from Highveld Steel joined a seven-day stayaway, the longest in South African history.

The key demand of this action – for local factories to recruit only local workers – initially led to tension between the township and migrants. However, the migrants were soon recognised as permanent workers, and, partly because of long-standing ANC sympathies among Pedi workers, an alliance developed between the hostel dwellers and the township youth. On the other hand, the democratic practices of the Cosatu shop stewards, many of whom were local workers, encouraged scepticism

about the informality of township politics (though they identified with its general allegiance to the United Democratic Front). Yet, by taking a lead in community struggles, the local had, by the time of the UDF's banning in 1988, become the principal 'political decision-making forum' in the area.

Chapter five takes us back to Highveld Steel where, in September 1987, the union – now refashioned as the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) – was badly beaten in a four-week strike, which followed a lock-out. When hostel dwellers were threatened with eviction, the union tried to secure an orderly surrender. However, when the workers returned, 171 activists were arrested and sacked, and as one worker said: the

'Entry into the world of politics took unionists away from the world of workers.'

union 'was smashed completely'. Von Holdt comments: 'The workers had discovered the limits of confrontation ... The company had the power to dismiss workers... the workers were powerless to evict management.'

He also observes that the confrontation had followed hard on the heels of the defeat of the miners' strike, the largest industrial stoppage in South African history, noting that Anglo American, which had been central to the miners' defeat, was also the owner of Highveld Steel. It would be interesting to explore the significance of these defeats in shaping the character of the democratic movement in the period up to 1990.

In the wake of the defeat, a deep division opened up between the hostel dwellers and township residents, which lasted through to 1991. This is tracked in chapter six. Chapter seven focuses on the mixture of enthusiasm, which greeted the release and election as president of Nelson Mandela, and the false starts and strategic uncertainties that the new era created for Numsa (nationally and at Highveld Steel).

Chapter eight moves us on to the involvement of workers in local politics. From its launch in 1991, trade unionists were prominent in the Witbank branch of the ANC. In 1994, when 19 seats out of 30 on the local council were won by the ANC, 12 of the ANC councillors were members of Cosatu affiliates, nine of whom came from Numsa, including four workers at Highveld Steel. However, the chair of the Cosatu local is quoted as

saying that 'Cosatu is really, really dying,' and this, it would seem, was as early as the end of 1994. By 1998, Cosatu had hardly any representation within the ANC leadership or on the council, and only one Highveld Steel councillor still worked at the plant, and he was no longer active in the union. Von Holdt concludes: 'Entry into the world of politics took unionists away from the world of workers.'

Chapter nine describes the character of workplace relations in the three years to 1996. On the one hand, there was 'stalemate': the union had failed to transform the plant, so that elements of the apartheid order persisted, but also management had failed to restore authoritarian control. On the other hand, there was some flexibility, with instances of co-operation between Numsa and the whites-only Mine Workers' Union, and with some white workers joining Numsa.

Chapter ten details contestation and declining morale within the plant's Numsa structure over roughly the same period. Between 1994 and 1995 there was strong opposition to the shop stewards from the 'concerned group', which was led by some of the more skilled workers, and from the 'action group' and a breakaway union, which organised migrants. These revolts are seen to be a consequence of frustration arising from management intransigence and, specifically, the fact that migrants, with their poor education, remained trapped in the worst jobs. In addition, suspicions were aroused by the

promotion of shop stewards into managerial positions. In the final chapter, Von Holdt provides a postscript detailing what has happened to the various worker leaders who had appeared in the pages of his account. Of the 11 individuals mentioned, only one was still a worker at Highveld Steel, one was a manager at the company, and five were businessmen.

A strength of the book is that it covers the period before and after the transition. Whilst the contrast implicit in this approach might leave the impression of a movement weaker than it is – that is, in comparison to workers' movements elsewhere in the world – it does provide valuable insights into problems currently being experienced, showing how these are rooted in the history of the 1980s and 1990s. A key event appears to have been the 1987 defeat, but Von Holdt – rightly I am sure – places greater emphasis on the impact of the 1994 elections. These he says (with his emphasis) 'constituted the moment of democratic incorporation of the black working class (analogous to, but more dramatic than, the winning of the franchise in the capitalist societies of Europe)'.
He follows this assessment with what is, probably, his key conclusion, one that he contrasts to arguments made by, for example, Michael Burawoy and Dunbar Moodie. 'Hegemony [his emphasis],' he declares, 'is established at the political level, in the relations between classes and between classes and the state, rather than in everyday relations in

the workplace.' This significant judgment – one shared by this reviewer – has important implications. It means, for instance, that we cannot have a meaningful industrial sociology if it is separated from political and historical sociology.

Assuming that Von Holdt is correct, it suggests a possible flaw in his account. External influences do appear – the Cosatu local is established after unionists return from an East Rand meeting, strategic problems at the plant are placed within the context of debates within Numsa, the 1987 lock-out is associated with the miners strike, etc – but there is no overview to help us comprehend the local events described in his book. Yet, it would probably be fairer to suggest that Von Holdt's conclusion is a challenge to other researchers.

The relationship between the workplace and the state is seen as dialectical (though this is not a word utilised by the author). So, for instance, he is interested less in the 'dynamics of workplace order', and more in analysing the 'chaotic transition', the 'disorder', which paves the way to the establishment of new structures. He is thinking, here, about industrial structures, but, logically, the same should apply to new political structures (which are shaped by the many variants of local disorder).

This approach leads Von Holdt to a further significant conclusion. In response to Eddie Webster and Glenn Adler, he argues that what we have experienced, and are still experiencing, is not a 'double transition' – ie democratisation coupled with globalisation – but a 'triple transition'. In addition to the first two components, there was also 'a deeper and broader process of social transformation: a multitude of struggles, compromises and pacts

best understood as a process of internal decolonisation and reconstruction of society' (his emphasis again). It may take a while for the meaning of this assessment to be clarified, but one can see that it builds on his own research, and also that it might contribute to an appreciation of the continuing 'messiness' of South Africa's transformation.

Von Holdt's loyalty to his data and his willingness to dispute existing paradigms allows him to critique aspects of 'metropolitan sociology'. This is clearest when he considers 'social movement unionism'; that concept, developed by a number of radical writers (notably Peter Waterman), as a way of capturing the essence of a trend that developed among new unions in South Africa, South Korea, Brazil and elsewhere, which emphasised, for instance, democracy and mass mobilisation.

According to Von Holdt: 'Where the [existing] literature assumes social movement unionism is primarily class-based, this study finds an amalgam of popular and class identities... woven together by a discourse of national liberation struggle... [and] there was a failure of democratic practices to empower all layers of workers equally.' Moreover, collective identities among workers – including a strong migrant identity – 'reinforced each, generating an extraordinarily intense solidarity, [but also] created faultlines ... which, when placed under pressure, could become the front line in a bitter and frequently violent conflict over contending notions of union order.'

Embedded in the book are some good examples revealing the implications of nationalist discourse. Before 1994, workers saw themselves as alienated from and united against 'A white man's factory in a white man's



country.' But, the country is no longer owned by the whites, and some aspects of the factory have been deracialised. So, for instance, according to one worker, people 'assist the team leader, whereas they never helped the baas-boy [the old name for the team leader], [who was] part and parcel of the foreman [ie a white].'

Von Holdt has crafted a book packed full of interesting and important ideas. It will need to be read by any student who wants to understand or research, industrial, political or historical sociology, contemporary South African history or transition politics. It also serves as a model for ethnographic research that blends theory and empirical detail. And, as a work of literature, it commends itself to a wide range of readers as a sympathetic, yet brutally honest, account of the strengths and weaknesses of working class action against apartheid.

Alexander is associate professor in sociology at the Rand Afrikaans University. Von Holdt's 'Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa' is published by University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg (ISBN 1-86914-029-X).