

Shop Stewards & Worker Control

"At every level it must be workers representing other workers because they are the ones who can truly feel and represent what workers feel" - *shop steward*.

"Workers are losing and losing workers control, and it is in danger of becoming just a slogan" - *national union leader*.

Tens of thousands of elected shop stewards have long been the active expression and the guarantee of workers control in trade unions in South Africa. DOT KEET examines* how this system of democracy is functioning in COSATU under the pressures on the trade unions in South Africa today.

More than eight out of ten COSATU shop stewards (84%) now possess at least some secondary school education. A recent survey conducted for COSATU** indicates remarkably improving levels of education amongst these grassroots worker leaders - including 38% with junior matric and higher. Furthermore, nearly half (a total of 44%) are employed in the upper layers - clerical (15%) and supervisory (11%) - or in the skilled categories of workers (18%). This is in marked contrast to the early days of the emergent unions in South Africa when shop stewards used to be mainly unskilled, and even migrant, labourers!

The improving educational and skill profile of shop stewards today is accentuated by the

tendency for workers to select those amongst them with better education, and/or a good command of English, to be the office bearers and worker delegates to constitutional bodies, conferences and congresses. The higher up the structures, the more marked is this tendency, reflecting and reinforcing the development of the more educated union members as worker leaders.

This suggests positive possibilities for the performance of shop stewards in their increasingly complex and demanding role in the trade unions of today. However, as former PPWAWU assistant general secretary Sakhela Buhlungu*** points out: "If this tendency continues, only a fraction of workers will

* With thanks for the time and invaluable information provided by grassroots shop stewards, office bearers and officials in various unions and regions.

** "Preliminary findings of the CASE survey of shop stewards in COSATU affiliated unions", November 1991, due to be published in full by Ravan Press.

FEATURE

become shop stewards. It is going to bar large numbers of workers." This raises various questions.

Skilled representing unskilled workers

It is sometimes argued* that more highly skilled and better paid workers do not necessarily have the same interests or attitudes as workers at the bottom of the heap. There is significant truth in this. Certainly, there must arise conflicts of loyalty within skilled workers when they represent other workers over whom they exercise supervisory - and disciplinary - functions on behalf of management.

But there is also much testimony from unionists that it is amongst skilled and better educated workers that many of the most effective - and militant - worker leaders are to be found. Amongst other things, they can get better access to information and have more confidence in dealing with management.

Conversely, the unskilled and most oppressed workers, living on the edge of survival, are not necessarily 'the most militant'. They do have 'nothing to lose but their chains!' But they can also be characterised by ignorance of their rights, fear and submissiveness, and by a willingness to settle for any minimal immediate gain rather than aiming for longer-term and more ambitious goals.

The 'problem' of skilled workers taking over shop steward leadership does not therefore lie in any direct or invariable correlation between skill/education on the one hand and union/political attitudes on the other. The main problem, according to shop stewards themselves, lies in the greater accessibility of skilled workers to job promotion out of the body of workers and into the camp of management, or out of the factories altogether.

Younger shop stewards

Where there is a bias towards better educated



workers there will be a tendency for them also to be younger. This raises other questions. More than a quarter (28%) of COSATU shop stewards now are in their twenties. Most, therefore, have joined the trade unions more recently. Their

experience of unionism, does not go very far back and they may not be very securely anchored in the union traditions of democratic workers control.

Many such younger workers will also have gone through the experiences of township 'youth' politics of recent years. They may indeed be 'more militant' - as many unionists say - and more politically engaged outside of the workplace. In some ways this could be strengthening to them politically, but they could also be more susceptible to the influences of organisations with political methods quite different to those of the trade unions.

Younger workers have also been coming into the trade unions precisely in a period when all are under changing pressures. Therefore, together with other influences, younger worker leaders are arising within, and adding to, tendencies for 'democratic workers control' to undergo important changes.

Democratic worker control

The evidence from the trade unions is of the continuing firm democratic roots of shop stewards. They are still directly elected - most usually by secret ballot - by rank and file members at regular intervals, although the period differs from union to union, and there does seem to be a tendency for the interval to be extended. This may not be a bad thing if it gives shop stewards a better chance to get to grips with their role.

Some shop stewards do become entrenched

*** at present on study leave

* for example former FAWU general secretary Jan Theron in SA Labour Bulletin Vol 15 No 3, Sept 1990

in their positions - either out of commitment or their own self-interested power and career motivations, or on the insistence of their members. But the more common pattern seems to be of a high turn over of shop stewards. There are many reasons for this but, in part, it reflects workers' exercise of their important right to recall unsatisfactory shop stewards between elections. The ability and willingness of workers to exercise this right differs however between, and even within, unions.

There are more marked and more generalised changes in the ongoing interactions between workers and their elected leaders in regular general meetings. The repeated testimony is that such meetings - whether within or outside of work hours - seem to be becoming less regular and less well attended. The most obvious and constantly quoted reason is the violence in the townships and peoples' fear to be away from their homes and families after dark.

Expectations of members

Another fundamental explanation lies in the changing character and expectations of union members themselves. The rapid growth of the trade unions in recent years has not allowed the same time and space for the unions to integrate and consolidate new members as in the past. This means that nowadays large proportions of union memberships have not gone through the cumulative experiences of past struggles and are not steeped in union traditions of workers control. PPWAWU's Sakhela Buhlungu says that many don't even know of - let alone how to assert - their rights within 'workers control'.

Long-time organiser for both PPWAWU and CWIU in Natal, Pat Horn points to the political climate in the country at large tending away from active mass engagement since February 1990. Furthermore, there is seldom the same sort of systematic democratic control of other organisations by the rank and file that has been a strong pattern in the trade unions



from the 1970s.

While the conscious democratic culture of the trade unions has contributed to the development of the broader political culture of South Africa, there have also been undemocratic

counter-tendencies coming into the unions from the wider society. Violence and political intolerance are only the most obvious of these. 'Leadership control' over membership is another - from conservative patriarchal traditions at one extreme to left wing 'vanguardist' traditions at the other.

More meetings, more pressures

There are, however, more direct explanations within the very functioning of the trade unions for changes in the shop stewards system and in the nature of workers control as a whole. The most pressing of these arise from the multiplicity of meetings and the pressures on shop stewards participating in them.

The great majority of the tens of thousands of shop stewards in South Africa are full time shop floor workers. They carry the same burdens of long hours of hard work, struggles to and from work in overcrowded and dangerous public transport, back to dreary and dangerous townships - where they can be the targets of the same death squads pursuing other community leaders.

It is in this context that shop stewards are expected to attend regular factory meetings of shop stewards committees, and area shop stewards locals and - if elected as office bearers or shop steward delegates - branch conferences and Branch Executive Committees (BECs) or regional conferences and Regional Executive Committees (RECs), or even the National Executive Committees (NECs), conferences and congresses of their unions.

These all involve other preparatory or follow-up and compulsory report-back meetings. Just to deal with their regular union responsibilities, diligent shop stewards can be

attending after-work meetings every night of the week, and over the week ends - at great cost to themselves and their families.

Many unions seem to be making the base meetings less frequent: fortnightly or even

monthly, rather than weekly as in the past. Another prescribed change is for only a few shop steward representatives per factory to attend their locals rather than all shop stewards in an area as in the past. This helps to make such meetings less cumbersome but it concentrates the responsibility and load on those shop stewards who do attend.

This is accentuated where some politically and personally ambitious union members accumulate as much access for themselves to as many meetings as possible, whether as shop steward delegates or office bearers. Amongst other things, this gives them access to experiences - including travel, hotel accommodation and so on - undreamt of by most workers.

On the other hand, as Amos Phike, NUMSA office bearer in Bloemfontein points out, for a shop steward to be really effective at NEC level, it is advantageous to attend the whole sequence of meetings upwards. It is in this way that a broad range of issues can best be grasped and followed through.

On both counts, however, many unionists point to the dangers of the resulting concentration of information and influence - and dependence - on too few individuals, especially office bearers. The loss to a union of one such individual - for whatever reason - can lead rapidly to the loss of entire plants or the collapse of branches.

Complex and fundamental questions

Even more serious for shop stewards is the growing complexity of the work of such bodies as the BECs/RECs. They deal with all the regular routines of internal organisational supervision and financial control, as well as local and regional union struggles. But shop stewards are



also supposed to take on board, understand and transmit back to their fellow shop stewards - and workers - debates and decisions on complex and fundamental national questions. Recent such questions have been:

□ trade union participa-

tion in central state structures such as the National Manpower Commission - with accompanying questions of 'incorporation' and 'co-option' and so on; or

□ trade union initiation of the National Economic Negotiating Forum with the attendant questions whether this represents the start of a 'social accord' or 'strategic accommodation between labour capital and the state' in South Africa.

The reality, of course, is that few trade unionists at any level in any of the unions have a confident or full grasp of the immediate aims or long-term implications of these and the many other strategic options being adopted in the union movement in South Africa today. Yet shop steward leaders are supposed to be taking decisions expressing and ensuring workers control over such fundamental decisions now determining the strategic directions of the South African trade union movement into the future.

The reports - from shop stewards and union organisers alike - are that most shop stewards simply do not have the time, nor do they get sufficient support from their unions to deal with such matters. What regularly happens is that shop steward meetings register their lack of preparedness on the NEC proposal at hand, agree on the need for further explanatory sessions before taking any decision, or 'refer' such matters back to 'the structures'.

Urgent practical problems

Shop stewards are also having to deal with urgent practical problems which are more familiar to them and more amenable to decisions and actions. This is why shop stewards report - and some more educated and politically-inclined complain - that not only

factory committees but even locals and BECs are mainly focused on 'bread and butter' issues.

However, to most shop stewards - and certainly most workers - the main and most urgent function of the trade unions is to improve their wages and conditions. And in the current severe economic recession this means defending their very jobs, fighting casualisation and subcontracting, coping with the new challenges of 'flexibility' and job redefinition and above all struggling to negotiate moratoriums on retrenchments.

Thus even these 'practical' aspects of shop stewards' responsibilities are by no means 'simple.' In fact, the agreements being negotiated in these difficult days are complex combinations of wages, jobs, (re)training and productivity deals and more. Even experienced employees of the unions say that they find such negotiations extremely difficult. How much more so must it be for shop stewards!

Strengthening shop stewards

The question facing every trade unionist today is how the shop stewards can be supported and strengthened. These are not new questions but they are assuming a greater urgency than ever before. One of the more obvious solutions is for shop stewards to have more time to do their work.

Full time shop stewards?

Being full time certainly gives shop stewards the advantage of more space to deal with the complexities of their union roles. However, management will obviously not pay for all shop stewards to be full time, and that tends to favour the development - and dominance - of those who are.

Former FAWU general secretary, Jan Theron, feels that full timers begin to function



as officials but "are not subject to the control to which officials are subject because they are regarded as workers in terms of the constitution."*

Experienced NUMSA shop steward in Durban, Sam Mthethwa goes a

step further, saying: "We shop stewards are opposed to becoming full timers. Full time shop stewards become distant from workers. Sitting in clean clothes, they don't feel the same conditions. We have learned from experience that full time shop stewards become tools of management." Similarly, one shop steward at a recent SACCAWU national bargaining conference warned against full time shop stewards becoming "bosses boys".

Rod Crompton**, former general secretary of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), feels that some shop stewards are keen on becoming full timers because their jobs become "cushy". But having full time shop stewards in large plants with thousands of workers "can be useful if their tasks are carefully defined and monitored by the union." This may be feasible with well organised unions such as CWIU. And there are full time shop stewards who continue to be solid worker leaders in some of the biggest plants and most powerful union branches in South Africa. But wider union reports suggest there are more negative experiences than positive.

Formal training and education

The far more common solution proposed by shop stewards themselves is for their unions to provide them with better training and education for their roles. Even the most cursory of surveys reveals very widely differing - and mostly inadequate - training systems in the different unions in South Africa:

At one end of the spectrum are the stronger unions, such as NUMSA: with basic,

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** at present on study leave

FEATURE

intermediate and advanced training programmes for shop stewards at different stages of their development, and at local regional and national levels. Yet even so, Jerry Thibedi, former shop steward and NUMSA



Education Secretary for the Northern Transvaal and Highveld, says: "Our education is mainly reactive to employers raising issues. We have not yet reached the level where our shop stewards are equipped to take the initiative, to pose questions and demands on management."

At the other end of the scale, many South African unions have only rudimentary training for their shop stewards and make only intermittent efforts at educational workshops etc. Like PPWAWU - with only one full time educator for 42 000 members - they simply do not have the material and human resources to sustain effective regular educational programmes. For example, some TGWU shop stewards in Natal claim to have had only one basic course, but no further training for between one and three years; and, as shop steward Duduzile Makhanya says, they feel "still blank as shop stewards."

Nonetheless - for all their shortcomings - as one of the few mass organisations in South Africa to be seriously committed to educating and empowering its members and grassroots leaders, the trade union movement has made great achievements in developing highly effective worker leaders over the years.

"Never-ending cycle"

The problem, say trade unionists, is that shop steward training and education is a "never ending cycle". Such is the lack of skills within the unions - and in South African society as a whole - that no sooner is the potential contribution of promising shop stewards

improved, often with great effort and at great cost to their unions, than they are

- snapped up as office bearers and workers leaders in the higher structures of their union, up to national level, and even into the

structures of COSATU; or sometimes even other political or community organisations;

- promoted to become officials within their own or even in other branches, regions or unions - as organisers, education officers, branch/regional secretaries and other roles;
- withdrawn - temporarily but also often permanently - from active union roles to become advisors, researchers and so on for academic institutes, labour organisations, publications and the like;
- most seriously of all*, targeted by management and lured out of the unions into better-paid positions as labour liaison, personnel management, community service officers and the like - which utilise their inside knowledge and skills developed by the trade unions in the service of new industrial relations strategies.

The result for the trade unions is that they find themselves "constantly running just to stay on the same place". The trade unions are not only the best "schools of the working class", they seem to be the "best sources of trained personnel for everyone else in South Africa!" according to one union leader.

Mutual influence and development

There are, of course, many other avenues of shop steward development than formal trade union workshops, seminars and conferences. Sam Mthethwa of NUMSA says that it is the responsibility of older shop stewards to impart their shop floor experience and union traditions to newer or younger shop stewards in their day to day work. Similarly, he says, better organised

* this is frequently the very first to be cited by interviewees when asked about problems facing shop stewards today

work places must strengthen the weaker.

That is why, as a number of unionists stressed, it is crucially important to maintain continuity with change. A balance is essential of older, even if less educated, but

shopfloor-experienced shop stewards *with* the newer, better educated but less 'rooted' shop stewards being promoted today.

CWIU is one of the unions with varied and effective forms of education, from the basics right up to 'political policy' and 'women's issues' workshops. Yet CWIU's Rod Crompton stresses that the exchanges and mutual influences in all working meetings are an integral part of the education of shop stewards. Not all unions - and even not all regions within the same unions - can rely upon this sort of stimulation of weaker shop stewards, work places and regions by stronger.

The unevenness - and importance of mutual support - is even more marked *between* unions. As Durban CWIU shop steward, Absolom Mncube says "training and support to shop stewards in our union is good," but he adds, "we don't follow these questions through with affiliates present in COSATU locals." This raises the question of the role of what is frequently referred to as "cross-fertilisation" amongst the unions affiliated to COSATU.

"Cross-fertilisation" in COSATU

COSATU locals could provide the ideal regular meeting ground for grassroots shop stewards from weaker unions/union branches to interact with those from the better organised unions/branches. There is evidence in COSATU locals' attendance registers - and in the statements of shop stewards themselves - that it is often those shop stewards feeling the lack of training/input from their own unions who attach most importance to the input they can receive through their COSATU locals.

COSATU at national level has tried to compensate for the unevenness in resources



and organisation amongst its affiliates by providing its own educational programmes. However, COSATU's regional structures are themselves uneven, and some - such as the OFS and Northern Cape for example - don't even have their own

Regional Education Officer. Yet, as Thabo Makweya, COSATU Regional Secretary in Kimberley in the Northern Cape, points out, "without education and training of all shop stewards in all the affiliates, the system can degenerate into domination by the strong affiliates."

Such domination may derive more from objective factors than deliberate intention on the part of the stronger affiliates. Where an element of 'sectorialism' does enter, however, is in what one COSATU official calls the rather "proprietary" attitude of some affiliates over their shop stewards. Some affiliates are hardly present at all in COSATU locals.

Some negative features

The oral and statistical evidence is that attendance in general at COSATU locals is down on previous years. For example, approximately 100 out of a possible 500 shop stewards turn up at COSATU's Durban local. Even in the well-placed Jo'burg local only about 100 of the potential 1 000 shop stewards turn up regularly. In addition to the endemic problems of violence, difficulties with transport and time and so on, there seem, however, to be other problems internal to COSATU locals.

'Top down' influences

Although COSATU local office bearers are elected, they function within a different dynamic to that of office bearers in the affiliates. They can be replaced, if unsatisfactory, but COSATU office bearers are less subject to the direct workers control that shop stewards can exercise within their own affiliates. What is more, COSATU office bearers

FEATURE

are themselves 'up-rooted' from their own unions, so to speak, and find themselves operating without the sort of mandates they are used to.

A greater source of difficulty is the range and complexity of the reports and instructions coming down to locals from COSATU national headquarters through regional offices/officers. These are vital sources of information, especially on national campaigns and the like, but they seem to be presented in ways that overawe both the shop stewards and the local office bearers. These reports can concern such complex - or debatable - matters as

- COSATU's positions on/role in the national constitutional negotiations in CODESA; or
- COSATU's Economic Growth Path arising out of its recent Economic Policy Conference.

Without full preparation and clear briefings, it is extremely difficult for most local office bearers to deal with complex issues of national COSATU policies and national South African politics. The tendency is simply to present them as 'top down' reports with no room for debate; or to focus on the more manageable practical aspects arising; or even to postpone them in favour of 'more pressing practical local matters'.

Routines and procedures

For these and other reasons, COSATU locals have a disappointingly routine character, sometimes quite dominated by "rigid proceduralism", according to OFS/Northern Cape COSATU Chair Serake Leeuw. This may explain why, as COSATU Johannesburg local Chair Nelson Ngale, observes, shop stewards seem to prefer to attend their own affiliate locals.

Such bureaucratised meetings have the unfortunate effect of alienating some of the more active and educated shop stewards who say they find COSATU locals "boring" - despite the fact that they are sometimes their



only union source of information on what is going on at national level.

Far from really informing and consulting grassroots worker leaders, there is a danger that COSATU headquarters may be using locals to turn shop stewards into

passive 'recipients' and diligent 'implementers' of instructions from on high. It also seems to be particularly irritating to some of the more informed shop stewards that, when they go to COSATU locals seeking their federation's explanations of the latest developments on the national stage, they are invariably simply given the same 'official statements of position' as are doled out to the media and the like, except that the shop stewards generally get them much later.

Functioning, basically, as channels of communication on common union matters and co-ordination of joint union actions, COSATU locals are therefore not the ideal terrain on which the less developed shop stewards can observe and learn from the 'dynamic informed debate' that may be lacking in their own union/branches.

Bureaucratic tendencies

Bureaucratic tendencies to elevate procedures above politics, observed amongst some COSATU local office bearers, are reported also about some office bearers within the affiliates. Obstructive bureaucracy is a function both of weaknesses in office bearers and their shop stewards. Where the shop stewards are well organised and conscious of democratic workers control, such tendencies can be kept under control, or the office holders removed.

More typically, office bearers - branch/regional chairs, secretaries, treasurers and the like - tend to be chosen from the best shop stewards. They carry all the burdens, and more, than the rest of their shop stewards do, and they will reflect their strengths and their weaknesses. But office bearers and shop stewards, alike, say that nowadays they are

facing a new form of pressure from another direction: a new type of official.

The new type of official

As the unions grow in scale and complexity, employed officials are assuming an ever-greater role. Although many of these are still appointed from within the unions, more officials are coming in 'from outside': white collar functionaries out of work, matriculants or university students unable to continue their studies and so on. For some, a stint in the unions is a viable job option and often a useful training ground or spring board into related (and more lucrative) areas.

Unlike "older organisers who have union attitudes", as one shop steward put it, the new type of organisers are often coming into the unions "as a job" and "not on the basis of commitment pure and simple", as Pat Horn says. She adds that "workers took it for granted that they would always have committed people" in such positions, and they are unprepared for the new type of organiser, many of whom "don't fully understand workers control [and even] really resent it."

Sakhela Buhlungu says that "most of the old organisers who have grown up with the unions are sensitive not to overstep their role." Now, however - although there are many effective and committed people among the new generation of officials - they are coming in at a phase in which there is an increasing tendency for officials to lead office bearers rather than the other way round.

These tendencies differ from official to official but are more marked in the weaker unions. At worst, where shop steward structures are weak, ambitious officials build up their own power bases. They do this by encouraging dependence and manipulating politically inexperienced workers.

Organisers, in turn, are promoted by weak worker leaders who constantly call them in to



deal with matters that they themselves should handle. At the same time, long - standing union organisers say that some of the new "careerist officials" actively counter emerging shop steward leaders in a variety of ways.

The paradox, says one union leader, is that "it is easier for determined workers to get rid of an unsatisfactory leader than an unsatisfactory employee."

"Organisers taking control"

In principle, middle level office bearers should be an effective counter-weight to over-bearing officials, but they are at a disadvantage faced with the full time officials positioned at their branch/regional offices between them and other structures of the union. Some shop stewards are convinced that officials hoard information and deliberately hold back documents from head office to increase their own power and control.

There seems to be some resentment amongst shop stewards against an "arrogant" new breed of official who "has never worked in a factory and don't know workers!" Numbers of shop stewards, struggling to defend their rights under democratic workers control, talk about "organisers controlling us instead of us controlling them!"

A partial solution to this inversion of workers control could lie in the recent proposal by NUM president James Motlatsi that all regional chairs should become full time elected positions. This could help them get on top of matters and exert more control over officials. It could, however, also contribute to their becoming distanced from the members, with the danger - as with full time shop stewards - of being turned into 'white collar functionaries'.

Another proposed solution is to try to ensure that officials are appointed as much as possible from amongst the best shop stewards. They have come up through the unions and have a

direct knowledge and commitment to workers control. As Pat Horn points out, however, while it is important to have 'worker officials', it is even more important to keep the best shop stewards as elected worker representatives to guarantee effective worker control up through all the union decision-making bodies to the NEC itself.



need an informed, effective institutionalised countervailing force from the base.

Workers themselves say that their control over leaders is essential because:

- "leaders and officials make decisions in their

heads, but workers' families feel them in their stomachs," according to one senior shop steward; and

- "at every level it must be workers representing other workers because they are the ones who can truly feel and represent what other workers feel," according to another.

One shop steward says they are the "links" all the way up a "chain tying leaders to the workers they speak for". That is why shop stewards, too, need a close and constant interaction with and control by the workers where they are based.

Shop stewards have hitherto been immersed in an embracing ethos of accountability, commitment and care for their fellow workers. But that care *and* accountability must be seen to operate from the bottom right to the very top of the unions, or the evident sense of dissatisfaction can become disillusionment and even self-serving cynicism can set in.

Workers democratic control is not only necessary for the practical political reasons of ensuring their commitment and the effective functioning of the unions. Empowering workers is seen by shop stewards themselves as an end in itself.

Out of the horrors of economic exploitation, political oppression and social degradation, SA trade unions have developed a unique (not perfect, but special) form of developing and directly empowering workers. Encouraging in workers a **capacity** for and a **conviction** about their rights to exercise control is a powerful and liberating principle and - whatever the difficulties - every effort has to be exerted to defend **and** extend it. The debate, now, is how this is to be done. ☆

*The weakening of workers' control

The role of worker representatives at national level is, in fact, undergoing rapid erosion in many COSATU affiliates today. The evidence varies from union to union but the features are clear and common enough to indicate a general trend towards the weakening of workers control.

A repeated lament from shop floor workers is a sense of not being fully in touch with what is being decided at the topmost levels in their unions, and more especially at the COSATU level. Even experienced shop steward leaders feel that in the current situation in South Africa, decision-making in COSATU is moving out of their control and into the hands of fewer and fewer remote leaders and national officials.

One national union leader, confirms this, speaking about workers "losing and losing workers control and it is in danger of becoming just a slogan."

Workers control more difficult but more important

With increasingly complex issues to deal with and difficult struggles ahead, workers control is becoming more difficult but more important than ever before.

Trade union leaders and officials are today coming under growing pressures and deliberate influences from outside union ranks and from outside the working class, and they