

# Shoprite-Maputo

*a different 'Renaissance' for workers*

In many cities, the opening of a food store attracts only minor attention. In Mozambique, Shoprite's arrival three years ago was an event. On the day Shoprite supermarket opened its doors in Maputo, the store was swamped with people who had been crushing its designer-tiled entrances to get in. There was much hype and local town gossip before this event, and local dignitaries attended the opening. Newspapers ran front-page coverage of the event.

The Shoprite Centre, 'Centro Commercial', is situated on the edges of the central business district in Maputo. The Centre takes up about 12 500 sqm of shop space and 12 500 ha of car park space - roughly the size of a small South African shopping mall. The Centre initially cost R5,4-million (less than US\$1-million). There are eight shops and a workforce of no more than 250 in the Commercial Centre, with Shoprite taking the lion's share of this number. Many of the single-storey shops in the mall are South African-owned (Truworths, Pep Stores).

The mall's entrance is made of beautiful modern paving. The entrance to Shoprite is the wide, brightly-lit shopping centre that marks 'First World' supermarkets. Fresh dairy products, rows of fresh fruit, signs announcing specials and identifying aisles, about eight rows of neatly-uniformed women cashiers at their tills and black male floor managers racing

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*Darlene Miller argues that Shoprite employees in Maputo, Mozambique occupy a contradictory location. On the one hand they are a privileged section of the national workforce. On the other hand, low standards in national labour markets and South African workplace domination make for highly coercive workplace conditions.*

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around with clipboards: this is what may be expected on a good day at Shoprite-Maputo.

The Shoprite Centre seems to be sandwiched between the target consumer market - beautiful houses and middle-range apartments on the east side, and on the north and west there is (what people call) 'cement city', a sprawling old high-density township, busy with people, children, informal food markets and stalls with second-hand clothing. To access the store can mean crossing some huge 'dongas' - holes in the road. The urban surrounds are bamboo shacks, poverty, broken-down infrastructure and 'shibalo'

work relations between Portuguese Mozambican owner-managers and subservient, multitasked local workers. Entering Shoprite is like crossing a boundary in space and time.

The wave of foreign investment from post-apartheid South Africa into other parts of Africa is having a dramatic effect. For some, South Africa is Africa's liberator and Calvin Klein all rolled into one. Step into the largest chain store in Nairobi, Kenya and what you buy are clothes from Woolworths, one of South Africa's largest clothing retailers. The milk on the shelves of the Shoprite-Checkers supermarket in Zambia is brought from South Africa. Thousands of Angolans flood across the Namibian border to shop at the new South African supermarket. Journalists trumpet this new 'scramble for Africa'.

But some in the host countries fear South African recolonisation. Many say that South Africa is taking over their local industries. South African mining companies, supermarkets and farmers are moving into the region almost recolonising it.

South African goods and investors are moving aggressively across the continent, killing fragile domestic industries. Others believe that South Africa will help bring jobs and build skills in their economies. How do Mozambicans feel about the new investments, especially the workers at Shoprite-Maputo?

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Newspapers ran front page coverage of the opening of shoprite.

## The workplace

Working at Shoprite-Maputo is a daily regional experience. The daily organisation of work at the shop does not allow workers or managers to forget that they are part of a powerful South African multinational. Store items are railed and trucked across the border from South Africa. If there are any border delays or customs problems, supplies may be disrupted and workers then have to rearrange the shop's shelves to conceal the milk, yoghurt or any other shortages in supplies. Cross-border Mozambique-South African relations and regulations thus influence the smooth functioning of the store. The store imports more than 80% of its stock. Shoprite in Gauteng purchases



*Border delays influence the smooth functioning of Shoprite-Maputo.*

the goods at a wholesale price and distributes them to the Maputo store.

Management claims that quality and reliability are a problem with supplies from the Mozambican market. Packaging is unreliable, and this is a key element in efficient shopfloor organisation.

To facilitate centralised buying and distribution, Shoprite installed an in-house communication system that links all its stores in the region. The company uses it to distribute marketing manuals, human resources information, catalogues for the purchasing and marketing of goods, training schedules, internal job openings, etc.

The store is supervised through a hierarchical chain of command:

- the Gauteng manager has overall responsibility;
- a management board chaired by the Gauteng manager (and includes an ex-Frelimo minister as an investment advisor);
- three divisional managers and a hands-

on branch manager (a Portuguese expatriate who lived in South Africa for 20 years).

The main form of external company supervision involves regular verbal and written management reports from the Maputo store to the Gauteng Divisional Manager. Shoprite head office and Gauteng managers also conduct shopfloor visits, spending one or two whole days on the shopfloor, taking notes, checking documents and going through each division of the store. When top managers inspect the store, both workers and managers go into intensive work mode, anxiously preparing for the visit. They are too busy to talk and have interviews, the atmosphere is tense and working hours are longer than usual.

While local and head office management claim that Shoprite-Maputo can make independent decisions, practice suggests something different. The head office chief executive officer (CEO)

claimed that the company's regional operations are highly decentralised. The branch manager claimed that his authority was the most important: 'They don't tell me what to do... I will show you anything you want to see. I am the boss here.'

However, a range of other practices suggest more centralised control. The branch manager complained about the top-down way staff were deployed, with no consultation of him or 'his boys'. Tight organisational systems between the local branch and the South African operations suggest more centralised control.

### Local elite?

To work at Mozal (Mozambique Zinc and Aluminium) or the new Shoprite in Mozambique is to be part of a labour elite compared to labour conditions in the rest of the country.

Wages at the store are twice as much as the average Maputo worker. According to the Department of Labour, minimum wage rates for service and industrial sector workers were US\$37,50 (R260) per month in 1999. The editor of *Metical*, a faxed daily newspaper, estimated that local businessmen pay US\$33 (R231) to US\$50 (R350) per month.

At Shoprite-Maputo wages for temporary workers are \$83 (R580) to \$100 (R700) per month and for permanents are \$117 (R820) per month. Hours of work at the Shoprite store are ten hours per day, beginning either at 8am and 10am and ending at 6pm or 8pm respectively, with a one-and-a-half-hour lunch break (siesta time). Workers work from Monday to Sunday with one day off in the week.

Sundays are a seven-hour straight workday with a quick bite for lunch. Most of the workers stay close to work and go home for lunch, so little time (or cost) is taken for transport to and from work. The

total work week for Shoprite staff averages 49,5 hours.

Of the approximately 200 employees at Shoprite, only 50 are permanent. Most of the workforce is casualised – working as temporaries who enjoy no leave benefits. Temporary workers – 'eventuals' – who started there when Shoprite opened, have not had any leave in the last two-and-a-half years. Eventuals also have no contract.

Training for wage labourers is minimal – a supervisor or peer trains new workers on the job for a few hours per day for about two weeks. Shoprite took some administrative staff and black management to live-in training courses in Nelspruit, for two months.

Shoprite-Maputo workers have all the trappings of the modern South African retail workforce. They are dressed in crisp uniforms. In a country where most people only speak Portuguese, most Shoprite workers can communicate with a basic English. Their positions on the shopfloor are clearly defined and levels of technology are similar to South African supermarkets. But the status of work at Shoprite is governed not only by work conditions but by the prestige of the supermarket in the local community.

### Community reactions

To some observers some of the promises of South Africa's African Renaissance would seem to be bearing fruit through the agency of South African corporations. For many Mozambicans Shoprite's investment is 'um bom investamente', a good investment. There are new jobs where there were no jobs. It creates new infrastructure and new consumption patterns.

Consumers have access to a range of commodities that they could not get in the past – fruit juices, processed meats, more different kinds of cleaning detergents.

Now Maputans who aspire to the culture of consumption that modern images have given to them, no longer have to go to 'mosquito-infested' local markets, as one resident described them. To a statistical observer, the size of Shoprite's investment (R5,5-million) may carry little meaning. To local Maputans and other Mozambicans who come from the countryside to shop, this store has changed the nature of their consumer lives dramatically.

But not everyone is happy. Local traders think that the special privileges given to Shoprite by the state and the local municipality give Shoprite an unfair advantage. 'Shoprite is a filthy-rich multinational with billions of US dollars in property. Shoprite had the chance to grow with apartheid. Mozambican traders have had to fight war and the competition of the informal sector. Many people were very happy when Shoprite opened. People went there in their droves. I was the only one objecting - what kind of regionalisation is this?' (*Interview, Metical editor, September 1999*)

Shoprite has also been the subject of local controversy because shoppers found expired goods on the shelves. Mozambicans accused South Africans of dumping old goods on them. Many of the wealthier shoppers returned to their old practices of buying at Shoprite in Nelspruit. Shoprite explains that expiries sometimes happen because of the way Shoprite South Africa organises its buying. Most retailers buy goods from warehouses. When these goods have a short shelf-life, they are sold at discounts. Shoprite also buys these discounted goods in bulk. This may be fine for South African stores, but at the Maputo store, goods take longer to arrive at the shelf and turn-over is also slower. (Maputo consumers often wait until promotions happen to shop at the store.) Delays at the borders also create a

problem. The centralised mechanisms of purchase and distribution in South Africa can have this negative outcome for stores in other countries. One of the black trainee managers argued that this was the expected order of things, with the regional 'biggies' dumping on the local 'smallies'. Turnover in South Africa is difficult. They finish their stock in Maputo. Of course they do things to suit them. They are the big ones, so what they want happens. It's a story. It happened before. It won't change. Dumping in Africa has always been happening. It's happening now in a modern way.' (Trainee manager)

### **What workers at Shoprite say**

Many workers are not satisfied with Shoprite. Workers are less concerned with Shoprite as a larger investment and more concerned with their immediate conditions. Their problems are many, ranging from multi-tasking and unequal treatment of temporary and permanent workers to inefficient black Mozambican store management and inconsistent efficiency at store-level. Poor management leads to a lack of co-operation from workers and a dirty, untidy store, a situation these workers think is not good for the store. Workers reported that they have been locked into the store overnight and had to work unpaid overtime before regional management inspections or sale promotions. At R9,50 a litre of Liquifruit, the new consumer items are not that affordable on a salary of R580 to R820 per month.

Workers have to buy their own uniforms with no compensation. There is no consistent standard for job descriptions. Multi-tasking characterises their work, where a neatly-dressed cashier can be pulled off the tills to help unload a truck or sweep the floors. Workers clearly resented the lack of leisure time and



*Mozambican Shoprite workers want to establish contact with South African unions.*

prospects for improvement. All wanted to study further and complained of how their work did not allow for this. Alvaro, a smart 18-year old, is a star swimmer, loves reading and is trying to take English classes. But he has become so exhausted that he is having difficulty keeping up any of these activities: Rodrigues has a similar problem: 'I am interested in law. Because of work this is very difficult. This current schedule is very bad. I can't stop working and someone can't finance me. If you ask management for a special time-table for going to school, they don't agree because they don't have an interest in that.'

Workers had little respect for the black management who they worked with daily on the shopfloor. They saw these six managers as disorganised and giving conflicting instructions.

There was a high standard at the store only when regional or headquarters management were inspecting. But their most bitter complaint was the lack of

respect and their feelings of being undervalued at work: 'There is no consideration for workers.' (Fabiõ) 'The pay is not bad. The problem is respect.' (Rodrigues)

Workers are aware of their privileged status within the Mozambican workforce, but they remain sceptical: 'Certainly, people look at us and say, "You are a good man, you are working at Shoprite. You get a lot of money." But this is not the case. Lunch and tea breaks are being cut back. There is no pay for overtime. At the beginning this bothered me. Now I don't care.' (Manuel) All the workers I interviewed repeated this theme: 'People think working for Shoprite is good. But it is bad.' (Graca) 'I am permanent but if I get injured, I get no compensation. No-one pays you for the first three days that you are sick ... In two years my salary hasn't changed, even though I am permanent. People respect them (Shoprite workers) because they only know it from outside.'

(Fabio) 'I am not enjoying working here but it is better than other jobs in Mozambique.' (Ernesto)

Workers have formed their own workers' committee at shopfloor level. While they enjoy the support of just under half the workforce, they could not make the majority needed for union recognition. The workers' committee has unsuccessfully tried to call work stoppages.

All the workers I interviewed had great respect for the leader of the shopfloor workers' committee. An ex-primary school teacher, Ernesto, is the image of a typical agitated, militant South African shopsteward of the 1980s. He is passionately concerned with establishing contact with South African trade unions. The workers' committee was collecting funds at the time for a trip to South Africa. His demand was that Shoprite-Maputo have the same conditions as South African workers, because of the way shopfloor management made comparisons with South Africa. 'When we make demands, they (management) always say that this is the way things are done in South Africa and we should comply. Well, if that is the case, we should go and see the Shoprite shops in South Africa for ourselves, and then we will see.' (Alvaro)

Other workers made similar comparisons. 'South African trade unions are more organised. This enterprise comes from there. In June/July, at the end of the financial year in South Africa, salaries are increased. When there was no increase this year, Shoprite workers were throwing stones in South Africa. This is not possible here. In South Africa the casual workers don't work everyday but get the same leave as permanent workers. But not in Mozambique.' (Fabio) A few workers were uninformed about South Africa and had no views on whether they were getting or

should get the same conditions as South African workers.

## Conclusion

The opening up of new stores, breweries, energy plants, mines and other worksites is creating a new segment of wage workers in Southern Africa. Workers in Mozambique have, for over a century, served South African multinational capital as migrant mineworkers in South Africa. This now happens alongside the creation of a new layer of formal sector, waged workers in Mozambique working for South African multinationals which have invested in Mozambique. This new segment of workers occupies a contradictory location. On the one hand they are a privileged section of the national workforce. On the other hand, low standards in national labour markets and South African workplace domination make for highly coercive workplace conditions. This entails casualisation, intensification of work and low wages structured along lines of race and gender. The African Renaissance has an unexpected meaning for workers beyond our borders. Workers are making comparisons with South African workers and may want to make some demands on the new region. Post-apartheid Southern Africa and the proclaimed African Renaissance may encourage workers at South African companies to expect a better status and improved work conditions. If discriminatory treatment between South African workers and their regional counterparts was a source of tension in the past, in the present context a new sense of regional identity will make such discrimination untenable. The new flurry of economic activity by South African multinationals in other parts of Africa could awaken worker expectations and give new life to workers' struggles in the region and beyond. ★