



The new union vision

reconstruction in a democratic South Africa

The early 1990s was a period of political change in South Africa, of transition from apartheid to democracy.

The organisations of the liberation movement – the ANC, the SACP and the PAC – had been unbanned, and were involved in negotiations with the apartheid regime over the shape of a new, non-racial democratic South Africa. Organisations were beginning to discuss their hopes and strategies for a post-apartheid society.

NUMSA, the union which represented the workers at Highveld Steel, was also debating its responses to these changes. It developed a new strategic vision of union-driven reconstruction in the economy and the workplace.

The shopstewards at Highveld Steel were deeply involved in the union debates, research and study groups that the new strategic vision emerged from. This article describes the Highveld shopstewards' vision of workplace change as they explained it in the mid-1990s.

New strategic vision

The shopstewards argued that there were three reasons why it was necessary to forge a new strategic vision:

- ❑ The transition to democracy meant that the trade union movement should play a central role in reconstruction – in

Highveld Steel is a massive steelworks outside Witbank. It was a centre of militant struggle in the 1980s. During the 1990s, the NUMSA shopstewards at Highveld Steel tried to implement a new strategic vision of reconstruction in the workplace. Over the next few issues Labour Bulletin will run a series of articles by Karl von Holdt describing their attempts to transform the workplace.

other words, in rebuilding the economy so it could meet the needs of a new democratic government and of the people.

- ❑ The transition to democracy created an opportunity for the union to shape a new democratic order in the workplace and eradicate the legacy of apartheid.
- ❑ Globalisation was increasing the competitive pressure on South African industry in general, and on Highveld Steel in particular. The union should

play a proactive role in increasing productivity and quality and thus prevent management from implementing anti-worker strategies.

Rebuilding the economy

In the view of the shopstewards, the changing political conditions in South Africa meant that the union should play an active role in economic reconstruction. Meshack Malinga, the chair of the joint shopstewards committee, explained this: 'In the 1980s we embarked solely on resistance, we never wanted to concern ourselves with production, as part of the struggle to bring down the system of apartheid, economically and otherwise. When we resisted the system of apartheid we wanted it to be replaced with a democratic order, a democratic government.'

Now that we have a democratic government, we want it to succeed, and of course no political power can be maintained if there is no economic power. Our economy has been devastated by the system of apartheid, and we need to rebuild it now. So I therefore believe that the culture definitely has to change from the culture of resistance and ungovernability to the culture of productivity.'

New workplace

Over the years of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, a racially-oppressive system of workplace relations and practices had evolved. Together these formed what may be called the apartheid workplace regime. The apartheid workplace regime was based on a racial division of labour in which black workers performed unskilled tasks, and skilled and managerial jobs were reserved for whites. It was also based on a racial distribution of power. Most supervisors and virtually all

other managers were white. They exercised power not only as managers, but also as whites empowered by apartheid. They maintained this system of white power - of white *baasskap* - through racial insults and racial assault. According to one worker: 'it was the apartheid system that was working at Highveld. Management were not listening to black workers, they were always supporting white workers. If a black guy hit a white guy, he's fired. If the white guy beats the black guy, the white guy is not fired. It was not fair. Whites, they liked to beat workers at any time...'

The apartheid workplace regime was not only racist - it was also inefficient. Racism and the authoritarian and hierarchical relations between managers and workers meant there was poor communication in the workplace. Black workers, with limited access to education and training, tended to have low levels of skill."

Those who had developed their skills were not recognised and their skills were wasted. White workers and supervisors

Highveld Steel

Highveld Steel is owned by Anglo American, and was established in the mid-1960s. The steelworks produces about one million tons of steel a year, mostly as rolled sheets of strip and rolled rails and bars. Apart from the steelworks, the Highveld Steel group consists of a cluster of other plants around Witbank which produce steel-related products (it is the biggest producer of vanadium in the world), as well as Rheem which manufactures aluminium cans. It also owns a one-third stake in Columbus Stainless, one of the world's biggest stainless steel plants. The Highveld Steel group employs 6-7 000 people. NUMSA has over 3 000 members at Highveld in Witbank.

were also often lacking in the necessary skills, because they were promoted as whites rather than because of their skill or ability.

'If I may speak the truth, if a white man gave you a job, you were not supposed to know whether he was a foreman or where he worked, you just had to follow him, listen to what he was telling you... He had a right of just taking you and saying follow me to fix that machine while you were not working with him. If you refused, you had refused to obey that man's rules,' added another worker.

The result was inefficiency, waste and poor quality production.

'...we feel as workers that we should also be involved in deciding what we want our company to do. We don't want to live in the past, where management had to think and decide for us.'

The shopstewards at Highveld Steel wanted to replace this regime with a new workplace order based on workers' skill and participation. As one of them put it: 'The political structure outside is changing. We are now going to be involved in everything that is taking place in our country, and we feel as workers that we should also be involved in deciding what we want our company to do. We don't want to live in the past, where management had to think and decide for us.'

According to Mosi Nhlapo, chair of the steelworks shopsteward committee at the time, their goal was both to empower workers and to improve production:

'Firstly, our goal is to give more control, more power, to the workers in their activities. Secondly, to make work easier for workers. Thirdly, one of the most important points is to change the relationship between management and workers, so that there should be mutual understanding between them. Fourth, we want to make sure that at the end the workers benefit from the process of producing steel. Fifth, the end result will be more productivity and better quality goods. Finally, not to forget that whatever is happening within the factory or industry must benefit those outside as well.'

Globalisation and competitiveness

According to the shopstewards it was essential to improve production (in terms of both productivity and quality) because of the increasing competitive pressure on Highveld Steel.

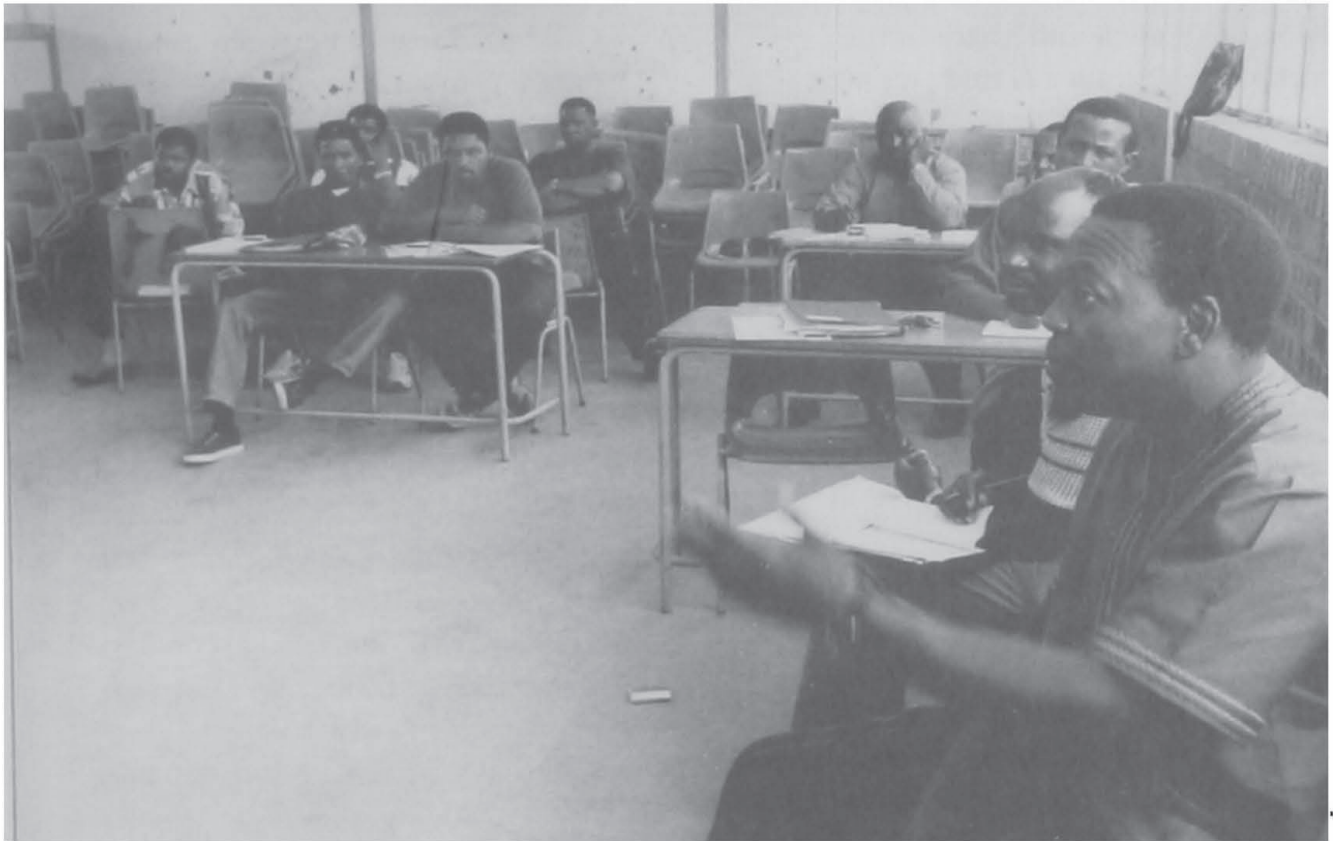
Nhlapo described their concerns: 'It's either things must continue as they are, and eventually Highveld Steel could close because we cannot compete with other companies; or we say we want to be part of Highveld Steel truly, by committing ourselves to our responsibilities, and sharing part of the cake that will come out at the end.'

By improving skills, participation and motivation, Highveld Steel could become more competitive, thus building the South African economy and protecting jobs.

Practical transformation

The shopstewards at Highveld Steel had practical proposals for achieving the transformation of the apartheid workplace regime into a democratic workplace. There were four aspects to their proposals:

- ☐ Implementing a skills-based grading and training system;
- ☐ Implementing new forms of work organisation based on teamwork and



Leslie Nhlapo discussing the new strategy of reconstruction with fellow shop stewards.

- greater worker control of production;
- ☐ trade union participation in the highest level of company decision-making;
- ☐ profit sharing.

New skills-based system

The shop stewards identified the lack of skills in the workplace – including managerial skills – as the major obstacle to improving the efficiency and quality of production. At the same time, apartheid's legacy of low levels of education and skill among black workers was the major obstacle to their advancement in the workplace. A skills-based grading system, together with a massive training programme, would provide new opportunities for black workers, eradicate the legacy of apartheid, and improve productivity.

Ezekiel Nkosi, then the secretary of the shop stewards committee, described the importance of these policies: 'The people

are not educated because of apartheid. Multi-skilling and the reorganisation of the company is the only way for us to earn a living wage and get the rights we deserve as workers. The company must develop the worker and give him training so that he can get promotions and do better jobs and earn a living wage. Multi-skilling will also improve productivity. The more workers gain skills, the better quality will be. The company will gain because production will be better. Both sides will benefit.'

New work organisation

The shop stewards' proposals for skills and training went hand-in-hand with their proposals for a new form of work organisation based on independent teams, multi-skilled workers, and the removal of supervision. Bunny Mahlangu, a former chair of the shop stewards committee at Highveld Steel during the 1980s, and then

regional NUMSA organiser, described this vision of a new South Africa in the workplace: 'Our idea is that you take planning of work out of the offices and into the people. You set up workteams that are able to set their own targets, that can produce quality, that can run the show without the superintendent, the foreman, the assistant foreman standing there and telling them what the manager in the office said they must do. There is a line of about ten people who are conveying messages to those who must do the work. We're saying that the office must give the production order to the people, and they should set their own priorities, their targets and everything. There should be no supervisor within them. If they want a supervisor they can elect someone from amongst themselves. People must not feel a painful responsibility. When they wake up in the morning they should feel that they want to go to work, that they will enjoy it.'

High-level participation

The shopstewards felt that if these practical transformations were implemented in the workplace, they and their members would be able to commit themselves to improving productivity. But there was one condition - that they should share in the benefits of improved productivity through some form of profit-sharing or bonus linked to production. To ensure that this happened, they argued that they, as trade union representatives, should have a role in the highest level of decision-making in the company. Only in this way could they influence the broader strategic decisions about company expansion, technological change, investment and the utilisation of profits.

Implications

This new strategic vision of NUMSA and of the shopstewards at Highveld Steel, had

implications for:

- ☐ the relationship between union and management;
- ☐ the relationship between workers and 'experts' in the union;
- ☐ for the struggle for socialism.

Firstly, the shopstewards argued that the strategy of reconstruction could only be implemented if there was co-operation between management and the union. According to Ambrose Mthembu, one of the shopstewards, 'Management should co-operate for reconstruction to be a success. As the union we can initiate - but if management does not agree, at the end of the day there will be no reconstruction programme. Both sides will have to compromise in order to reach consensus.'

'But,' he added, 'the union would have to be a watchdog to make sure that management is doing what has been agreed upon.'

Some of the new policies were very complex and required a high level of expertise. Already, the process of developing the new policies had empowered some officials and shopstewards, and disempowered others, as Nhlapo pointed out: 'Information is concentrated in a few individuals. They might be complicated and say things you don't understand, but at the end of the day you are bound to agree with them because you don't understand. You don't have any way to say, "No, I will debate it". What are you saying about democracy if you want people to accept your views with no information? That is the change in the union. Everything will be concentrated in the head office unless we do something very drastic.'

The formulation of the new strategy had been highly controversial within NUMSA, and sparked heated debates. Did the new strategy mean abandoning



Highveld strike 1993: Militant workforce, new vision.

socialism and committing the union to managing capitalism? Was it a new strategy for achieving socialism? Or was it a strategy for strengthening workers' position within capitalism and postponing the struggle for a different system?

The shopstewards at Highveld Steel agreed that the new strategic vision aimed to achieve some of the goals of socialism, although they had different opinions about whether it was likely to be successful in this aim.

As Nkosi put it, 'We want to make decisions about profits, we want to make decisions how to run the factories. When we talk about worker involvement in restructuring, it disguises that we are talking about socialism.'

So, in spite of their concerns about some aspects of the new strategic vision, and particularly about the weakening of union democracy, the shopstewards at Highveld Steel were committed to the

new strategic vision of their union, and to taking up the struggle to implement it in their workplace. The rest of the articles in this series describe different aspects of this struggle. ★

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