



# Implementing the vision

## *reconstruction through teamwork*

**T**he Highveld Steel shopstewards made several attempts to implement the union strategy on the shopfloor in different departments, but managers mostly refused to co-operate.

For example, the manager of the flat products division wanted to combine the workers from the trimming and cutting machines on the two production lines – plate and strip – into one ‘cut-to-length crew’.

Two of the shopstewards, Mosi Nhlapo and Ezekiel Nkosi, developed a proposal that the eight workers in the crew should all be trained to operate all the machines on both lines. They should all be upgraded to the level of the most skilled worker in the group, be paid accordingly, and operate as a team. The flat products manager agreed with this, but was ‘frustrated’ by senior management who insisted that new ways of organising work should not cost the company increased wages.

Management fashioned a counter-proposal in which the members of the crew would be graded at three different levels according to their most frequently performed tasks, but would still be required to fill in for workers on higher grades when necessary. The shopstewards rejected this, and the plan was abandoned.

But the shopstewards were able to

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*In the second article in his series on Highveld Steel, Karl von Holdt explores how shopstewards successfully implemented teamwork and transformed their workplace.*

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implement the union vision on the tap floors in Iron Plant One. At about the same time as the flat products proposal, Nhlapo heard that the tapping crews were initiating frequent stoppages in support of their demands for upgrading and better wages.

### **Working on the tap floor**

The six tap floors are located beneath the six furnaces in the iron plant. The job of the tapping crew on each floor was to open the tap-hole when the smelt was ready (every three to four hours), so that the molten iron and slag could run out of the furnace.

The slag was dumped and the molten iron was transported to the steel plant for processing into steel. The tapping crew drilled the tap-hole open, monitored the separation of iron and slag, released the flow of separated iron into the iron-pot at the right moment, and tried to prevent

spills. After the tap, their job was to clean the tap floor and prepare it for the next tap.

Conditions of work on the tap floor were tough and dangerous. Workers had to work in thick protective suits because of the heat of the molten iron and the danger of spills. Dehydration and heat exhaustion sometimes caused workers to collapse, and workers were injured and sometimes died in spills.

Leaking carbon monoxide gas had also caused fatalities. One of the tap floor workers described these conditions: 'Conditions on the tap floor are very dangerous. I am used to the place so I can work there with ease, but for a new person it is a very dangerous place. Whenever you are on the tap floor you should always do what the people who work there do, not run away or take the wrong direction.'

The tap floor was a harsh working environment, not only because of the physical conditions, but also because of the treatment by supervisors: 'It was tough on the tap floor. If they regarded you as cheeky they would send you there. If you complained about wages you were sent there as well. It was a white-dominated working site, it was an apartheid workplace. The treatment there was not fair.'

Most of the tappers were illiterate migrant workers. Many had worked on the tap floors for long periods of their working lives. Each tapping crew was led by a *baas-boy* or *induna*. When the furnace operator decided that the smelt was ready for tapping, he informed the foreman, who then instructed the *baas-boy* to start tapping. The *baas-boy* then instructed the members of his crew to get ready, while he drilled open the tap-hole. The tapping team members were graded as labourers on grade 14, while the *baas-*

boy was on grade 13. Absenteeism was high on the tap floors, and, after they had finished tapping their furnace, tappers in one crew were frequently instructed to join another crew and assist with tapping a second furnace. This was a sore point with workers, who felt entitled to rest between taps because their work was so hard.

### Tappers' demands

The tappers felt that they should earn higher wages because of the harsh conditions of their work. During 1990 they launched a series of small stoppages demanding to discuss their problems with their manager.

Eventually they were promoted – the tappers by one grade, and the *baas-boy* by three. This angered the tappers even more. They demanded to also be promoted three grades. Although the *baas-boy* was supposed to open the tap-hole, all the tappers knew how to perform this task. It had long been a custom on the tap floor that if the *baas-boy* was not present, the foreman would instruct another member of the team to do this.

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Now they refused, on the grounds that they were not paid to perform this task: 'Management would come and just point at anyone and tell them to do the job. So we realised that we have the same knowledge, but we are not paid for the work. That is why we came up with this

grievance, after realising that we knew the same thing.'

Management bent company policy and offered to pay the tapper who filled in for the induna an acting allowance at the higher rate. This worked for three months, and then the tappers again refused to co-operate: 'If the baas-boy was absent no-one would open the tap-hole. The operator could not move from his furnace and come down to the tap floor. So he would phone the superintendent.

The superintendent, not knowing the skills of opening the tap-hole, would phone the manager, and he would come and start begging the guys to open the hole. But they would just sit down and say, "You do it. Once the tap-hole is open we will work. But now the tap-hole is closed and there is no-one to open it." If the manager called another baas-boy to come and do it the guys would threaten to walk off the floor. If management called a worker to a disciplinary hearing for refusing to open the tap-hole or refusing

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to assist another team, all of the workers on the tap floors would leave their work and go to the inquiry, and say, "We are going to witness this inquiry."

### **Union proposals**

It was at this point that Nhlapo intervened. The tap floors occupied a key place in the production process. Any delay here

brought the entire steel plant to a standstill, so management was under intense pressure to resolve the workers' grievances. The iron plant manager agreed that the tappers could be upgraded to grade 12, but insisted that it should be paid for by reducing the number of workers per crew.

The numbers per crew had been reduced from nine to seven in retrenchments the previous year, during a downturn in the steel market. At the same time a mechanical grab had been introduced to help clean the workplace after tapping.

Management proposed that the size of the crews be frozen at their new level of seven members, and justified this by arguing that the grabs had reduced the workload. Since this would not entail any fresh reduction, workers 'were ready to fall for it' until Nhlapo pointed out that it could intensify work because the grabs were subject to frequent breakdowns. It would also be more difficult to have their former comrades who had been retrenched, re-employed.

Nhlapo proposed to the tappers that, instead, work should be transformed so that they worked as a self-directed work team. Their job descriptions should be expanded to include:

- drilling open the tap-hole for tapping;
- using a special gun for shooting open the tap-hole when it was blocked;
- repairing brickwork;
- minor welding work;
- checking and replacing the safety screens.

All tappers should be trained in these tasks and in leadership and team skills, and upgraded to grade 10. There should no longer be a baas-boy, but each team should elect its own leader and this position should be rotated.

The workers on the tap floors agreed

with Nhlapo's proposals. It seemed that these proposals would not only satisfy their demand for more money, but also alter the racial and skill hierarchies of the apartheid workplace. This was attractive to migrants who were located at the bottom of the apartheid hierarchy, as one of them commented: 'Mosi came to our rescue with the suggestion that since there were jobs that whites were doing that we could do, why don't those jobs get done by us, so that our wages can also be equal to theirs.'

The proposal was put to management. At the same time, workers applied their work-to-rule tactics to the grab. Whenever the grab broke down – which was often – the entire team would stop working until two extra workers were found or the grab was repaired.

At about this time a more liberal and innovative manager was shifted to the iron plant. He was more open to co-operating with the shopstewards, and welcomed innovative suggestions. He agreed to get rid of the grabs and expand the teams again. He also motivated to senior management why they should accept the shopstewards' proposals. Agreement was reached on a two-month training programme. While one shift was attending this programme, the other two shifts each worked a 12-hour shift.

### What was won

The new organisation of work on the tap floor was a radical break with the work organisation of the apartheid workplace regime. For most of the unskilled migrants on the tap floors this was the first training they had received. This was the case for Albert Makagula, a migrant shopsteward who had worked there for ten years: 'We only realised how well we do the job after we had been for training. The job is the same, nothing changed, but what has

improved now is the sense that we all have equal knowledge about the job and everyone knows what to do, and there are no conflicting ideas on the job that we are doing. That is the fulfilling thing, that everyone knows exactly what to do and why, and that's why it's better now. Throughout the years we were paid in a discriminatory way. Now for the first time we succeeded in forcing management to pay us equally with the whites.'

The training, upgrading and increased pay for tappers implied that management

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recognised the skills, experience and importance of a group of black workers who had been least acknowledged in the apartheid workplace.

The tappers had also won the right to 'job ownership' defined by a job in a particular team on a specific tap floor. Tappers could no longer be instructed to assist in another team whose members were absent. Instead, workers from the preceding and following shifts would be requested to work overtime – 12-hour shifts rather than 8-hour shifts – to cover absenteeism. This meant increased overtime pay.

### Removing the foreman

The creation of self-directed teams was a direct challenge to the racial structure of power centred on the foremen. Management resistance to removing the

foremen suggests how important they were to the apartheid workplace regime.

Nhlapo described these negotiations: 'We said, OK, remove this foreman, because when there are problems, when there is spillage, this foreman just stands there and says, "Werk! Werk! Werk!" - but he has got no idea how to do this work himself. The furnace operator, let it be his responsibility to tell the tappers that it is time to tap. So when there are problems the operator and the tapping team can communicate, unlike the foreman who just gives instructions and goes away - when there are problems there is no one to talk to. It was a tough battle.

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here." Eventually management agreed and the foreman was removed.'

The importance of the new way of working, in Makagula's view, was that workers could control their work and protect each other from the racism and victimisation of management: 'Before, the manager would come to tell us to start tapping and would interfere with our work in many ways - even though we knew what we were supposed to do. The way we now work at the iron plant is one of the ways I hope to see democracy in the workplace, because I find myself feeling happy with the way we work.

There is no harassment from white people.'

Instead of being oppressed by the foreman, workers could develop their own leadership skills: 'If workers are scattered and there is a job that needs to be done, the leader is the person who organises everyone and calls them together and tells them what to do. If management comes about a problem in the plant, or wants to know why a particular worker is absent, then he knows who to speak to. That is why there has to be a leader at all times.'

Another tap floor shopsteward, Hendrik Nkosi, commented on how workers' attitude to work had changed with the change in the structure of power: 'Before, the baas-boy was part and parcel of the foreman. The foreman had to assist the baas-boy because the people didn't do the job properly - not to say they didn't know the job, but the baas-boy was driving the people and the people were fighting the bosses. Now people are doing the job properly; the people are happy about this system. They assist the team leader, whereas they never helped the baas-boy. I don't see the foreman's job at the tap floor now, he's got nothing to do.'

Nkosi described the collective resolution of disciplinary problems: 'The leader calls the whole team to say, "Let's talk with this gentleman," because it's many times he has come late, or maybe when he's present he is not doing the job properly. "Let's get from him what is his problem." So the team sits down and talks to him.'

If that didn't solve the problem the leader would call some members from another team to assist, or even involve a shopsteward. This was a process of trying to solve the problem through discussion rather than punishment. Management's disciplinary procedures remained in place if the problem could not be solved by the workers. Nkosi stressed that this approach

also protected workers from managerial discipline: 'It is important to understand that if the man is absent but he reports to the team, the team can defend him from management's disciplinary inquiry because they can explain why he is absent.'

### Limitations

There were limitations to the tap floor experiment. According to Nhlapo, there had not been a shift to real multi-skilling. He would have liked to see the tappers trained to operate the furnace as well, thus abolishing the distinction between tappers and operators. But the tappers' lack of formal education made this impossible.

Several of the tappers confirmed that they had not learnt new work skills on the training course, since they already had the skills to do their job. What was new was the training in leadership skills, and information about how the furnace worked.

Other than that, the chief contribution of the training course was that it gave formal recognition to the informal skills of the workers.

The new organisation of work on the tap floors was not based on a reorganisation of work and production in the entire plant, but was rather like a 'liberated zone' of workers' control carved out of the apartheid workplace regime. This made it vulnerable to erosion over time.

### New SA in workplace

Despite these limitations, the union was able to combine the traditional militancy and solidarity of the tap floor workers with its new vision to transform work on the tap floors. There were three critical factors in the success of this project:

- The strength of worker solidarity and militancy in a strategic location in production.
- The presence of innovative shopstewards empowered by the union

vision of reconstruction and policies for implementing this vision.

- The presence of an innovative and liberal manager prepared to co-operate with workers and the union and to take risks in doing this.

As one of the iron plant shopstewards put it: 'We have taken the workers out of their Egypt, now they are in Jerusalem.' The racial hierarchy of skill, income and power inherited from apartheid, was dismantled and replaced with the collective control by black workers of their work. The

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transformation of work nurtured workers' solidarity, democracy and leadership skills. Workteams elected and rotated their own leaders, removing the racist and authoritarian power of the foreman. Workers endeavored to resolve problems of discipline and performance collectively, building their collective solidarity and protecting each other against managerial discipline. As another tapper put it, 'We have established the new South Africa in the workplace.' ★

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*Karl von Holdt's articles are based on his PhD research, undertaken while he was based at the Sociology of Work Unit at Wits University. He currently heads the Workplace Transformation Programme at Naledi.*