



# 'Wildcat co-operation

## *a new challenge*

**W**ildcat co-operation describes co-operation between managers and individual workers, or groups of workers, in introducing new and more efficient work practices in the workplace. It is more often informal than formal.

Wildcat co-operation is a new phenomenon of the 1990s, made possible by workers' desire for change, by the recognition of some managers that change is necessary, and by the new opportunities for promotion and affirmative action for black workers.

Support for wildcat co-operation is usually found among more skilled or younger workers who are looking for opportunities for promotion, improved skill and therefore better pay.

Through wildcat co-operation, managers can build support among workers for change and bypass the union. This means management can maintain control over workplace restructuring, and establish a workplace order with some legitimacy compared to the apartheid workplace regime.

This new workplace order is constructed by management rather than by the union, and the result may be marginalised and weakened union structures in the workplace.

This article describes three different cases of wildcat co-operation at Highveld Steel during the 1990s.

*In the last issue of the SA Labour Bulletin 'The Highveld Steel Story' described the struggles of the shopstewards at Highveld Steel to construct a new workplace order on the tapping floor of the iron plant. In this article Karl von Holdt describes the attempts by some of the managers at Highveld Steel to construct a new workplace order based on 'wildcat co-operation' with various groups of workers.*

### **The steel plant**

Over a period of several years retrenchment, dismissals, retirement and promotions had reduced the workforce in the steel plant. Management was deliberately using this attrition of worker to intensify work. The result was multi-tasking, increased workloads and grading anomalies.

In many cases managers persuaded workers to accept these changes with promises of upgrading and increased pay, 'making agreements' with individual

workers and bypassing the shopstewards. The shopstewards could see the dangers of this wildcat co-operation between individuals and managers, but were powerless to intervene.

Eventually, as management failed to deliver on its promises of increased pay, workers became disillusioned. Ambrose Mthembu, at the time a shopsteward in the steel plant, explained: 'They used to raise their grievances through the foreman, not really the way they should be raised. The time came when everyone was now sick and tired of hoping for the better, then they started coming to us again as a union. As shopstewards we had to tell them the truth, that they have done wrong by taking this to a foreman. They had to understand that we, as the shopstewards, are more capable of helping them than their foremen.'

Then, while Mthembu was away on a course, the steel plant workforce downed tools in a wildcat strike over their grievances. Wildcat co-operation led to a wildcat strike. On his return to work, Mthembu found that the stoppage had created 'a platform I could stand on, I could see management was now prepared to resolve problems'.

Mthembu was given time-off to examine the tasks and grading of the workers, and found that as attrition had reduced the number of grade five workers, workers on grade eight were required to assist them with their jobs, without any compensating increase in pay. He was able to persuade the steel plant manager that the grade eight workers should be upgraded to grade seven, that grade eight should be done away with, and that an additional nine workers should be employed on grade five to handle the workload.

It was only the workers' resort to unprocedural action which provided

Mthembu with the 'platform' to make these gains. But he also had to convince his manager that multi-skilling and upgrading would benefit production: 'I explained multi-skilling to my manager, I had to convince him that he is going to benefit because he will have a pool of people who can do most of the duties. If there is a shortage on one job, he can take anyone to assist - unlike presently, if there is a shortage of people then the job has to stand still. That is a way of increasing production, and we as NUMSA believe that we should increase production and profit.'

In the steel plant, workers became disillusioned with wildcat co-operation because it failed to deliver. This led to a wildcat strike, which provided the shopsteward with the opportunity to reassert the role of the union in representing workers and negotiating change. The union vision of reconstruction empowered the shopsteward to analyse problems and propose solutions that benefited workers. Management had to co-operate with the union rather than with individual workers.

### The iron plant

Management was much more successful in making use of wildcat co-operation in the iron plant. Here, the iron plant shopstewards themselves became participants in wildcat co-operation. A new manager was appointed in the iron plant in the course of 1992. In the shopstewards' experience he was different from any other manager at Highveld Steel, keen to innovate and experiment, open to discussion and consultation with the union and the shopstewards. He had a different style, interacting and discussing with ordinary workers on the shopfloor.

His strategy for eliciting co-operation from workers was to work with groups of workers in different sections of the plant

on ways to reorganise work, without the constraints of negotiating with the union over the broader implications of these local changes. He would identify common interests through a process of negotiation and consultation with workers, and try to accommodate their demands - usually for increased pay - by linking these to a reorganisation of the work process. In this way, the workers would be won over through increased levels of skill, pay and responsibility to his goals of increasing efficiency and reducing costs.

Wildcat co-operation started when the kiln operators complained that as white kiln operators were replaced by blacks, management had done away with the kiln attendants. This meant the operators had to perform extra tasks, like cleaning their workplaces or unblocking the chutes that fed the kilns, which made it impossible to control the kilns properly and resulted in poor production. Frustrated by management's lack of response, a shopsteward on the kilns proposed in a meeting with management that a working group should be established to investigate the problem and propose solutions. A shopsteward from the furnaces added that they had a similar problem with a shortage of operators.

The new manager agreed that two working groups should be established, one for the kilns and one for the furnaces. Each working group consisted of a shopsteward, seven rank-and-file workers, the superintendent and the assistant manager. The shopstewards saw these working groups as participative structures where managers and workers should work together as a team, rather than negotiating as representatives.

A year later the shopstewards reported that the working groups had developed a successful proposal to solve the shortage of labour by employing and training a new

category of workers called swingmen. The swingmen formed a flexible, multi-skilled group of workers who could be deployed wherever there were shortages - to the kilns, furnaces or hot-charge cars. Twelve workers were trained and upgraded for this position.

The furnace shopsteward described this as a success: new jobs had been created, the workload of operators had improved, and management and workers had co-operated fruitfully. The only problem was that the new multi-skilled workers were graded and paid two levels below the operators, although they were even more skilled. But the manager had satisfied them by promising that this problem would be sorted out once the restructuring of work in the iron plant as a whole had been completed - again, successfully establishing a constituency in support of his programme of restructuring.

While the furnace shopsteward was pleased with the success of the working groups, a white foreman who had joined NUMSA argued that management had pulled the wool over the workers' eyes. The swingmen were happy because they had been upgraded, but their presence was allowing management to continue reducing the number of other workers, some of them paid more highly than the swingmen: kiln and furnace operators, furnace attendants, hot-charge car drivers and radial gate attendants. Swingmen had applied for vacant positions as kiln or furnace operators, but were refused and the posts were kept vacant. Contractors were being brought in to do work previously done by furnace attendants. Management was planning a programme of automation that would do away with hot-charge car drivers.

Management was, in other words, slowly implementing a programme to

create a smaller, multi-skilled and flexible workforce that would simultaneously reduce costs and increase responsibility. The iron plant shopstewards, focused on immediate and local concerns and grievances, were missing the broader picture and failing to protect the collective interests of all iron plant workers. The new manager had successfully mobilised localised interests in 'wildcat co-operation' and undermined the union as the representative of the broader collective interest of workers.

### *New opportunities*

Wildcat co-operation was reinforced by the new opportunities for talented black workers – and especially shopstewards with leadership skills – to benefit from upward mobility in the restructuring process. The kiln shopsteward was promoted into the ranks of management and shifted to a different plant. The furnace shopsteward – who had started out as a shopsteward on the tap floor – was regularly appointed an 'acting foreman', and expected to be promoted as a full-time foreman. Co-operation with management clearly held potential for the advancement of their personal careers.

Initially, the furnace shopsteward commented on the dangers of the new manager's style and of working with management as a team: 'He's clever. If you talk with him you're supposed to be very careful. He tries to pull you from your side to be with him now, to be on the



*Highveld Steel workers: new opportunities for black workers leads to wildcat co-operation.*

management side. If you don't look carefully, you can't see him pulling you from that side. He wants to use you. He knows that if he gives a report together with you to the workers, they will accept it. Maybe later they will say this thing was not right. They are going to fight with you then, not with him'

But a year later, he was convinced that fundamental changes had taken place: 'Racism is totally changing. The management and workers are friends.'

This also meant the role of the shopsteward had changed: 'There are no more disciplinary enquiries. The foremen can solve problems with the workers. For the past ten months nothing has been required of me as a shopsteward. The time for fighting is past. Now you can negotiate. The door is open. If there is something

you are not happy about you can go and talk about it.'

In the view of this shopsteward, a new workplace regime had been constructed through co-operation between workers, shopstewards and management. The shopsteward leadership were much more critical. They argued that management in the iron plant had succeeded in undermining the collective solidarity of the union, co-opting the shopstewards and, through participation, building a constituency supportive of work restructuring among workers.

By mobilising the desire of black workers for change, the new manager had won their support and undermined the ability of the shopsteward leadership to intervene. The result was management control over restructuring, which held potential dangers for workers. The union was unable to contest, negotiate or put forward its own demands in relation to restructuring. Workplace restructuring was removed from the terrain of company-level negotiations where safeguards could be built in, and long-term goals established.

As important, if not more so, were their concerns about the politics of workplace change. Workplace change is as much about the balance of power and control as it is about grading or efficiency. The marginalisation of the union in the iron plant increased management's power to control and restructure production.

### GMPD

The General Maintenance and Production Department (GMPD) does shutdowns and maintenance work all over Highveld Steel. The GMPD workers are mostly artisans and labourers. In 1994 a workers' committee emerged in the department. It included one or two shopstewards together with a majority of ordinary workers. The committee was formed

because several of the white artisans wanted to bypass their union and work more closely with the NUMSA members. The NUMSA shopstewards in GMPD also wanted to strengthen their union by including rank-and-file members in their engagement with management.

In practice, this committee became a forum through which artisans, black and white, asserted their interests. It became the basis for wildcat co-operation with management, bypassing the structures and strategies of NUMSA in the company.

The GMPD manager and the workers' committee began to discuss 'multi-skilling' artisans. This would end the demarcation between artisan trades, as well as improving artisans' pay. These discussions were never referred to the NUMSA leadership in the company.

The shopsteward leadership was shocked and angry when they heard about this. They believed that it would undermine the entire NUMSA strategy of transforming grading, skills and pay structures at Highveld Steel. They made the following points:

- The special deal for GMPD artisans contradicted the union's principles on grading and so would undermine the company-wide project.
- Management would use the multi-skilling to reduce the number of artisans in GMPD.
- The workers' committee was not representing the interests of the labourers but only of the artisans.
- The GMPD special deal was undermining the unity of the union at Highveld Steel.

At a meeting to discuss their strategies, shopsteward chair, Mosi Nhlapo, reported to the shop stewards that: 'Workers at GMPD are working hand in hand with their manager. He has more support from workers than I have as a shopsteward.'



*Shifting relations between black workers and management creates new challenges for union organisation.*

They have agreed on implementation and they will leave the union out of it. It is difficult to block – they will turn against you as an individual, or against the union. We must find a way to disband that committee. Remember, GMPD was very militant, you could always start a strike there – but not now!

One of the shopstewards from GMPD agreed with Nhlapo's analysis: 'The committee is more powerful than the union in GMPD. The union only has permission to meet in lunchtime, but the committee can meet during working hours. We need help in disbanding the committee, because it is active and workers follow it.'

### **Strategy for co-operation?**

The three stories described here show that wildcat co-operation poses a serious problem for union organisation in the workplace. New managerial styles, new opportunities for promotion for black

workers, and affirmative action, make it possible for managers to compete with the union in winning the support of workers. Shopstewards need to be vigilant and active to prevent wildcat co-operation from undermining the union.

Most importantly, shopstewards will probably fail to protect and strengthen the union if they focus only on a blocking or resisting managerial strategies. Wildcat co-operation is based on workers' desire for change – for promotion, for better jobs, for more skills, for better pay. The union will only be able to prevent wildcat co-operation if it has a strategy itself for satisfying these desires. This means unions have to develop their own strategies for co-operation with management, so making it unnecessary for workers to engage in wildcat co-operation and impossible for management to do so. This was the strategy that Ambrose Mthembu was able to use successfully in the steel plant, as described above. ★