

Ungovernability in the union

There were two strikes at Highveld Steel during 1994 in which the strikers rejected the shopstewards and their union, NUMSA. In both strikes workers in a particular division went out on strike alone, making no effort to seek solidarity from other divisions. And in both cases, the strikes were led by groups of workers who set themselves up in opposition to the shopstewards' committee. The union itself seemed to be suffering from ungovernability and the fragmentation of worker solidarity.

What was actually happening within the union over this period? What were the causes of ungovernability within the organisation?

Analysis of these events suggests that new forces and pressures were affecting the shopstewards as individuals and as a committee. The involvement of shopstewards in democratisation and reconstruction was providing them with new opportunities both inside and beyond the workplace - opportunities for political careers, opportunities for promotion. The involvement of the shopsteward leadership in the ANC and in political campaigns in the community also made them less visible inside the company.

These new developments left many members discontented, and suspicious that their shopstewards were less committed to representing them. Others noted the new opportunities available to

Karl von Holdt continues his series on Highveld Steel. In this article he analyses the new and destructive forces unleashed within the trade union at Highveld Steel by new opportunities and pressures affecting shopstewards.

shopstewards, and became determined to gain access to such opportunities themselves, even if it meant mobilising against the shopstewards in an attempt to oust them.

Liberation and democracy, the very freedom that the unions had engaged in such bitter struggles to win, unleashed new and destructive forces within union organisation. This article describes the challenges to the shopstewards' committee at Highveld Steel in an attempt to understand these new forces.

Challenges

During the first democratic elections in South Africa, the workers of the iron plant division launched a two-day stayaway, breaking the agreement reached between the union and the company that there would be no work stoppage. The majority

of workers in the iron plant are migrants. They felt that the company had not addressed their anxieties about voting at their rural homes, and decided that a two-day stayaway from work was necessary to ensure they could cast their votes

Only one senior shopsteward was left at the steelworks over the election period, the rest of the leadership being involved in mobilising the electorate and monitoring the elections.

When the iron plant manager at Highveld Steel suggested that NUMSA should be called, the organisers of the stayaway told him, 'We are not representing the union, we are just workers here.' After the elections, the secretary of the shopstewards' committee asked the iron plant workers to explain their action. They answered that 'this thing has got nothing to do with the union, it is our thing of the iron plant'.

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The concerned group

One of these groups mobilising against the shopstewards called itself 'the concerned group'. According to the chairperson of this group, they were dissatisfied with the shopstewards and concerned about the future of the union at Highveld Steel. They suspected that the shopsteward leadership had sold out to management because:

- there were few report backs from meetings with management;
- they were no longer mobilising workers

for wage negotiations;

- they were not achieving anything through negotiations.

They also accused the shopstewards of using their positions as 'a platform for their own political gain'. The absence of senior shopstewards from the workplace on political and union tasks was paralysing the union because ordinary shopstewards did not have the authority to negotiate major issues with management.

As a result, the concerned group decided to stop recognising the shopstewards: 'We said from now onwards we are members of the union, but we don't recognise our leaders. If we have a problem, we will nominate people to talk with our divisional management. That is why, when the shopstewards wanted to intervene in our stayaway at the iron plant, we said no, this is our own thing. We chased them away.'

The concerned group was centred in the iron plant, but it also had a network of members across the steelworks. According to the shopstewards and union officials it was not clear what the agenda of the concerned group actually was. At times they claimed their intention was not to attack the shopstewards but to consolidate the union.

At other times they argued that the shopsteward office-bearers lacked credibility and had to be removed. They claimed to represent the masses and demanded a general meeting to discuss their concerns, but when the shopstewards offered to call a meeting they backed down.

Several meetings were held between the shopstewards' committee and the concerned group. The shopstewards pointed out that there were very few active shopstewards, and invited the concerned group to stand as shopstewards in their constituencies in order to



Highveld Steel hostel kitchen: ungovernability in the union brought out tensions between migrant workers and township residents.

strengthen the committee. The concerned group demanded that the office-bearers stand down first.

Two general meetings were held to discuss the conflict. In the first, the majority of members, led by migrant workers, rejected the criticisms of the concerned group and threatened to beat them for undermining the union. The second meeting was very tense, taking place as it did at the same time as a protracted wildcat strike in the flat products division (see p42). At this meeting the concerned group gained more support. But after every attack on the behaviour of the office-bearers, their constituencies would rise and defend them.

Eventually the meeting agreed to elect five members of the concerned group to monitor the shopstewards by attending shopsteward meetings and negotiations with management.

When by-elections were held in some constituencies, several members of the concerned group were elected as shopstewards. However, they soon stopped attending shopsteward meetings. It became clear to the shopstewards that some of the leading members of the concerned group were motivated by their belief that the shopstewards had access to opportunities to become small business contractors to the company. When they discovered that this was not the case, they lost interest.

Some members of the concerned group were genuinely concerned about problems in the union. Others were disgruntled individuals. One was jealous because he had not been chosen for training, another was in danger of dismissal for absenteeism and was looking for ways to protect himself, a third had always quarrelled with shopstewards. Some were former shopstewards who had

failed to perform and had been rejected by their constituencies. Others were happy to attack the shopstewards, but always refused to stand for elections.

Over time, the concerned group faded away. Its chairperson was eventually successful in becoming a small business contractor to the company.

The action committee

The action committee on the tap floor of the iron plant emerged out of similar concerns and at the same time as the concerned group, but it was a much more localised group. Its base was the unskilled, illiterate and predominantly migrant workers on the tap floor. It was a response to their experience of marginalisation and disempowerment in the workplace and in the union.

Members of the action committee expressed frustration that the shopsteward leadership were not addressing their problems. They also felt that the shopstewards in the iron plant were not strong enough to face management. They decided to elect their own committee 'who will be able to face management', as well as 'go to the office-bearers and tell them what we as workers want'.

The action committee grew out of the culture of militant solidarity that characterised the tappers in the iron plant (see Part 2 of this series, vol 24 no 2). This culture was described by one of the shopstewards: 'They have their own strategy of showing management that their demands must be conceded. If they want a manager they leave their work and call him to come. Sometimes they don't even involve the shopstewards. It's not good, there are procedures that should be followed.'

One of the tappers put it differently: 'I wanted to work there because they are highly unionised, it was not easy to be

victimised because one always had the support of the other workers. They know the struggle, they suffered a lot under apartheid. They are willing to fight to ensure that the changes that they have won are not taken away from them.'

The action committee and the concerned group converged in organising the election stayaway, and rejecting intervention by the shopstewards. But most of the time the two groups were remote from each other.

The migrant workers of the action committee had little in common with the personal ambitions and grievances of the operators and artisans, all township residents, in the concerned group. As described above, when they felt that the concerned group was threatening the structures of the union, they were quick to come to the defence of the shopstewards. For the migrant workers at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy the union was their most important defence against management.

For the migrants on the tap floor, the action committee was simultaneously an expression of workers' solidarity and a vehicle to contest their marginalisation within the union. Thus the action committee sometimes ignored the shopstewards, sometimes challenged them and sometimes supported them. When they were instructed by union officials to disband the committee they did so, although they were sad to see it go.

Wildcat strike

About three months after the elections stayaway in the iron plant, workers in the flat products division downed tools complaining about unfair wages and racial discrimination.

On the day that the strike started, neither of the two NUMSA shopstewards was present, and a group of workers



Unity is not a given, but has constantly to be built and rebuilt. Here organiser Bunny Mahlangu (left) and shopsteward chair Mosi Nhlapo (middle) discuss with a second shopsteward in the early '90s.

belonging to a splinter union managed to take control of the strike. They persuaded workers that the strike should be an action of the flat products workers alone, and that union shopstewards and officials should be kept out of it. Few of the workers knew that those leading the strike were actually activists of the splinter union.

The strikers elected a delegation of workers to meet management, but they were under strict instructions not to negotiate. They were to bring the managers to flat products to negotiate directly with the strikers. When their managers arrived, they told the workers that they had not followed the correct procedures, and that NUMSA and the splinter union should negotiate for them. The response of the flat products strikers

echoed the words of the iron plant workers three months before: "They said that they do not belong to any unions now. They are there as the employees, not as union members, so management must not now involve the unions. They must come and solve the workers' problems."

When one of the NUMSA shopstewards arrived for his shift, he was told not to interfere because he was not trusted. The workers then settled in for a sleep-in strike.

Some of the strikers explained why they were so easily persuaded to marginalise their shopstewards. They were frustrated by long, fruitless negotiations, and the lack of results led to suspicions that their shopstewards might have been bought by management: "We wanted management to respond to us directly,

without the unions, because the shopstewards used to come back saying that management refuses to give us an increase, and we thought that somehow, somewhere, there might be something, you see?'

The NUMSA officials and shopstewards decided not to interfere. They expected that the strikers would 'burn their fingers - and once their fingers were burning they would return to us as the union'.

The stalemate at flat products lasted for several days. Eventually management issued an ultimatum and then announced that the strikers had been dismissed. A contingent of police moved onto the company premises to prepare for the eviction of the strikers.

Inside the plant, workers started to turn to the NUMSA shopstewards for advice: 'They started to see now was the time to go to our union. They came to me straight and said we realise what we have done is wrong. Let's sit down like men and talk, because now we are losing our jobs. Go in now, and talk to management.'

After lengthy negotiations, NUMSA succeeded in having all the strikers reinstated. It emerged from the strike strengthened, while the splinter union was described by the shopstewards as 'the living dead'.

The wildcat strike at flat products was very similar to the stayaway at iron plant. Strikers rejected the union and its leadership. They took action as employees of a specific division, making no effort to link their action to the wider solidarity of NUMSA at the steelworks as a whole. They were led by a group of disaffected workers who were able to mobilise workers' suspicions against the shopstewards. The splinter union was led by workers who had been dismissed for intimidation after a massive strike in 1987.

Most of the dismissed workers were

migrants, and the splinter union itself was based in the hostels. Thus an underlying tension between migrant workers and township residents was present both in the iron plant and in the flat products division.

The shopstewards' committee

All three of the groups that challenged the NUMSA shopstewards - the concerned group, the action committee and the splinter union - were able to mobilise the dissatisfaction and suspicion of significant groups of union members at Highveld Steel. This had become a more important factor because of the new opportunities facing shopstewards. The shopsteward leadership was deeply involved in ANC structures and campaigns. Two of them became city councillors in 1995. One became a civil servant in the provincial government. The NUMSA regional organiser - a former chairperson of the Highveld Steel shopstewards - became a manager at another metal company. Several of the shopstewards were exploring promotion possibilities at Highveld Steel.

Shopstewards experienced family and peer pressure to join the upwardly mobile post-colonial elite. One shopsteward explained: 'The politics of today is about how much money you have, how beautiful your car is. It's no longer about how you develop the economy and how you look at the interests of the poorest. It's about yourself. I also want to be myself. I've been a shopsteward for a long time and I have gained nothing from it except the politics and experience that I have.'

Another shopsteward was pessimistic about the impact of this on the union: 'Most of our shopstewards are on line to government. The poor guys are sitting down there on the shopfloor, seeing the shopstewards working too much outside. We

have lost the capable guys. Everyone is looking at green pastures, you see. And when they leave to government or to promotion, there is no one to close the gap, because they have all the information. In future we will become weaker and weaker.'

The union's members were aware of these new opportunities and pressures. The shopstewards' committee was beginning to take on a new meaning. It was no longer only the representative voice of the workers – it was also a platform which shopstewards could use to pursue promotion or new careers. The result was rumours and mistrust.

A further factor at Highveld Steel was the particularly intransigent attitude of its management. Shopstewards were unable to deliver significant bargaining breakthroughs to their members, with the result that there was a history of dissatisfaction with shopstewards. Indeed, one of the reasons why ungovernability was so dramatic in 1994 was that it was a year of very high expectations of change. In later years expectations were not as high, and workers were less inclined to take dramatic actions in the quest for dramatic change.

At Highveld Steel there were two different kinds of responses to this among members. Among the more highly skilled and educated workers there were some who themselves had ambitions to gain access to the opportunities that shopstewards had. They tried to mobilise against shopstewards in order to replace them. This was the motivation of several in the concerned group.

The less skilled and often illiterate migrant workers had a different response. It was clear to them that the new opportunities promised them very little. Rather, their suspicion that the shopstewards were no longer representing them very effectively led them to establish

their own structures – like the action committee – and rely on their own capacity for direct action and solidarity to defend themselves against management.

These pressures, and the formation of new interests among workers, undermined and fragmented the solidarity of the union. Ultimately, the challenges failed and the shopstewards' committee retained control. Nonetheless, all the pressures described in this article remained and continued to weaken the union. The fragmentation of solidarity, and the weakening of the shopstewards' committee, made the union less able to defend and advance workers' interests.

These developments were not unique to Highveld Steel. Most unions in most workplaces are experiencing similar problems. This will continue as long as broader social change creates new opportunities for shopstewards and other skilled black workers to join the new middle class. The danger is that it will continue to generate conflict, undermine unity and weaken the unions at their foundations – in the workplace.

There are two possible strategies for combating this trend. Firstly, developing workplace campaigns and programmes would help to unify shopstewards and members and provide direction, thus overcoming division and conflict. Secondly, shopsteward education programmes should aim to equip shopstewards with the skills to manage much more complex organisational dynamics than in the past. ★

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