
The new shopstewards for or against us

*During the early years of trade unionism, shopstewards were the backbone of unions. Today, they want to ensure their own advancement, sometimes at the expense of workers. **Jenny Grice** explores the new challenges facing shopstewards as Numsa completes its round of shopstewards elections.*

I don't want to stand again. I have been a shopsteward for ten years and I am tired now,' says a frustrated Numsa shopsteward, Freddie Mhlawula from Pylon Engineering in Steeledale, Johannesburg. While he talks to his organiser, his co-workers come together to elect shopstewards who will hold office for the next four years. Half an hour later, his workmates elect him again. As he walks us to the gate to say goodbye, he is determined to do his best but worries about the poor organisation in his factory.

Mhlawula's tale is not an isolated one nor is it the only problem besetting trade unions like Numsa. Shopstewards were once the pillars of the progressive trade union movement. They were the essential link between the factory floor and union leadership. As Numsa gets down to electing its new shopstewards across its more than 7 500 companies over the next few months, it must reflect on some of the dilemmas that it and its fellow affiliates are facing.

The demands of globalisation and the resulting restructuring at the workplace have put 'shopstewards between management and workers,' says Numsa president, Mtutuzeli Tom. Shopstewards find themselves stranded – workers do not support them, and

management pressurises them to get workers to agree to changes.

If workers do not pull their shopstewards back to their side, shopstewards lose their links with their base. And as other shopstewards will tell you, this makes it easier for those without a base to agree to outsourcing even if workers are against it. The next thing, those shopstewards 'are the first ones with tenders for the outsourcing in their pockets to put on the table!'

Whether it's winning tenders for outsourcing, getting kickbacks from loan sharks, medical aid schemes or benefit schemes, the shopsteward's position now provides the potential for accumulation on a scale that the 1980s shopsteward never got a finger on!

There were fewer opportunities then for advancement. Shopstewards in those days 'would never ever become a manager,' says Tom. 'We were black. Managerial positions were meant for white workers.' Moreover, crossing to the other side was seen as deserting the workers, selling out. But the new worker is ambitious, 'they want to be a manager, they want to move up the ladder,' continues Tom.

'The young workforce have never been activists in the democratic struggle.' They were young children when their parents were fighting for

democracy. Many do not understand how collective action won rights and benefits that continue to apply to workers today, so they shun the trade union. Instead they put their efforts into studying as a way to achieve their aspirations of advancement. But even when young workers do join and take an active part in Numsa, they are put off. 'Meetings (are) still done the old way, people (are) very serious and that is boring,' says 24 year old Mzolisi 'Mfana' Stokwe, a VWSA worker since 2000.

The progressive trade union movement has always seen shopstewards' role as a 24 hour job – organising at work and at home in the community. But 'the trade union standing (in the community) has diminished,' says Tom. 'We are invisible in society in terms of taking our struggle forward.'

Ironically, the new political dispensation has something to do with the 'poor show' of trade unions. 'I have been involved in community issues since 1980. In every Cosatu local, and in companies those (political/community) issues were debated,' remembers former Numsa organiser, Tim Mabena, now ANC councillor. But 'those issues are no longer discussed. If you go to a Cosatu

meeting you will be told 'those are community issues' and they are not discussed.

But this is not true of all Cosatu locals. Another ex-Numsa organiser, now councillor, William Ntsanwisi, cites the Johannesburg local which was active around rejecting the Igoli 2002 initiative.

Having seen that the deployment of Cosatu officials into government has not had the desired results, Cosatu's stance has changed. Now the cry is to 'swell the ranks of the ANC', make the ANC more of a working class organisation and influence ANC mandates. But even here shopstewards' attempts have been thwarted. Often when they attend ANC meetings, 'we are labelled workerists and our contribution is disregarded,' say some shopstewards who did not want to be named.

What are the answers?

The recent Delta strike has given one answer. When Delta opened up its new plant in Struandale, Port Elizabeth, it recruited only newish, young workers with matric and technikon diplomas. These workers were reluctant to join Numsa. Their uniform of white shirts and grey trousers set them apart from the older workers who were grounded in Numsa tradition. The new breed aspired to be somewhere in the company.

But as the demands of the production process started to effect them – no breaks, they were not allowed to open their cellphones for calls on the line (very important for a cool, young dude!) – they began to realise that what they had aspired to achieve as individuals was not happening. As Samkelo Malangeni, Numsa's Eastern Cape regional organiser says, 'management helped us organise them!' And now, they 'have

become very militant.'

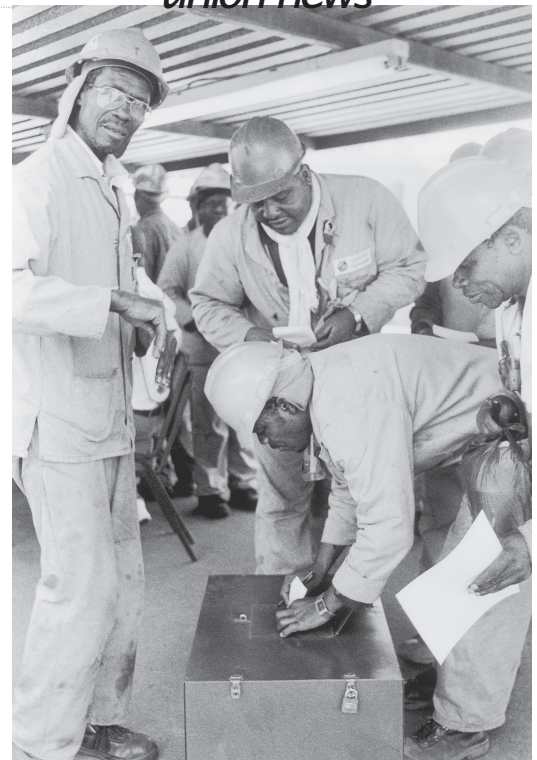
But it won't work everywhere. Nor will pleas to 'remember Numsa's militant tradition,' Current organisers and shopstewards forget what made unions powerful in the earlier years was the collective action of their members. There was little else to give them back-up – the state was repressive and the employers exploitative.

The issues in unions in the new South Africa are no longer united by the simplistic 'us and them' divide. Now divisions within race threaten to divide the collective action that is needed to rebuild weakened trade unions. This is true of issues like employment equity and training which could provide new kindling to ignite the fire. But the damper is that some workers will benefit more than others – the older workers from the 1980s will battle to advance because they lack the basic education required. The challenge is to win something that will provide benefits for all levels of the workforce – offering the less skilled, older workers the choice of training for their children instead of themselves, could be one option to explore.

Productivity bargaining, long avoided by trade unions, could provide another avenue. To build collective action, Numsa's policy is that any productivity payout must benefit workers equally but in practice, most companies' productivity payouts perpetuate skills divisions. If trade unions are to use this as a uniting force, they will have to be careful how they craft productivity agreements.

In the community

Issues around education that ignited the link between parents and children on the East Rand in the 1980s, are now less strong. Battles over the privatisation of electricity and water could unite workers, but different social



movements are now leading these struggles. In addition, many shopstewards double up as councillors and so may be part of the very people that are driving the privatisation of services in their communities. Both of these factors could see the current divisions continue. But just as in the factory situation, issues such as health, safety and environment and HIV/AIDS could provide tools to rebuild fractious or non-existent community structures.

Mhlawula and his fellow shopstewards should be commended for taking on positions as shopstewards despite the pressures on them from their peers to move on and 'follow those that are now in the provincial legislature, those that have moved to the suburbs'. But shopstewards and their trade unions need to look at issues that will reunite workers on the shopfloor and in the community if they are to become the strong organisations that they once were.

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Grice is Numsa's publications officer. This is written in her personal capacity.