

# Divisions and 'factory tribalism'

When you ask unionists about the Mercedes sleep-in you get one of two simple explanations: either it is an elite group of workers who just want more money for themselves, or it was all caused by 'SAAWU elements'. But is it really so simple?

Fikizolo and Tom believe the demand for withdrawal from the NBF and the strike were orchestrated by a coalition of groups and individuals who resented particular shopstewards as well as the regional leadership of the union. This group included former SAAWU activists who wanted to undermine the union, and ambitious and opportunistic individuals "who wanted to be seen as militant leaders".

## The legacy of tensions with SAAWU

The SAAWU members in the metal sector were finally integrated into NUMSA in early 1989. According to Fikizolo, however, tensions persisted in the Mercedes plant.

Former SAAWU members were quick to mobilise around dissatisfaction or doubts wor-

kers may have had about negotiations at the NBF.

They formed an alliance with the "power-hungry" and "ambitious" individuals among the shopstewards, says Fikizolo, because they both had a common opponent - himself, Tom and the regional leadership of NUMSA. The SAAWU influence did not necessarily come from within the shopsteward committee, but from former SAAWU members on the shopfloor. According to Fikizolo, some of those leading the sleep-in spoke of "infiltrating" NUMSA, of a "coup", and attacked the NBF in the same



### KEY PLAYER:

*Moses Mayekiso:*

*'The union will have to investigate whether there are valid grievances.'*

*Photo: /Afrapix*



way as SAAWU had attacked registration and industrial councils in the early 80s.

The leadership of the strike, says Fikizolo, imposed their views by chanting, "howling down" opposition, and accusing others of being "collaborators". Fikizolo points out that of the 18 shopstewards supporting the strike,

10 were former SAAWU members. The five opposing the strike were all long-standing NUMSA members.

### "Not a rebellion against union"

Bakaco, on the other hand, rejects the idea of a 'SAAWU factor', pointing out that he himself is a "loyal NUMSA member" and has been for years. "NUMSA is the organisation that will take us to a post-apartheid South Africa," he says. He says the majority of workers were unhappy with the NBF because they did not understand it, and felt they could get higher wages with in-plant bargaining. Resentment developed because the regional leadership was undemocratic and "imposed" the NBF. The decision to strike was not an attack on the union, but a democratic majority decision by frustrated workers.

"Our role as shopstewards was to do something to unite the workers," says Bakaco. "We saw the NBF was dividing workers." He argues that workers were united on the demand to withdraw from the NBF. "Those who left the factory were not opposed to that demand, they were opposed to continuing the sleep-in. But then they landed up at Gompo, as if they supported the NBF."

Bakaco claims that it was the shopstewards at Gompo, and the regional office, "who went around saying, 'This is a SAAWU attempt to topple NUMSA.'" Because the majority of workers are "loyal NUMSA members" they

therefore turned against the strikers.

It is difficult to believe the old antagonism between SAAWU and NUMSA did not play a role in the strike. Conflict between the two organisations has a long history in the plant, surfacing in violent confrontation in 1988 (see p 39). According to Tom, F site - where opposition to the NBF started - was a long-standing SAAWU stronghold. This was confirmed by management. H site, which opposed the sleep-in, was a NUMSA stronghold: the 1987 strike started there.

In the current dispute a deep hostility to union officials and policies was displayed: the key slogan was "Away with the NBF!", coffins were inscribed with the names of officials, the company-union recognition agreement was carried on a coffin, and officials were assaulted. All attempts by the union to persuade strikers to abandon their demand were rejected. One cannot explain this hostility simply in terms of dissatisfaction over wages.

### Rivalry on the shopsteward committee

However, other divisions were also important. Many of the strikers and eight of the 18 shopstewards were long-standing NUMSA members, which suggests this was not simply a SAAWU/NUMSA issue. Fikizolo and Tom say they were labelled as people who were "too clever" and had sold out to management.

Fikizolo and Tom are impressive and articulate activists with a deep political commitment. No doubt they are tough and wily bargainers when faced with management. Fikizolo is chair of NUMSA's



Border region, while Tom is vice-chair of COSATU's Eastern Cape region. They are highly exposed to national debates and issues. It may well be that they came to dominate the shopstewards committee, or were perceived to do so, and others began to resent this.

Mayekiso believes this is an important point: "Tom and Fikizolo are highly capable leaders. They were expected to deal with day to day issues and bargaining, but they were overloaded with national NUMSA work and COSATU duties. They became removed from the shopfloor."

Tension around this may have been exacerbated by the fact that most of the shopstewards were fairly new and inexperienced. Tom was the only one who had also been a shopsteward in the 1987 strike (others resigned, were dismissed, or died).

### Organisational weaknesses in the region

Added to this was tension around the regional leadership. As Mayekiso says, "Some workers expressed great animosity towards the regional leadership, a loss of confidence. The union will have to investigate whether there are valid grievances." The evidence suggests serious

organisational weaknesses - administrative weakness, lack of information and education, arrogance and lack of democracy, and dissatisfaction and division, have all been mentioned.

Tension with the regional secretary was probably linked to the old divisions between SAAWU and NAAWU/NUMSA. Nonyukela had been chair of the NUMSA shopstewards committee during the 1987 strike, and was also chair in 1988 when tensions between SAAWU and NUMSA erupted into open warfare on the shopfloor. Nonyukela was dismissed with 17 others, allegedly for their role in this battle.

### Did the majority support the strike?

Bakaco rejects the idea that the strikers were rebels, or that they were "egged on" by anyone, insisting that the majority were dissatisfied and favoured withdrawal and a strike. Yet the fact that the number of workers occupying the plant so rapidly became a small minority suggests that, even if the majority were present when these decisions were made, their support was not wholehearted. This tends to reinforce Fikizolo's argument that decisions were imposed with militant rhetoric and lack of discussion.

In the heat of the moment a majority may well have backed demands for plant level negotiations when they were led to believe they could get more that way. When it became clear, though, that the

company would not budge and the union would not back their demand, they probably changed their minds.

Bakaco's claim that the NBF decision was imposed in 1989, and that there was majority opposition to it, also seems unlikely. Nonyukela and Fikizolo refer to general meetings where the NBF was discussed and accepted. Demonstrations in support of striking Toyota workers last year, and Delta workers this year, support their view that there was a general understanding.

However, the fact that the strike happened at all shows that there was widespread dissatisfaction in the plant. The 'militant' and uncontrollable nature of the action, and the rejection of union policy and officials, suggests that a wide gulf had developed between union leaders and the rank-and-file on the shopfloor.

### Lack of education, information

It is clear that union information and education was inadequate. All parties agree on this. Workers had a very shallow understanding of the goals and processes of centralised bargaining. The inexperience of most of the shopstewards, and possibly the "arrogant style" of some of the regional leaders, contributed to this lack of clarity.

"We did not embark on education after last year's negotiations," says Fikizolo, "because no-one raised complaints or doubts. We thought everyone was clear. But the

### KEY PLAYER:

*Les Kettledas,  
seasoned auto organiser  
and negotiator*

*Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin*



arguments raised this year show we were wrong."

Bakaco remembers that "in 1989 when the NBF was discussed and workers were receiving report-backs, they kept saying there are unanswered questions. They demanded education workshops. This year they complained again. Workers were tired of being told, 'This is the policy of the union.' We always have to rely on officials."

Bakaco believes it is essential for education to start now: "The future of the NBF will depend on it."

According to Bakaco, the general feeling at the first joint meeting of workers after the eviction was that "the union should accept responsibility for this problem" because of lack of information.

Mayekiso agrees that "our members were not well-informed." Nonyukela also concludes that "we cannot blame the workers, we have to look at ourselves and see what's wrong."

### 'Factory tribalism'

The Mercedes wildcat strike was a clear case of 'factory tribalism', that is, where workers abandon unity with workers in other plants or companies and go it alone, hoping to win better conditions or wages in plant negotiations.

Fikizolo, Nonyukela and Tom see this as an issue that was manipulated. "If you put money in front of workers you can lead them in any direction," says Tom. "Workers were told they could get R3 at plant level, and they went for it." They believe that lack of education about centralised bargaining facilitated the development of this 'factory tribalism'.

While this issue may well have been manipulated, it is clearly a real issue facing unions in centralised bargaining. It would also have been a particularly powerful issue in the Mercedes plant.

There is a strong memory of the marathon 1987 strike, when 2 800 workers downed tools for 9 weeks and won a new minimum of R4,50, 30% above the new minimum that had been negotiated in the Eastern Industrial Council. This gave workers a great sense of power at plant level, and confidence that they could push wages way beyond industry averages.

Bakaco feels the demands of the strikers were legitimate. "I am not opposed to centralised bargaining," he says, but he criticises the union team for allowing the NBF to become the forum for setting real rather than minimum rates. "If a com-

pany can pay higher wages this must be accommodated," he argues.

Mayekiso is sympathetic to this view: "I would not say this was a revolt against union policy. Workers felt they were not getting what management can afford, and that the NBF deprived them of the chance to push for more. Dual level bargaining is the answer."



### Delays in negotiating

It is clear from the accounts of the shopstewards that the long drawn out negotiations contributed to the emergence of 'factory tribalism'.

Kettledas, a seasoned auto organiser and negotiator, sees this as the crucial factor in workers' dissatisfaction. "Slogans and placards don't necessarily reflect what is happening on the ground. For the majority of our members the problem was delayed implementation, not the NBF.

"This problem is not new. Last year there was a delay in reaching agreement because of the resistance of the employers to entering the NBF. At MBSA in particular workers were concerned. This year again we only reached agreement 2½ months past implementation date." The delay this year was caused by lengthy negotiations over job grading.

### Militancy and the history of industrial relations

To the various organisational and personal divisions inside the factory, and the factors that encouraged 'factory tribalism', must be added the

industrial relations history of MBSA. Up until the end of 1988 the management regime at MBSA was authoritarian, anti-union and racist. The current management readily acknowledge this (see p 38).

Union organisation, complemented by the militant political traditions of the Border region, generated a high level of militant resistance in the huge workforce at the plant. This culminated in the 1987 strike, and the frequent stoppages throughout 1988.

The new management has tried to implement a more liberal regime, believing that management and unions should co-operate as they both have a role to play. But the tradition of militant resistance persists. As Kettledas says, "The deep scars of the past cannot just be papered over." This tradition was easily mobilised in the current dispute. Many unionists, including Fikizolo and Tom, commented on the "unguided" and "immature" militancy of the sleep-in.

The current fluid political situation in South Africa, the high level of expectations and mood of militant defiance, probably contributed to the willingness of workers to take action. An unprocedural sleep-in may well have seemed like a 'radical' or 'revolutionary' action, even if it was in support of 'factory tribalism'. The mock AK47s and bazookas, and the ANC and SACP flags, carry the same message.

It was no doubt partly in recognition of this dimension of the sleep-in that NUMSA

sought the help of the ANC and SACP.

### Conclusion

Many factors contributed to the wildcat action at Mercedes. The key factor seem to be weaknesses in union organisation: apart from problems in the region, there was inadequate education, many shopstewards were new and untrained, and key shopstewards seem to have lost touch with the shopfloor because of other tasks in the union, the region and COSATU.

These weaknesses allowed the rivalry on the shopstewards committee, and the divisions on the shopfloor, to fester. The old hostility of SAAWU activists towards NUMSA became an important factor in the general dissatisfaction.

In this situation the tensions inherent in centralised bargaining - wage levelling, delays, compromises on mandates, the remoteness of negotiations from the shopfloor - could become mass grievances.

The union recognises its weaknesses. The October edition of *NUMSA News* states that there "must be a commission of enquiry to find out all the weaknesses and mistakes."

The strikers, on the other hand, must be criticised. Whatever their frustrations, a wildcat strike and sleep-in by a minority is no way to debate union policy or to further the struggle against exploitation. Their action seriously weakened the union's bargaining position and has led to division, dismissals and demoralisation. ❖