

The struggle for peace in Natal

THAMI MOHLOMI and WILLIS MCHUNU spoke to Labour Monitoring Project (LMP) about the stayaway in Pietermaritzburg, about the peace talks with Inkatha, and about the alliance between workers and youth. Mohlomi is the Southern Natal secretary of COSATU, and Mchunu is NUMSA project organiser in the region.

LMP: *Who was Jabu Ndlovu and what role did she play in the labour movement?*

Mchunu: Jabu worked for Prestige in Pietermaritzburg. She had been a member of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) since about 1982 and at the time of her death, she was the senior NUMSA shopsteward at the company.

In addition to her activities within the factory she also participated in NUMSA structures nationally, in the COSATU local, as well as in the community structures in Imbali where she lived.

LMP: *Many people have been killed in Pietermaritzburg in the past two years. Is there any special significance that we can attach to the attack on Jabu and her family?*

Mohlomi: We don't think that the attack on Jabu was a random one - it was planned. She was one of those Imbali residents who brought to COSATU's attention the atrocities committed by those "warlords" who lived in the "Stage One" suburb, as well as the collusion between the "warlords" and the police. She participated in the Johannesburg press conference where COSATU released a report detailing the crisis in Imbali. She gave detailed first-hand information on what was taking place there.

LMP: *How many trade unionists have been killed in the conflicts in Pietermaritzburg and surrounding areas over the past few years?*

Mohlomi: I don't know, but it's a lot. The unions that have borne the brunt of the whole conflict are un-

doubtedly COSATU's NUMSA, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and the Construction and Allied Workers Union (CAWU). Since 1986 more than ten busdrivers who were TGWU members have been killed. Incidentally Jabu's husband (who was also killed) was a member of FAWU.

LMP: *What were the demands and goals of the stayaway which took place in Pietermaritzburg during 5-7 June 1989?*

Mohlomi: Generally the demand was that all political violence within the whole region should end. The people of Pietermaritzburg hoped that the protest would direct all parties, including Inkatha, to take serious action to stop the violence and the killings. The main focus of this protest was against the state itself. The people would like the state to use its power and influence to stop the violence in Natal, but it would seem that the Nationalist government is refusing to do so for its own ulterior motives. It must be stressed the Minister Vlok's talk of using an "iron fist" to crush organisations isn't a constructive way to resolve the situation.

At another level the protest also aimed to pressurise the police into taking some action against the "warlords", and to get them to allow us to bury our dead without restriction.

Mchunu: The protest also aimed to get the authorities to lift the restric-

tions imposed upon people in terms of State of Emergency regulations. People who are restricted have often become the targets for assassination squads as their movements - reporting daily to the local police station - are widely known.

LMP: *How do you see this kind of protest action bringing about these objectives? Is the idea to put pressure on employers so they will put pressure on the government and Inkatha?*

Mohlomi: Yes, we believe that employers can play a much larger role in the peace process than they have done up till now. They have a real ability to exert pressure on the government. We would like them to pressurise the authorities into establishing an independent commission of inquiry into the activities of the police. The Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Commerce has supported our position, but they have not done enough to ensure that a commission is actually set up.

LMP: *At one stage it appeared as if the protest action was going to affect the whole of Natal, but it was later confined to only the Pietermaritzburg area. Could you tell us how the action was decided upon?*

Mohlomi: Well, in Pietermaritzburg, immediately after the attack on Comrade Jabu's home, there was a meeting of all concerned people - COSATU members and officials and other community leaders. Most were

very angry and they insisted that some form of decisive action be taken to protest the deaths, but also to protest against the situation that has gone on for far too long.

On the COSATU side the whole issue was referred back to union locals so that they could decide what action they thought was appropriate. The Pietermaritzburg local was in favour of taking immediate action.

The general feeling of the other union locals in Natal - especially in Clairwood and Pinetown - was that they were not in any position to endorse protest action, because they realised that they did not have enough time to mobilise people properly.

After all the reports of the various union locals had been considered, it was decided that the Pietermaritzburg local should proceed with whatever action they were able to take. It was agreed that workers elsewhere in Natal would take whatever action they felt was appropriate.

There is a feeling that further action, which will affect the whole of Natal, may take place.

LMP: *Independent monitoring groups have reported that the stayaway in Pietermaritzburg has not been so successful. Why do you think this was so?*

Mchunu: The main reason for worker support being so low was the lack of time to organise the action. The stayaway arose out of specific incidents and was thus more a spontaneous reaction than a carefully

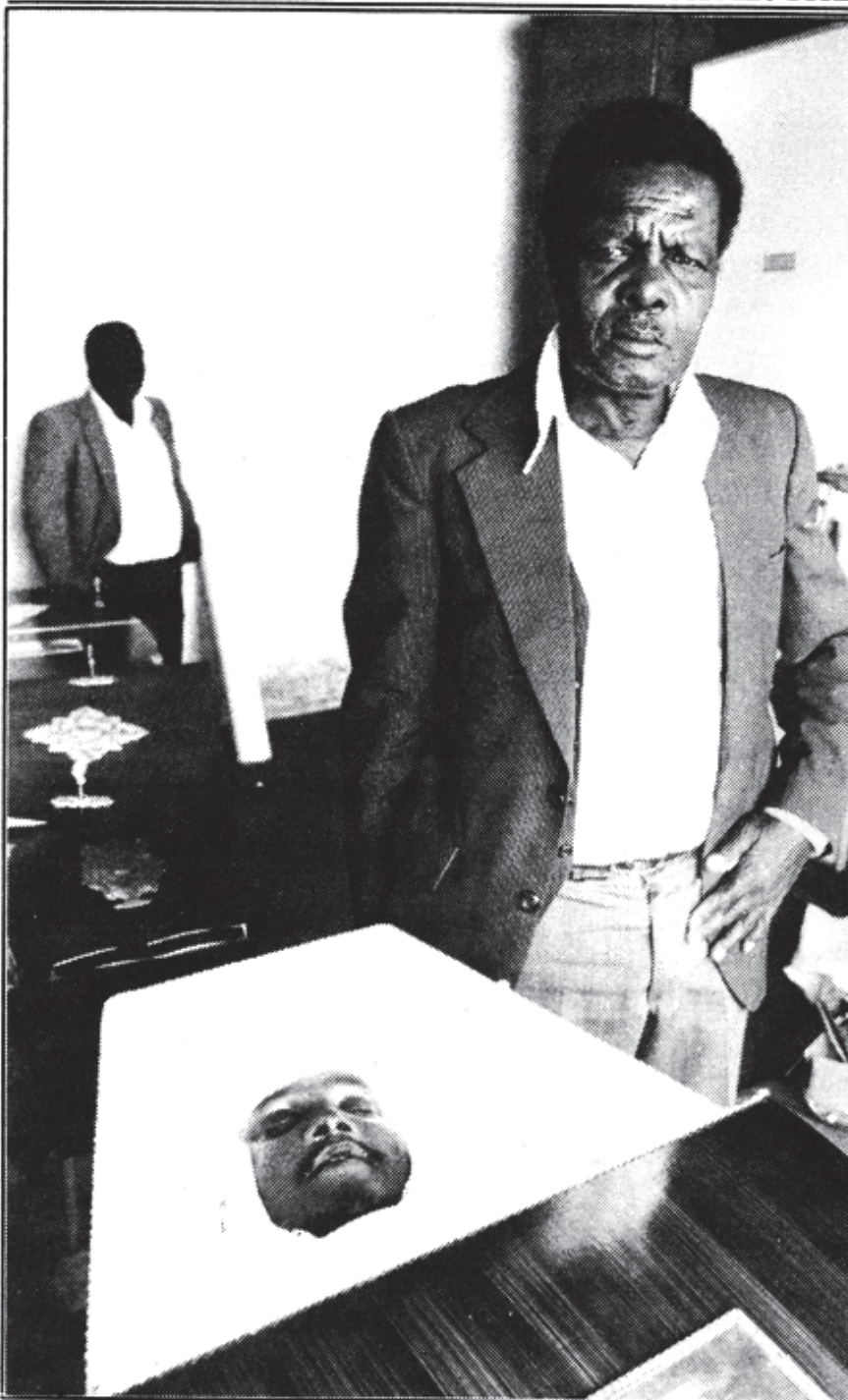
planned exercise. We have to admit that the extensive discussions that should have occurred in structures did not take place. Not enough work was done on the ground among workers and the different sectors of the community. The role of the police should also not be underestimated. The difficulties facing the people were great.

LMP: *In previous stayaway actions in Natal, busdrivers have been held to be responsible for workers being unable to attend work. They have become the focus of persistent attacks from organisations and groups wishing to wreck stayaways. Could you tell us something about the position of busdrivers in the latest action?*

Mohlomi: The bus and taxi services ran during the period 5-7 June. The TGWU made it clear that bus services should operate in the city and the COSATU local agreed to this. In the past some people have blamed the absence of busses for the success of stayaways. As I said earlier, more than ten drivers have been killed in this city.

LMP: *How would you describe the latest peace initiative? What were the goals and processes as envisaged by COSATU?*

Mchunu: We in COSATU are committed to peace in the region. It is in everybody's interests that the violence comes to an end. The best way of achieving that peace is a joint commitment between Inkatha and all other organisations to end the violence. The



A father stands beside the body of his slain busdriver son, Patrick Magwasa, who was killed in 1988 - busdrivers, mostly TGWU members, have often been targets possibly because they are seen as assisting in stayaways by refusing to drive buses

Photo: Cedric Nunn/Afrapix

joint commitment should be endorsed at a meeting of all organisations in some sort of conference.

We have decided that neutral par-

ties should convene a conference on our behalf. This would avoid a debate as to who must initiate a peace conference.

Inkatha said that meetings should take place at their Ulundi headquarters. We insisted that all meetings should take place at a neutral venue. Inkatha would never accept any meeting in COSATU House in Johannesburg. After the intervention of the churches it seems as if the problem of venue may have been resolved for the present.

LMP: *It seems that the state and Inkatha have moved closer together. Perhaps they have reached an understanding on how they will deal with COSATU and the UDF in Natal. How do you view the situation?*

Mchunu: We don't precisely know what the relationship is between the state and the Kwazulu authorities on the

issue of the Natal conflict. Perhaps they have reached agreements on how to deal with democratic forces within the region. But the situation at the mo-

ment is very sensitive. It would be wrong to speculate too much.

LMP: *Could you tell us more about how you envisage any peace working? We have already had one peace concluded between Inkatha and COSATU in Natal which does not seem to have worked at all. Specifically, people were reluctant to make complaints or to defend complaints against them. Also every time a complaint was made against an individual, the organisation to whom the accused person was alleged to belong, claimed that the individual was not operating on their behalf. How do you envisage any further peace effort overcoming difficulties like these?*

Mohlomi: We have had some ideas on how we are going to enforce agreements that we reach at a peace conference. One idea is to establish some form of tribunal which will need to be staffed by a number of influential people from within Natal, nationally and perhaps even by representatives of foreign governments. The tribunal will be able to immediately send people to investigate any violation, whether it be attacks or threats, that are reported to it. With all these neutral people and groupings participating it will be difficult for any organisation to renege on any agreement that may be reached.

Buthelezi himself suggested the establishment of Monitoring Committees in all the areas where Inkatha and COSATU/UDF function. These Com-

mittees would then monitor any violations of the agreement. We believe that these committees could be useful.

LMP: *To what extent has there been an attempt to brief major employer groupings and to get them, on the one hand, to pressurise the state to police the conflicts fairly, and on the other hand, to put pressure Inkatha to come to a peace conference?*

Mohlomi: The Natal Chambers of Commerce and of Industries have been briefed about the situation. Nationally COSATU intends to meet with the FCI. SEIFSA has agreed to make representations to the government as well as to Buthelezi on the issue.

LMP: *Compared to the previous peace initiative there appears to be greater understanding and co-operation between UDF affiliates, particularly the youth, and COSATU in Pietermaritzburg. Could you tell us how this co-operation has been achieved?*

Mchunu: Firstly, I think we should look at what occurred immediately after the first peace initiative - people were detained and the UDF was restricted in terms of the Emergency regulations. That had a psychological effect on the youth who began to see the exercise of negotiation as futile. What peace can you make when you are being detained and restricted? The situation was very bad.

Secondly, although there has been

a sincere agreement to enter into a peace initiative, our people's commitment to it has varied. Such commitments do not reach all levels of organisation at one go, so you are likely to get different responses, particularly when the thing is new. But as time goes on, and debates keep going on, people start understanding each other and they start accommodating each other. This kind of debate has now been going on since the first initiative and it is still going on. It is this kind of open debate which has helped the move to peace more and more.

While the youth in Pietermaritzburg have realised that the actions of the government, e.g. detentions, banning, etc., will never stop, they have also realised that it does not mean that one will be unable to proceed with one's own strategies. That is the situation now - and I would say that it exists in the whole of Natal. There is a lot of working together between the youth and unions.

LMP: *So basically because of state repression youth organisations have had to adapt, and they have adapted in a particular way which is fruitful for co-operation and consultation with unions?*

Mohlomi: Correct. They sometimes attend our local meetings where they are able to get report backs which they would not otherwise get. UDF structures have got their problems because of the repression and the banning of their leaders.

When we first started engaging in

these talks there was co-operation between COSATU and UDF structures - particularly in Pietermaritzburg. But then the state responded by detaining and restricting people, e.g. officials like Martin Wittenberg and Skumbuzo Ngwenya. As a result of these detentions and because of harassment the youth lost a lot of their leaders, other had to flee.

That was when some tensions began to arise between COSATU and UDF structures. Some leaders of UDF had been informed about the peace processes but they were unable to convey that down to the rank-and-file membership because of the restrictions. So when the youth saw on TV and in the newspaper that COSATU and Buthelezi had signed an agreement, they naturally felt that they had not been properly consulted. But since then, I think, we have worked excellently through all the structures - we have tried to discuss things as much as possible.

LMP: *For some years people have argued that it is important to build a united front at grassroots level between COSATU and UDF affiliates. This would bring together the two most powerful forces in our country, the workers and the youth. This appears to be happening in Pietermaritzburg. How significant do you think this development is, and do you think there are lesson for the rest of the country?*

Mohlomi: As I have been saying this process is fairly advanced in

Pietermaritzburg now. Whatever meetings take place you find there is representation from community structures, especially youth. The same is developing around Durban. Whenever we have major issues, or even ordinary local shopsteward council meetings, you find a lot of youth attending. They are ready to put forward their views, and we come out with a common understanding on issues. Because we communicate and take decisions jointly there is no one who goes against a decision once it has been taken. That is quite useful because we have been able to prevent a lot of conflict which arose in the past between youth and workers.

I think there are a lot of lessons to be learnt from this. If you compare the situation now from what it was two or three years back, you find there are a lot of differences in the way we and our youth operated. In fact, the youth are beginning to accept leadership from the older people, which was not the case two years back. Even in the townships they are trying to organise the older people - the parents - saying, "Look we can't do without you, you must come and be part of us." That's very significant because that was not the thinking of youth in the past. They are the ones who are now interested in setting up civic organisations for the parents.

This is quite a significant advance. In the past the vigilante problem has arisen partly because older people have complained: "Why are the youth stoning the busses?" or "Who has made this call for a stayaway?" - that

kind of thing. So these tensions have sometimes made some of our members think that the youth must be disciplined. But now because of the close co-operation that union members have with the youth they are able to give direction and guidance to the youth.

LMP: *But UDF affiliates comprise more than just youth organisations? To what extent has the Natal Indian Congress, for example, been involved in the peace process?*

Mohlomi: In Pietermaritzburg there have been attempts to set up a committee which will involve all the organisations in all the areas. I think it has been fairly successful. They do hold meetings from time to time where they brief all sectors - women, civics, NIC, coloured areas, and so on.

We (in Durban) also have that kind of structure. How successful it is I can't really gauge at the moment. Of course, it's true there have been problems in that people of other race groups have not really been participating fully in this peace process. We are trying to involve them as much as possible.

We have commissioned some of the comrades on the working committee to go and brief those organisations about developments and to find out from them what they can do. But it is true that we still have problems at this level - they haven't been fully integrated into the whole process. It is something we are trying to work towards. ☆