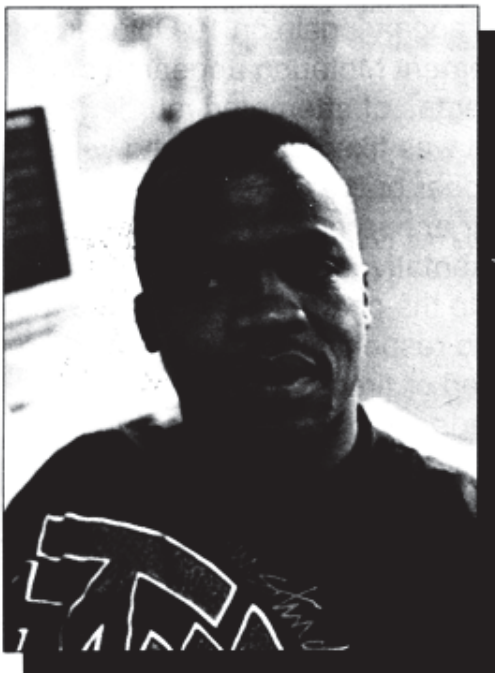


# Truckers blockade

*"If you leave  
your base  
others will  
fill your  
space"*

Over 2 000 truckers blockaded the main Durban – Johannesburg highway in August. Union officials were caught by surprise. ZOLILE MTSHELWANE reports.



**W**hen over 2 000 truck drivers blockaded the Mooiriver toll plaza on 22 August for three days, Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) officials were caught by surprise. As the major union organised in the road goods transport industry, TGWU had no prior knowledge that some of their members were party to planning this kind of action to highlight their grievances. What baffled the union more, was the support that truck drivers showed for the blockade.

According to Thulani Dlamini, national organiser of TGWU's goods, the main demand of truckers for the establishment of a national industrial council was already being addressed by the union. "We were nearing completion of counting membership forms to be submitted to employers to verify our representivity," Dlamini said.

There had been a one-year delay by the union in completing the verification process. According to Dlamini, this was caused by the need to recruit more members in the industry. "In December 1992, agreement was reached with employers for the establishment of a national industrial council for the road transport industry (goods). The only requirement left was for unions in the industry to submit proof of representivity."

But, Dlamini said, the other unions (about six of them) then pulled out of the process. "We needed to prove to the bosses that we represent at least 19 500 members in the industry, which is 51% of the total workforce. TGWU had about 15 000 members at that stage." Dlamini said the other unions might have pulled out for fear that TGWU might dominate the envisaged council.

TGWU officials acknowledge that their members were involved in the blockade. "The fact that truck drivers, including their shopstewards, are always on the road, makes it difficult to keep contact with them and inform them of developments," Dlamini said. He said although the goods sector meetings are being held regularly, truck drivers are hardly ever present.

But Julius Matroos, assistant general secretary of the union, went further: "That there

is a lack of qualitative service to members by unions is a fact. Workers are disgruntled because they never see organisers, and we as officials have turned into clerks. We sit in our offices and do administrative work, we only see workers when they come to the office.”

The demands that were put by truckers at the blockade reflected the terrible conditions under which they work. These are:

- A minimum wage of R2 500 per month;
- A basic wage of R700 per week for a code 14 driver, R650 for a code 11;
- Non-taxation on overtime pay;
- The setting up of a national industrial council.

### The advent of the Turning Wheel

International Workers Movement baffled TGWU officials even more. Press reports attributed the blockade of 22 August to this hitherto unknown movement, quoting a certain Richard Madime as the leader of the action. It later transpired that Madime, at the time of the blockade, was a TGWU shopsteward employed by International Transport Corporation in Vereeniging.

Madime argues that the Turning Wheel was never meant to be a union, but rather an all-encompassing movement for truck drivers and their assistants, both unionised and non-unionised. “Some of us realised that our unions

had become liberal and had lost their strength,” Madime said. He went on to say that the blockade was meant to regain the initiative on behalf of truckers, thereby strengthening the positions of unions within the industry.

But TGWU officials dismissed Madime and his Turning Wheel as “opportunists” who are using the workers’ genuine grievances as a means of fulfilling their own political agendas.

The agreement that led to the lifting of the blockade, signed on 25 August, provides for, amongst others, the speedy establishment of a national industrial council for the road transport industry (goods). Dlamini said the action, although not sanctioned by TGWU, spurred the union branches to expedite the counting of signed up membership.

### Truckers plan action

Madime claimed that drivers started planning the action in February this year. “The blockade was the culmination of individual company actions that workers embarked on. At ITC, where I was employed, for example, we were engaged in three strikes since February. “Madime said workers were disappointed by TGWU’s insistence that workers should follow procedures, and were always discouraged by the union from embarking on wildcat strikes. “This approach has dampened the militancy of the workers,” he said.

Four workers were arrested at the second blockade on 19 September. They were all charged and appeared at the Mooiriver magistrate’s court.

- Samuel Mokoena of Cargo Express was charged with obstructing traffic. His bail was set at R300 and the case was postponed to 21 October;
- Meshack Khuthelo was charged with drunken driving. Bail was set at R500 and will also appear again on 21 October;
- Mpikayipheli Zebulon Mbele was charged with failing to comply with the directions of a traffic officer. He

will appear again on 19 October; and

- Clement Motaung appeared on charges of attempted murder. His bail was fixed at R700 and will also appear on 19 October.

All four appeared without any legal representatives, and they pleaded guilty to the charges. TGWU said they take no responsibility for any worker arrested or fired due to the second blockade. Madime said the Turning Wheel knows nothing of the arrests and subsequent court appearances. He claims he had to leave Mooiriver in a hurry at the second blockade because of threats to his life.



*Truckers catch the union by surprise*

Madime said a core group of nine truckers from different unions met at Mooiriver under the banner of the Turning Wheel on the Friday before the blockade. "We listed eight demands that we felt were burning issues for workers. We then decided to call a broader meeting of truckers and assistants on Monday 22 August." He went on to say that they distributed notices of the meeting on the weekend, and also used the two-way radios fitted into trucks to announce the meeting.

By Monday at noon, according to Madime, about 50 trucks were parked on the side of the road at the toll plaza. "We had agreed that we were not going to block the road, so that motorists could pass." Many truckers knew about the meeting, so they stopped of their own accord to attend. "By 5pm, the number of truckers had swelled to over 100, and no cars could pass." Madime added that by 8pm the number of trucks had swelled to about 700 and the numbers were growing by the hour, culminating in 2 000 by midnight.

Madime said a delegation of five truckers

went to the Mooiriver police station to negotiate with the local station commander. "Our immediate demand was to talk to Tito Mboweni, the Minister of Labour, and the MEC for roads and transport of KwaZulu-Natal, Sibusiso Ndebele." Madime said the drivers wanted Mboweni to come and address them on their grievances, especially those relating to non-taxing of overtime pay and the removal of repressive labour laws. "But we also wanted Mboweni to facilitate a meeting with the employers and their associations. The employers refused to negotiate with the Turning Wheel on Monday, arguing that they have no knowledge of our existence in the industry."

### **Roadside negotiations**

Mboweni arrived in the evening on Tuesday and talks started, with Mboweni chairing the negotiations that lasted until the early hours of Wednesday. TGWU, TAWU, and other union representatives arrived after Mboweni. According to Madime, TGWU said they had come to observe. But according to the union,

Fana Mdluli has been working for his current employer since February 1992, although he has been a truck driver for more than 15 years. He is a long-distance driver and travels all over the country delivering and collecting goods.

His major problem is wages. Mdluli is on the road for 10 hours almost everyday. He says his employer does not pay him any basic wage, only an allowance as follows:

- ❑ From Durban to Johannesburg he gets paid R200;
- ❑ From Johannesburg to Durban he is paid R100;
- ❑ From Durban to Phalaborwa in the Northern Transvaal he gets R300; while
- ❑ a trip from Durban to Cape Town earns him R400;
- ❑ and a trip from Durban to Welkom in the OFS gets him R200.

"I only get paid when the truck is loaded. If I come back from Welkom, for example, with no cargo, I am not paid anything on that return trip."

Mdluli is not a member of the union, because, he says, the company employs only three people. "This is a very dangerous job. I have seen a number of drivers being burnt to ashes in accidents. When a truck overturns, the gas explodes while the driver is trapped inside."

Mdluli said because of the low wages and lack of adequate stopping places, truckers always push themselves too hard. "When you drive through the night, you usually get night shift allowance and/or overtime pay. Many of us hardly ever rest as we need the money. But when we want to stop, the truck stops are normally full and traffic officers fine us when we stop on the side of the road, forcing us to keep moving."

Mdluli added that many truckers have been divorced more than once. "The fact that you are away from home many days of the week puts a strain on marriages. I have been divorced twice because I suspected that some of the children I was supporting were not mine."

Madime and his Turning Wheel people had insisted that TGWU be granted observer status. The union rejected this: "We are the biggest union organised in the industry, there was no way we could be given observer status by unknowns like the Turning Wheel."

Madime said before Mboweni left his Cape Town office on Tuesday, the minister had assured him on the phone that he would attend to the truckers' demand on non-taxation on overtime pay. "It was a verbal undertaking. We felt we could trust Mboweni, that is why we did not insist on a written undertaking," Madime said.

However, the agreement leading to the ending of the blockade does not say anything about truckers' demands on wages and other conditions of work. The agreement, signed by employer associations, TGWU and the Turning Wheel states the parties agreement "in principle that it would be in their mutual interest to improve the standard of living of all employees in the industry," and stresses "the urgency with respect to the re-commencement of negotiations on the issue of a national industrial council".

COSATU's Zwelinzima Vavi, who was part of the negotiations to end the blockade, said that Madime, after the signing of the agreement, gave a false report to truckers at the blockade. "He claimed victories that had not been achieved. He told workers that all their demands have been met." It is interesting that the truckers demanded that Madime should report back, as opposed to TGWU or COSATU officials. Matroos said the unions managed to extract undertakings from employers that no worker would be disciplined for participating in the blockade, as well as full payment for the duration of the blockade.

### Forming an industrial council

Negotiations on the formation of a national industrial council started on 26 August.

According to Dlamini, the combined paid-up membership of unions that are participating in these talks stands at 31 095, of which 19 339 are TGWU members. Two subcommittees dealing with representivity and the constitution for the council have been established. A plenary session will be held on 13-14 October

where a full report will be given to unions on progress made.

TGWU officials believe that the establishment of an industrial council will go a long way in addressing many of the truckers grievances. "Negotiating at a central level will make life easier for us," Matroos said. "Agreements reached at the council will be gazetted, thereby become binding on non-members of the council as well." Dlamini added: "We are arguing strongly for this envisaged council to negotiate actuals as opposed to setting minimums. This will give the union enough time to plan and implement an aggressive recruitment strategy, revive the sector's regional shopstewards councils and concentrate on other workplace issues like health and safety."

Although Dlamini acknowledges that there are disadvantages for the union negotiating at the industrial council level, he said these are far outweighed by positive aspects of this approach. "One of the disadvantages is that it will be difficult to reach agreements at the council. This is because of the number of unions that will be represented, and the differing approaches of each of these unions. This will be further complicated by different, sometimes conflicting mandates from workers."

### Losing touch with members

Among other approaches that TGWU is looking at implementing is the holding of shopsteward councils at truckstops and the possibility of setting up offices at these stops. According to Dlamini, the Western Cape region of the union has already started holding shopsteward council meetings at truckstops.

Both COSATU and TGWU officials agree that TGWU's lack of constant contact with truckers has made it possible for the Turning Wheel to exploit the workers' grievances, promising them quick results if they take action. Vavi said the one lesson for both TGWU and COSATU in the wake of the blockade is: "Never stay away from your base for even a day. If you are not there, somebody else will occupy your space completely."

Both Matroos and Dlamini are convinced that the Turning Wheel has no prospect of



*Richard Madime, Turning Wheels leader*

winning over their membership. "The Turning Wheel is finished," Dlamini declared, while Matroos opined: "Our members are loyal to TGWU. Many of them now realise that they have been misled by people like Madime." But TGWU has also decided that any of their members found to have any connection or dealings with the Turning Wheel will be dismissed from the union.

Dlamini points to the way the second blockade flopped as a reason for his declaration that the Turning Wheel is finished. The second blockade was at Mooiriver again, nearly three weeks after the end of the first one. This lasted several hours, when troops moved in with dogs, forcing truckers to disperse. "The second blockade proved that Madime and his Turning Wheel have no support among truckers," Dlamini said.

Maybe Dlamini is right when he said the Turning Wheel is finished. What is not finished though, are the deep-seated feelings of injustice amongst truckers on the road. Like all sectors of disadvantaged communities, truckers expect that with the advent of a

democratically-elected government, their conditions must improve. Therefore, the appearance of an eloquent speaker who calls truckers to action in support of redress to their grievances might sway a certain number on to his side, as Madime's case showed.

A trucker and TGWU member at the second blockade told us he had no idea who the Turning Wheel was or how the blockade was organised, but that he would join any blockade he encountered on the road as a protest against his working conditions.

Madime is a member of the Workers List Party, which has accommodated him and his Turning Wheel in its offices in Johannesburg. The ability of the WLP and/or the Turning Wheel to organise an effective organisation or trade union is doubtful.

It is possible that the WLP is desperate to win workers over by showing themselves up as champions of worker rights who are not afraid to confront an ANC-led government. Madime said the Turning Wheel is now in the process of forming itself into a union, with the aim of becoming a permanent feature in the industry.

There is nothing suggesting that the Turning Wheel's tactic of orchestrating blockades can be matched by their ability to organise a coherent industrial force. But they have proved their potential to be a pain on the side of TGWU. The growth or demise of this potential will, to a large extent, depend on TGWU.

The ability of TGWU to put in place an organising strategy for truckers will be an interesting development to watch. The question is whether the union is going to use the national industrial council as a means towards an end, or whether it will become an end in itself. Madime has vowed that his Turning Wheel, now that it has formulated itself into a union, will go all out to organise defections from TGWU.

However, Dlamini said one lesson they have learnt from the blockade is the need to establish and maintain means of communication with truckers to keep them informed of developments. Maybe TGWU needed the blockade and Madime to make them remember how important it is to always keep in touch with the membership. ☆

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# The auto industry strike: *industry restructuring or wage militance?*

What was the five week auto strike really about? ASHWIN DESAI and KARL VON HOLDT ask why the strike lasted so long, and what happened to the agenda for industry restructuring.

**A**fter five weeks 25 000 motor assembly workers ended their strike, settling for a pay increase of 10,5%.

The strike raised some very important questions. How did NUMSA get involved in a strike exclusively about money that in the end cost workers some R90 million in wages and the fiscus R500 million in taxes? What happened to the agenda for restructuring the industry and empowering workers? Can the union successfully combine militant wage struggles with struggles to democratise the workplace?

## What was the strike about?

In the lead-up to the strike, NUMSA press statements made it very clear that the dispute was "not fundamentally about the annual wage increment", but rather was about "ending apartheid in the factory and not just in parliament". To this end, NUMSA focused on the "apartheid wage gap", education and skills development. The union presented these demands as part of a programme for restructuring the industry to meet international competition.

However, in the second week of the strike, NUMSA shifted focus to the wage demand

For a detailed account of the first two weeks of the strike see Ashwin Desai's article in the last issue of *Labour Bulletin*.

alone. It was agreed that negotiations on wage policy could be dealt with in a different forum (see Desai 1994: p59). The strike became a simple wage strike.

This, despite the fact that NUMSA (and employers) are acutely aware that with the lowering of tariff barriers and the concomitant threat of international competition the industry requires a speedy and fundamental restructuring. The preamble to the draft Motor Industry Task Group (MITG) overseas mission report based on a tour to Australia, England and Germany by both worker representatives and the employers, recognises this.

So why did the employers and the union lose sight of these issues? Why did such a lengthy strike happen at all, if both parties are aware of the need for restructuring?

## Different agendas

Part of the answer is that employers and the union have different agendas for restructuring. Employers want a moratorium on industrial action, wage restraint and a better work ethic. NUMSA, on the other hand, wants to roll back 'management prerogative', increase skills on the shopfloor and lay the basis for industrial democracy.

The union had not prepared itself for any national strikes this year, since all its energy was on the elections. "We under-estimated the expectations that would be unleashed by

democracy,” says NUMSA general secretary Enoch Godongwana. When it became clear that the dispute was heading for a strike, the union expected it to be a short one – lasting at most a week.

Employers, however, took a tough stand. Toyota’s Harry Gazendam – who is also vice-president of manufacturer’s association AMEO – believes the union sees the auto industry as a “soft touch” which sets the pace by winning the highest increases. He believes NUMSA wanted a major victory before the COSATU congress.

Consistent with their agenda for restructuring, employers held the view that wage increases of more than a couple of percentage points above the inflation rate would fuel inflation and raise production costs. What particularly angered the union negotiators was that employers did not deny that they could afford the increase – it was simply a matter of principle. Employers told NUMSA that in the new SA wage increases would not be brought about by strike action.

For the union it was equally a matter of principle not to concede that wage restraint should be the basis either of macro-economic stability or of industry restructuring, especially as it had settled below inflation for two years running and because its members’ wages account for only 50% of the industry’s salary bill.

So the strike became a trial of strength. In the highly organised and militant auto sector, this would mean a long strike. In the end the union forced the employers to drop their principles. The final settlement was 10,5%, “the highest ever on actual rates in the industry”. Employers had sought to make wage restraint a central issue of post-apartheid economic restructuring – and failed to impose this view on militant and well-organised workers. But in financial terms it was a paper victory, since strikers forfeited more than a month’s wages.

### **Losing control of the agenda**

While different agendas for restructuring underlay the strike, the union was unable to assert its programme for ending the apartheid

wage gap and democratising the workplace. Such a failure on the part of a union which has put more effort than any other into policy on industry restructuring is highly disturbing. What happened?

The union and employers had in fact reached a wide-ranging agreement on wage policy issues before the strike began. The dispute centred on the time frame for implementing them. By the second week of the strike it was clear to NUMSA that this issue would not easily be resolved. Meanwhile, comments national organiser Gavin Hartford, “our priority was to try to settle the strike.” This was when the union proposed de-linking the wage demand from the wage policy issues, which could then be negotiated in a different forum.

Hartford says both the union and employers had actually reached the limits of the kind of agreement they were able to negotiate. “Employers were having real difficulties making the complex calculations over cost implications of reducing the time frame from four to three years. On our side we could not cope with an agreement with so many variables covering such a long period.”

Godongwana admits that the union “lost control” of the strike agenda. Part of the problem goes back to the lack of preparation for a strike. The union had not done sufficient groundwork among members on the complex demands around restructuring and the wage gaps. The worker leadership mobilised members on the simple demand for a wage increase. “Once you are in a conflict situation workers forget everything except money,” comments Godongwana (see also the comments by Toyota workers, p78).

This accounts for the highly embarrassing proposal from NUMSA, late in the strike, that employers divert their contribution to the Work Security Fund into their wage offer so as to raise it from 10,5% to the 11% demanded by the union. The Fund had been established in response to a union demand for the re-training of employees who might be retrenched as a result of restructuring. Since NUMSA had argued that such a fund was essential to its



participation in restructuring, and its establishment was regarded as a path-breaking achievement, the union's proposal to divert funds into a wage increase was highly damaging to its claims to be acting in the long term interest of workers, the industry and the community.

**New agenda, old tactics?**

Perhaps the major question to arise from this strike is how the strategy for industry restructuring adopted by NUMSA can be pushed forward.

The restructuring agenda adopted by the union consists of extremely complex proposals on training, career pathing, wage-gaps and work organisation. At the same time, they are proposals that take a long time – several years – to negotiate and implement. This makes it difficult to mobilise worker support for them. On the other hand, management only accepts these proposals when confronted with union power.

The result is that the union has to keep linking the longer term more complex proposals to mobilisation over short term more immediate demands – especially wages. There is a constant trade-off between the two – which sometimes produces gains, but can ultimately undermine the union strategy. This year's strike is a clear case of this.

Godongwana agrees that "we need to re-evaluate our mobilisational strategies and the traditions we come from". The question is how – or whether – the tactics of mobilisation, resistance and wage militancy of the 1980s can be used to achieve the goals set by the union in the 1990s.

These difficulties do raise some important questions: should restructuring issues and



*Auto strikers march in Pretoria*

wages and conditions be negotiated in the same forums and in the same way, or should they be separated? Should the unions lobby for *legal* rights to be involved in restructuring issues (via a Social Plan Act as proposed by NUM, or via co-determination rights) so that they do not have to rely on strikes to assert their agenda? Should the unions lobby for stronger state intervention in restructuring, so that they can avoid huge trials of strength over wage gaps, training, access to information, etc?

**Centralised bargaining**

These issues are, of course, linked to the debate over centralised bargaining. Employers stated clearly that they want the relation of centralised bargaining in the national bargaining forum (NBF) to plant

level bargaining reconsidered. NUMSA also believes a new discussion on the "balance between centralised and plant level bargaining" is necessary.

The strike itself appears to have created some stress in workers' unity, with rumours that Mercedes Benz workers would return to work alone in the fourth week of the strike, and VWSA workers clearly unhappy with the settlement. Ironically, Godongwana feels that one of the reasons the strike was prolonged was that all manufacturers were hit, so none felt it was losing market share.

Gazendam argues that NUMSA's approach to centralised bargaining resembles a command economy. "Everything must be the same in the industry. This is reflected in their approach to team-work – they insist the guidelines must be laid down at national level. This results in a bizarre attempt to take companies with German and Japanese cultures and produce a homogeneity. The result of this is to reduce everything to an average mediocrity.

"While Mercedes has a plant level productivity scheme, NUMSA has told the rest of the industry that only when a new wage model is implemented will they consider plant level productivity schemes. This is some three to four years away."

Gazendam says the NBF "has too many complicated, far reaching proposals" which neither party can see through. He believes the NBF should focus on economies of scale, retirement, health care, generic training matters, housing assistance, job security, and creating an "enabling framework of minimum standards, including wages". Bargaining at this level would be adversarial.

At the plant level "the emphasis should be on productivity, with results producing benefits". At this level the culture of identifying with the company interest would develop, and relations would be "collaborative" rather than adversarial.

Gazendam's comments indicate employers are also grappling with the issue of what issues should be addressed in which forums. However, NUMSA will have to counter a vaguely defined "collaboration" on

management's terms with a far stronger and uniform framework of co-determination rights established in law and through centralised bargaining.

### The state

Finally, what of the role of the state?

Very clearly the success of dragging South Africa's sheltered, unproductive and racist motor industry from the past into a future that is internationally competitive and less white in its upper echelons cannot be achieved without state intervention. In this context the MITG's recommendation for the establishment of a Motor Industry Authority (MIA) as a statutory body reporting directly to the Minister of Trade and Industry needs to be instituted speedily. Part of its responsibilities would include provision for the monitoring of the performance of and outlook for the motor industry; to encourage the development of the motor industry in a way that is consistent with economic policy; and to provide change in the motor industry that will improve the efficiency of the industry (MITG, 1994:49).

### New conditions

The auto strike was one of the most significant strikes of the year. It showed that employers will be unable to impose wage restraint unilaterally on militant and well organised workers. It revealed the difficulties unions will have in combining wage militancy with struggles over industry restructuring. It will sharpen debate on centralised bargaining. And it taught the union that the conditions of struggle are changing. "Reconstruction and growth are the key issues," reflects Godongwana. "Public opinion played a major role. We were ill-prepared for that. Under the new conditions we have to win in the arena of public opinion as well as on the shopfloor." ☆

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