

What happened at VW?

So serious was the Volkswagen (VW) strike in January this year that President Mbeki referred to it in his opening speech to parliament, saying that the government would not tolerate illegal disruptive strikes. And figures released later by Statistics SA noted that the production of motor vehicles, parts, and accessories was down by nearly 16% in January on a seasonally adjusted basis because of the strike.

But this was not workers striking against their employers. It was workers striking against their union, NUMSA.

This is not the first time that workers in South Africa have struck to highlight internal union conflict. In fact, it is a peculiarly South African tactic to disrupt production when members have a grievance against their union.

It is not always clear why workers use this tactic rather than raising grievances in union structures. It may be the only way workers know of getting their grievances aired or it may be an attempt to cripple the opposition by weakening the union in that plant. But it is clear that workers are prepared to risk their jobs to protest an internal union matter.

But how does a situation like the one at VW arise? How do unions attempt to deal with the conflict, and how successful are they?

These are complex questions which need a considerable amount of unravelling.

Kally Forrest explores why the three-week strike against NUMSA took place at VW and concludes that workers learned through their bitter experience that the union is there to represent their interests and that internal conflicts must be solved through democratic debate in union structures.

There has recently been a spate of internal union conflict – some of which have been successfully resolved, and others that simmer on unresolved or explode into violent confrontation in the public arena. The killing of an NUM regional chair, Selby Maylse in May last year when he addressed workers on confusion around the Mineworkers Provident Fund, is one of the most extreme forms this conflict has taken. Indeed, the memory of this murder has put extra stresses into resolving of internal union conflicts.

VW and Nissan conflicts

Although the VW strike got wide coverage in the press there were few attempts to answer these questions beyond vague allegations that the UDM (United

Democratic Movement) and other political formations were making in-roads in the plant and causing conflict.

At VW, in Uitenhage, as at Nissan (see Box on p 18), there is a history of workplace restructuring and change. Like Nissan, VW is a large auto factory with a big union membership of about 4 000 members. As at Nissan, a rumbling internal dispute broke out into open hostility and in the VW case led to a three-week strike against the union's suspension of 13 shopstewards. And as at Nissan, in the lead up to this internal dispute NUMSA shopstewards and regional leadership were accused of being in bed with management in a highly charged atmosphere with threats and intimidation.

But in the VW case, unlike Nissan, NUMSA was not able to contain the violence and internal conflict. The reasons are complex and varied and this article does not claim to cover all the dynamics in the dispute.

Background

For a long time before the strike, internal union politics at VW were unstable. VW is a key factory in the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area with strong links into local community politics. In the 1980s workers waged militant battles to improve their conditions and VW was the first factory in the union movement to demand a living wage of R2 an hour.

Through its militant struggles and size VW was seen as an important factory to win in local political battles. This has meant that over the years various political groupings, and tensions, have surfaced in the factory. In the past the union contained these differences but in the 1990s things changed.

The 1990s ushered in a new democratic government which workers had fought for. New labour laws protecting workers'

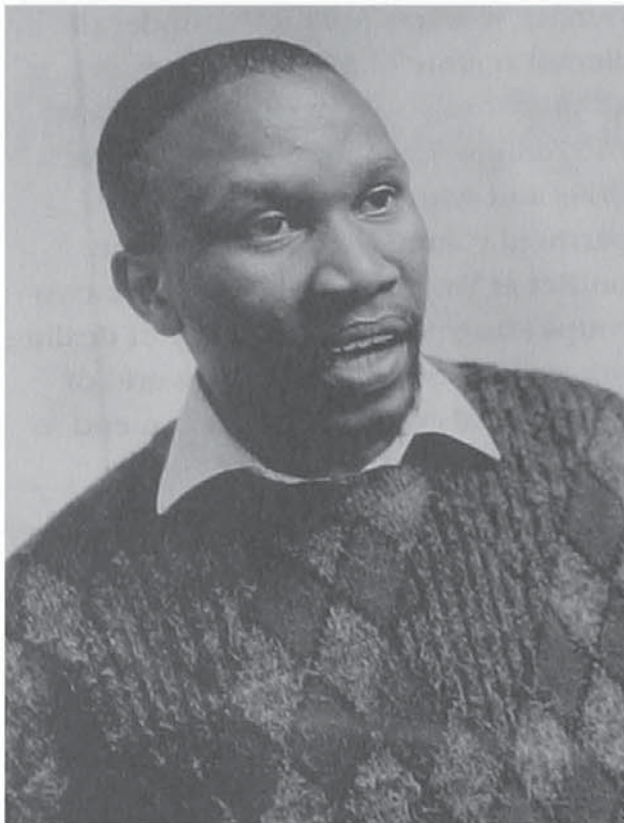
rights were introduced, and new and younger workers joined VW under the tolerant regime of Mandela's presidency. But there are also older workers at VW who remember the hard battles of the 1980s and who cannot forget how apartheid ruined their lives. And the conflict at VW is partly about these two groups struggling to find a way of dealing with employers in the 1990s world of international competition and an end to protective tariffs.

Over time a group of older African members began to feel alienated from the younger shopstewards on the shopstewards committee. This younger leadership was struggling with massive unemployment, and other new and complex issues in a period where co-determination was the buzz-word, and the old days of militant rejection and suspicion of all management initiatives was over. This difference in approach is well illustrated by the different responses to the A4 Golf Export Agreement.

A4 Golf Agreement

VW Germany were willing to allocate the A4 contract to their South African subsidiary if local management could develop the capacity to carry out the contract. In order to win the contract the company had to cut back on costs and introduce new technology. Negotiations with the union began.

The company offered 850 new jobs with the spin-off of another 1 000 jobs in the harbour in return for certain workplace changes. This included things like only one tea-break a day, and instead of the traditional three week factory closure over Christmas, leave would be spread over a nine-week period to ensure unbroken operations. This was taken to membership and after nine months of discussion the union got the mandate to



Peter Dantjies helped resolve conflict in the union at Nissan.

go ahead with the agreement. NUMSA's Eastern Cape regional chair, Irvin Jim, put it like this: 'That agreement was not perfect but in a capitalist environment it was the best we could do to ensure creation of jobs in a sea of unemployment in the area.'

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But to the older traditional African workers it looked like the union was selling out on all the hard-won struggles they had waged to win rights like regular tea-breaks. They also wanted the

traditional factory closure at Christmas with everyone returning together to their homes to attend to things like circumcision ceremonies.

A core of these workers started holding their own regular general meetings at lunch time where they voiced their unhappiness about shopstewards selling out, and complained about the lack of mandates, and servicing.

Over time they gathered a group of sympathetic workers around them in a grouping known as Indlu yeengwevu (The House of Elders). In this way a block of union members operating outside of union structures emerged even though some of them were shopstewards.

Then the de-mutualisation of Old Mutual in 1998 further aggravated this split. As at Nissan and in other internal union disputes, benefits can be the trigger for some heated emotions.

The VW provident fund had invested in Old Mutual. With de-mutualisation workers believed they were entitled to cash payouts. The Indlu yeengwevu encouraged workers in this belief whereas at other workplaces NUMSA regional leadership quickly clarified the situation.

When shopstewards at VW explained that payouts from a provident fund only took place on resignation, retrenchment, retirement, or death, some workers at VW remained deeply suspicious and confused.

Dealing with Indlu yeengwevu

Shopstewards outside of Indlu yeengwevu felt they had to deal with this unconstitutional group that 'was misleading workers'. So, for example, they called a company congress in 1997 to allow members to raise grievances and map a way forward.

The regional executive was then mandated to execute this plan of action with shopstewards. But it was clear that 13

of the 32 shopstewards were not on board, according to Jim, 'The 13 actively boycotted or sabotaged union meetings and structures and attacked the leadership all the time without specific allegations. We felt they just had the desire to weaken organisation. They knew they could not break away and form another union because the majority of membership would not go with them.'

Witnessing this split in their leadership, membership became passive and marginalised in the conflict. The worsening situation rumbled on throughout 1998 until in 1999 the NUMSA Uitenhage shopsteward council, made up of shopstewards from different companies, decided to take action and suspend the 13 stewards. The suspended stewards were invited to a hearing but did not come. The region pointed out that the suspension was unconstitutional but at a later regional congress the decision of the local was upheld subject to correct procedures being followed.

The Indlu yeengwevu group quickly followed this decision with a one-day strike supported by about 300 NUMSA members demanding the reversal of the suspensions. To resolve the situation NUMSA leadership decided they had to be 'creative' and lift the suspensions while adhering to the congress decision that the 13 must stop operating as a block within NUMSA, and stop inflaming opposition to NUMSA leadership. This decision was communicated at a quarterly general meeting to which the 13 were invited. They attended but sat with general membership distancing themselves from other shopstewards.

At the meeting the other shopstewards resigned as they felt they could not continue in the threatening atmosphere and 'they felt useless with no unity to take up issues'. This left the 13 as the sole

shopstewards. The meeting agreed to hold shopsteward elections and bring in the neutral Independent Mediation Services of South Africa (IMSSA) to conduct them. But this never happened.

The Indlu yeengwevu group conducted their own ballot and at a meeting attended by the regional secretary, Slumko Nodwangu, they gave the names of new stewards to management. Nodwangu objected that the stewards had not been properly elected and management then witnessed veiled threats on Nodwangu's life.

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The strike

On 20 January the Indlu yeengwevu group and about 300 supporters went on strike. Over time about 1 300 workers joined the strike. Most of the strikers were less skilled workers. This time it took three weeks before production at VW started again. VW management responded by closing down the plant and giving workers a deadline to return to work saying it was an illegal strike. Some returned but 1 300 were dismissed.

In the meantime the Indlu yeengwevu

group set up a Crisis Committee in the community which was partly taken over by non-VW workers. Their spokesperson was an unelected ex-NUMSA and now management member of Goodyear, Wilfuss Ndani.

The majority of dismissed workers turned to NUMSA to get them reinstated and the union immediately took up their cases. But the strike had taken its toll on both production output (VW was losing about R25-million turnover per day) and the image of the union was dented in workers' eyes as they asked: 'Do we need all this trouble?'

What to make of it?

On the face of it, NUMSA leadership tried a number of different ways to resolve the conflict in their ranks. There were attempts to deal with the problem as openly and democratically as possible through the calling of general meetings, company congresses, and regional congresses. So why did these attempts not succeed as they had at Nissan?

The Indlu yeengwevu were older workers, concerned mainly with workers' issues, who felt their militant tradition of workplace union struggle was under threat.

Some commentators feel that politics and the union's lack of impartiality stood in the way of a solution to the problem. Most NUMSA leadership was aligned with the ANC/COSATU/SACP alliance and shopstewards outside of this camp were viewed with suspicion. The Indlu yeengwevu were older workers, concerned mainly with workers' issues

who felt their militant tradition of workplace union struggle was under threat. As time went on some of the stewards from this group joined other political groupings.

At every point where the union attempted to resolve the conflict they sent in representatives who supported this alliance politics, whether it was the regional leadership or national leadership in the form of NUMSA president Mtutuzeli Tom. The union did not send in a neutral, but trusted representative, as in the case of Nissan, to act as a mediator in the conflict. This meant that all attempts at solutions were immediately regarded with suspicion.

There was also a crisis of ideology in the union. Older workers were battling with the new style of leadership - a leadership that accepted they were operating in a capitalist environment. Older members had grown up in the 1980s socialist rhetoric - and this was especially true of auto factories in the Eastern Cape - where there were times when it seemed that workers would wrest control of factories from employers. From this perspective this new era of co-determination with management looked like a sell-out.

But the Indlu yeengwevu group were unable to put forward any alternative strategies which could convince the majority of workers that theirs was the route to go. Instead they dug in their heels and sabotaged union leadership and structures from the sidelines. During the strike, Nodwangu commented, 'Workers used intimidatory tactics which were associated with VW struggles which were at the centre of the struggle in Ultenhage in the 1980s. These kinds of tactics in these times with a new LRA were inappropriate.'

The Indlu yeengwevu were also struggling with the style of leadership.



Like other unions, NUMSA must work at building and maintaining unity.

Gone were the days where the union sought mandates from members on all issues. With more complex issues, and more worker benefits, shopstewards are often involved in a range of technical issues where they make decisions on the spot. This broader representative democracy was not easily accepted by older members.

This was a tension that the union did not resolve, as Peter Dantjies, NUMSA's general secretary at the time, put it, 'There is a lack of involvement of members. People tend to rely on one-hour meetings and when important issues are discussed in other meetings there is not a majority of members present.' The union was not able to ensure deeper involvement by members which would have allowed for broad mandates that shopstewards could work with to ensure no undue delays in negotiations.

Combined with this clash of ideologies went certain assumptions about the level of leadership experience in VW. Nodwangu comments that 'because VW was an old and militant factory there was the belief in the union that there was qualitative, experienced leadership in the factory and a well educated membership. In fact at the point of production a great deal needs to be done to inform members of micro- and macro-economic relations - a great deal of education needs to be done.'

The assumption that local leadership could deal with the conflict meant that national leadership came in at a very late stage when it was difficult to make any constructive intervention.

Commentators also feel that the conflict was not dealt with early enough at a local level. Differences were allowed to simmer unattended until a clear

Internal union dispute at Nissan

Just before the VW strike, NUMSA leadership were resolving an internal union dispute at Nissan where members called for the cancellation of their union subscriptions and a strike directed against their company and union. This conflict was successfully resolved.

At both Nissan and VW, workplace changes either caused, or heightened, internal union conflict. The dispute at Nissan happened against a backdrop of company restructuring and discussions around retrenchments in the face of falling profits.

Unilateral restructuring

NUMSA has 2 000 members at Nissan, a company in Rosslyn near Pretoria. Nissan management unilaterally introduced a new medical aid to cut company costs. Once they had contracted the new medical aid, management consulted NUMSA shopstewards and the chair of the shopstewards committee wrote a letter endorsing the new medical aid. Workers were then faced with a form to sign to change over to the new medical aid.

Workers were confused about the decision and they were worried about what would happen to their contributions in the old medical aid. A vocal group of workers emerged who strongly opposed the shopstewards committee for going along with the new medical aid. They accused shopstewards of being in bed with management.

This caused a split in the shopstewards committee – some sided with angry workers and others supported the new medical aid. Anti-NUMSA feeling ran high amongst workers and there were requests to cancel union subscriptions. Then 2 000 workers struck against the company's medical aid decision and the union's endorsement of this.

Head office intervenes

At this point Peter Dantjies, NUMSA general

secretary, was called in from head office to try and sort out the conflict. He consulted carefully with shopstewards over a period of two days and then addressed a general meeting.

In Dantjies' words it was a difficult meeting, 'Workers were very hostile. They kept interrupting me and grabbing the mike out of my hands to address workers. All this came just after the killing of an NUM regional chair in a similar situation and speakers made reference to that incident. Workers would not allow any shopstewards or local organisers to address them. It was very threatening.'

But Dantjies had a couple of advantages. Firstly he had formerly been an organiser in the Rosslyn area and was trusted by workers. Secondly he was seen as a neutral 'outsider' with no particular brief or involvement with either of the shopsteward factions. This was in contrast to the regional leadership who workers did not consider neutral.

These advantages enabled Dantjies to hold his ground and members began to air their grievances which included complaints about lack of servicing and consultation, and allegations against regional officials. The meeting then proceeded to endorse some creative and innovative ways of handling the dispute.

Commission

The meeting agreed to set up a commission to investigate members' grievances and to develop proposals for general membership to discuss. Dantjies was to head the commission and members could elect anyone to sit on the commission – they did not have to be shopstewards. Dantjies said this was important because, 'I detected there was a core who were not shopstewards who were driving the opposition and we needed to know who they were'. And the same time, 14 people who

were strongly attacking the union were elected to sit on the commission.

The company was at first very hostile to this commission. They felt they had the upper hand because shopstewards had endorsed the idea of a new medical aid, and they did not want to deal with an ad hoc group of workers.

The union, however, managed to persuade management to co-operate with the commission and to give commission members time off with pay and transport for the period of investigation. It was also agreed that shopstewards would continue with their day-to-day tasks and the commission would only deal with medical aid issues.

The commission set to work and demanded information from each medical aid so that members could make an informed comparison. The union also explained to the medical aid how their selection had caused conflict.

The medical aid agreed to a joint meeting with the union and management and in this way the union managed to change the balance of forces around the company's unilateral decision. At the meeting the medical aid agreed to withdraw until workers had a proper chance to discuss and make an informed decision.

In this balanced and transparent manner the union was able to diffuse the situation and to bring the union opposition on board in a constructive way. The commission investigated all worker allegations including

their allegations against the regional leadership many of which were without substance and had arisen mainly out of anger with the union's lack of consultation. Members of the commission also agreed that political differences must be neutralised as this was not the main issue.

Commission findings

The commission agreed to recommend to the general meeting that shopstewards be suspended and those stewards responsible for writing the letter to management should not be allowed to stand for re-election. They also agreed to recommend that in future any member calling for the suspension of union subscriptions would be expelled from the union.

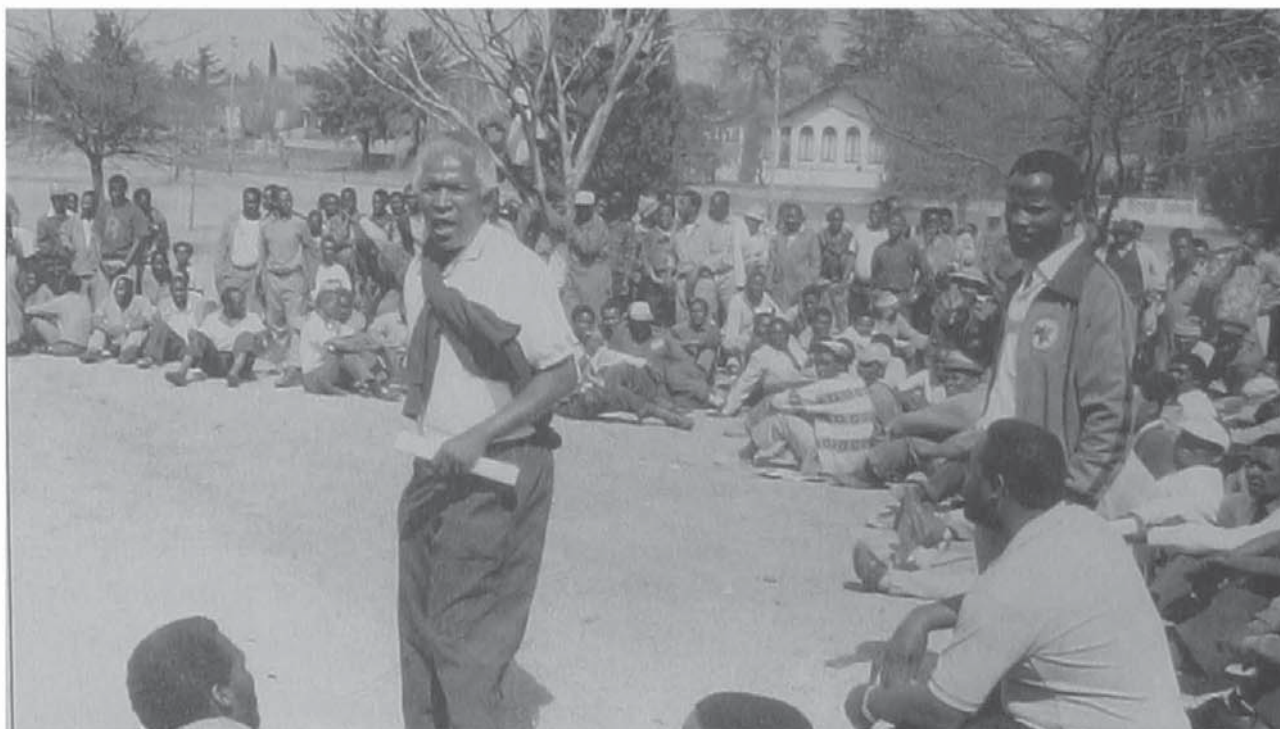
The union then held a five hour report-back meeting with general membership where all issues were thoroughly discussed. The ball was put back into the membership's court, as Dantjies put it: 'We told them we can't say which medical aid you must go with. That is your decision, it's for you to assess now you have the information. We are merely here to normalise the situation. You must decide and give a mandate.'

Once the union was again talking with one voice it was possible for NUMSA to declare a dispute with management over their unilateral implementation of the medical aid. The company then withdrew their decision and began a proper process of negotiation over the future of the medical aid.

opposition group emerged. Richard Ntuli, an experienced NUMSA organiser on the East Rand and a former shopsteward, has commented: 'There is jealousy amongst shopstewards themselves. I faced that. It's a hard job to bring them all the time together. That's why we met every week. There's a Sesotho expression *'ditaba di mablong'* (in your face), you must look at each and everyone in the face and check

and see that this one has something wrong. You must move fast as a shopsteward to catch things before they get worse.'

Even during the strike, management felt that regional leadership did not come forward rapidly enough. For the first three days of the strike NUMSA leadership were afraid to come to the plant in Uitenhage because of threats. They wanted to meet



Debate and discussion in union structures build organisation.

management in Port Elizabeth and cited the recent NUM worker killing of Maylse as the reason for this. Management felt that the union lost the initiative by not addressing workers at once.

As VW's human resources director, Brian Smith put it, 'Maybe 600 of them would not have gone on strike, those three days allowed them to entrench their position by getting workers to believe that NUMSA leadership was corrupt, controlled by the ANC/SACP, in bed with management. They got the upper hand in the absence of clear communication from the union.'

The delay in dealing with the Indlu yeengwevu opposition may have been partly to do with the NUMSA tradition of allowing a wide range of opinions and political views within the organisation. This has been one of the union's strengths. But in 1990s, with the absence of a common enemy of the 1980s (apartheid and the Nationalist government), diversity of opinion is harder to contain.

In the future the union will have to work harder at informing, educating and

keeping all workers on board if it wants members to fully understand and support its policies. The union can no longer rely on an external enemy to assist in the creation of worker unity. And it is the responsibility of shopstewards to ensure this happens. If it does not happen, workers will test their union through extreme action, and will only learn through the bitter lesson of dismissal that:

- the union is after all there to represent their interests;
- and it is only through open discussion within union structures that their interests will be best served. ★

Kally Forrest is the director of Umanyano Media Service.

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