

Who was Lira Setona? Why should we care?

Vaal Reefs at war

In 1985 a powerful ungovernability swept through Vaal Reefs shafts 8 and 9 which established the indisputable presence of the National Union of Mineworkers. **Dunbar Moodie** in part 1 of these articles, describes how in this mobilisation Lira Setona, a charismatic figure was critical. Yet he was not a man of the union and his role was both controversial and admired.

ACTION

In 1984 in South Africa, black African townships exploded into popular revolt. The ANC called on township residents to “destroy the enemy organs of government”, rendering them “ineffective and inoperative”. Militant township youth seized on this principle of ‘ungovernability’ to impose ‘discipline’, often violent, on ordinary people trying to go about their everyday lives.

Similar forms of disruption eventually spread from residential areas into factories in militant opposition to the apartheid workplace regime. Although resistance movements such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) invoked the need for democratic order under a rubric of “people’s power”, ungovernability and violence always lurked close to the surface in practices of confrontation during this period.

UNION GATHERS MOMENTUM

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa was not millenarian. Its leaders all, and especially Cyril Ramaphosa, denied any claim to

prophetic charisma. Nevertheless, in 1985 at Vaal Reefs South a leader, Lira Setona, arose who directly and militantly challenged management control, claiming charismatic power with supernatural assistance.

In March 1985, union meetings started occurring all over the Vaal Reefs complex without management authorisation. Ordinary workers boycotted liquor outlets on the mines and these boycotts soon spread to concession stores, dry cleaning depots and local supermarkets. In one week alone, R1.2-million was withdrawn from cash savings outlets administered by Teba (The Employment Bureau of Africa), the recruiting corporation.

Workers stopped taking part in organised sports on the mines. They marched into senior black messes set up for black team leaders and officials and demanded service. On 18 March, at No. 6, No. 7 and No. 9 shafts, workers escalated their protest and started working short four-hour shifts. Union action had finally impacted on production. Moreover, for the first time the

action had been initiated on South Mine (at No. 9 shaft), where the NUM was not even recognised.

South division at Vaal Reefs, especially No. 8 shaft, was the milk cow of the entire Anglo-American corporation, producing 30 tons of gold a year. No. 9 (the other shaft in South division) was a new shaft just coming into production. Various divisions handed over their most dissatisfied and least hard-working workers to No. 9. Moreover, because No. 9 shaft was going to introduce trackless mining (electrically powered) at Vaal Reefs, workers with high school diplomas were hired to run the new machines. Many of them had been township or homeland student militants.

The union leader at No. 9, however, was Lira Setona, an ordinary winch-driver from Lesotho who could hardly write his name. The high school graduates at No. 9 were suspicious of Lira but put up with him because his mobilising charisma outweighed his organisational unreliability.

“Lira was somebody who was

not educated. We suspected that he was using *muti* (traditional medicine) because everybody accepted him. He was never stopped [by management].... I was close to Lira because we were monitoring Lira," Amos Mhlungwana, one of the ex-student radicals, told me. "We were not sure what really was happening. So we had to stay close to him. Because we didn't want to make a strike that would backfire on us. Because he was sort of an individual... Lira was leading the whole thing."

As Mhlungwana mentioned, most of the workers who knew of him were convinced he used powerful *muti*. When I asked his sidekick, 'Professor' Salai, who is now a Zionist evangelist, he laughed, however. "No," he said, "it was holy water that protected him." Muti by any other name, I thought.

Even No. 8 shaft was beginning to rouse up. An earnest young clerk, Nicholas Mkwana, recently transferred from East Division, was selected to head up the new branch committee at No. 8 shaft. Thanks to the efforts of Mkwana and his comrades at No. 8 and Lira at No. 9, the union had been signing up members in South Division at a fantastic rate.

There was no approach to management until shortly before the March 1985 liquor outlet boycott, however. South Division personnel manager, Stroom Strydom remembered: "Suddenly we had many stop order forms. It wasn't a matter of hundreds; it was about 13 000 at one time that they presented to us. Immediately after that, the next day, the trouble started."

Because the company had not recognised the union, there were no procedures in place for discussion.

LIRA AND UNGOVERNABILITY

Lira was a legend at Vaal Reefs. A tall man with a soft voice, he seemed able to mesmerise huge crowds of black workers and turn them to his will. Nankie de Wit, manager of personnel for the entire Vaal Reefs complex, heard about him from John Mayer, a section manager at No. 9: "He was surely the most powerful guy that I've heard about. At No. 9 shaft the workers decided to stay underground. This guy I knew very well, John Mayer (he wasn't scared of anybody) took Lira down there, just the two of them. He says to me afterwards, he says, 'Nankie, he stood up, the guys were going like mad, shouting and screaming and Lira just said once or twice, 'Amandla, amandla,' and everything went quiet. He said, 'Now this is the story. You get right into the cage. I'll make sure you're loaded. We can't stay here. We'll talk about it when we are on top.' The guy opened the cages and they all got on.' He got that whole mine cleaned that night. Just he and this John Mayer, only two guys. Remember down there you are in a shaft area. All those avenues to the shaft were packed. Between you and life is that cage. You must get into it and you must ring first and there's a delay so you've got no chance. When you're down there you've got no chance if those guys want to get rough. The two went down and they got the whole shaft up.... That's where I heard about Lira. He had a hell of an influence. Very strong."

James Motlatsi, the president of the union, also admired Lira for his daring and his leadership skill. In time, however, Motlatsi said Lira "started to fight not only against management; he also destroyed all the union structures there. No branch committees, no shaft

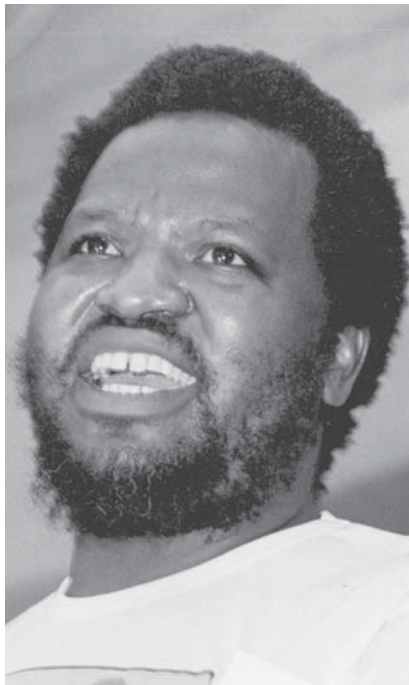
committees, no shaft steward committees, it was he and four other guys who commanded Vaal Reefs. He was saying he doesn't report to anybody. He reports directly to the president or the general secretary. All others in between are sell-outs."

From 4 April, management notes report "sporadic incidents with gradual erosion of general discipline." Cages were rushed underground, workers simply ignored orders to be paraded for disciplinary hearings, people refused to hand in their work tickets, making it impossible to keep track of who was working short shifts, and there was a general tendency to 'work to rule', that is refuse 'white man's work'. Incidents of intimidation and threats against team leaders, white miners and shift bosses, the principal agents of management control in the workplace, increased. White miners were targeted underground at both No. 8 and No. 9. "It was pretty tough out there... People were so scared they were trying to take revolvers down," Dave Hodgson, production manager at No. 9, told me.

There were endless meetings with shaft stewards, No. 8 production manager, Andries Schoombee remembered: "Now, instead of spending 5 or 10% of my time with these black guys, I'm now doing 50 and 60%. And it has to take place from four o'clock in the afternoon until ten, eleven, twelve or one o'clock at night. Man, you must experience this to understand what we had to go through... It was impossible to deal with all these committees. You sit down and you talk about something logically and we'd all come to an agreement. OK, this is what we'll do. Then they turn around and they go to the hostels



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and then somebody says, "No, man, you're fucking working with the whites. You can't do that. Next morning you hear that the decision has been totally slung around and it's now totally different from the decisions that were made at the meetings."

Ungovernability had come to the mine. "I can tell you it was nearly a war," Stroom Strydom told me: "It was really getting out of control."

Interestingly enough, from the union point of view Oliver Sokanyile, until recently local regional chairperson of the NUM, had a similar impression. "At No. 9 and No. 8 Lira was the boss now," he told me: "They made no effort to negotiate with management or even to inform management about their grievances. It was desperate there."

Things came to a head at a union meeting on 24 April, when the drillers at Vaal Reefs South decided not to charge up, saying it was white man's work (blacks were not permitted to blast). Next day, Tuesday 23 April, 64 machine operators at No. 8 were paraded for a dismissal hearing. About 800 turned up, claiming that they too were not working and charging management victimisation. On Wednesday 24 April, when a further 250 workers were paraded for disciplinary action, more than a thousand showed up.

NUM head office was called in to try to sort things out, but Lira was inspired to insurrection. Oliver Sokanyile takes up the story: "We reported [Lira's defiance] to head office. First, Cyril [Ramaphosa] came to discuss it and a shaft stewards council meeting was called and we all went to No. 6 shaft, even the people from No. 9. And Lira defied Cyril. Cyril gave up. Then James [Motlatsi] and [Elijah] Barayi

came. He defied them. James just laughed and said, 'OK Lira, you can go home and whoever wants to follow you can follow you.' And that was that."

On Friday 26 April, at both No. 8 and No. 9, the union took over the hostel, chained the gates, and nobody went to work. Shaft stewards at No. 8 came from room to room announcing a meeting that afternoon. Nicholas tried desperately to persuade the workers to return to work but Lira was intransigent. Over 14 000 workers were dismissed in all.

To carry out the dismissals, mine security had to break down the hostel gates and release the workers, who had been sleeping on the ground with shaft stewards patrolling the perimeters. Workers were marched to the huge Harry Oppenheimer stadium in the centre of the Vaal Reefs complex where the turnstiles had been turned backwards. They were paid out, put into waiting buses and shipped home.

A few months later, Lira's burned body was found at the bottom of a pass in Lesotho. Rumour has it that a black Mosotho personnel administrative official from No. 8 shaft took out a contract on him but the case has never been definitively resolved. LB

This article forms the first of three parts which are based on a much longer paper. In part 2 in the next volume of SA Labour Bulletin Dunbar Moodie looks critically at this powerful experience at Vaal Reefs Shafts No 8 and 9. Moodie is professor of Sociology at the Hobart and William Smith Colleges in the USA. For any queries or contributions email: moodie@hws.edu