

# Worker factory under state control

## Contradiction in terms?

The previous article tells how workers are taking over the Mine-Line factory on the West Rand and requesting the state to nationalise it. **Shawn Hattingh** however, although in favour of democratic worker take-overs, questions the concept, and the wisdom, of nationalising under workers' control.

to be a purely defensive strategy. There are no illusions about an overthrow of capitalism through a knock-on effect of factory occupations although workers see an urgent task in creating a mass political organisation based on a class programme with a socialist perspective.

However, the greater significance of this factory occupation lies in the immediate alternative it suggests to many workers fighting against mass redundancies and liquidations, which make workers and the poor pay for the economic crisis.

In the political paralysis of organised labour, the Mine-Line factory occupation offers a refreshing lesson in the struggle for militant working class alternatives. The working-class is demoralised by policies of class compromise and by the fatalism of its leadership, which is epitomised by the failure to mobilise for a single general strike in spite of millions of job losses, thousands of factory closures and widespread wage cuts.

Although this occupation cannot be a panacea for all the struggles facing the working class, it demonstrates to workers that alternatives can be explored in responding to job losses and precarious employment in the current crisis and beyond. **LS**

*Miriam di Paola is a Global Labour University student at the University of the Witwatersrand and Mametlwe Sebei is an organiser in Mewusa.*

*To express solidarity contact Mametlwe Sebei: mametlwesebei@gmail.com, Miriam Di Paola: miriam.dipaola@gmail.com, Liv Shange: livshange@gmail.com 074 105 9622, Sipho Linda: 083 773 9002*

**T**he economic crisis in South Africa has seen inequalities, and the forced misery of the working class, grow. While the rich and politicians continue to flaunt their ill-gotten wealth, over a million people have been retrenched.

In this context, most major trade unions have been hamstrung in social dialogue that has failed to end the job losses. On 20 October 2010, however, a few workers and their union boldly mapped out an innovative way of fighting retrenchments when they took over their factory, Mine-Line/TAP Engineering on Johannesburg's West Rand.

Wynand Mulder liquidated the company in August 2010 in order to escape responsibly for the deaths of three workers killed in an accident at the factory. Before declaring insolvency, Mulder looted the company. Workers, along with their families, were left with nothing - not even their final salaries.

It was this, and examples of factory occupations in other regions of the world, that led the workers who are members of the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (Mewusa) to begin an occupation. They were determined not to be retrenched. Workers are determined to take over permanently, to restart production and to run the factory under workers' control. As part of doing this, they have demanded that the state provide resources to restart the factory.

A solidarity committee was established to offer support to these workers. Organisations like the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front, Conference of the Democratic Left (now the Democratic Left Front), Co-operative and Policy Alternative Centre and the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM) got involved. This was vital to muster resources and to provide information and materials to the workers.

Importantly, unions such as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) also offered solidarity. Hopefully such support will be a catalyst for further factory occupations.

#### TO NATIONALISE OR NOT?

Some organisations such as the Democratic Left Front, DSM and Mewusa have said that although the short-to-medium term goal is for Mine-Line to become a co-operative, the ultimate goal of the occupation is for the factory to be nationalised under workers' control.

This call for nationalisation derives from a critique which argues that co-operatives run by workers cannot indefinitely exist as worker self-managed institutions within a market system. Market forces, such as competition, will undermine democracy and lead to the resumption of capitalist relations of production in the enterprise.

The solution the Democratic Left Front, DSM and Mewusa contend is for the state to take over ownership and guarantee resources to Mine-Line, but

allow workers' to control the factory. This would alleviate the worst effects of the market on such industries, and at the same time act as a training ground for socialism.

Calling for such action, whether at Mine-Line or other factories, does however raise issues relating to the nature of the state and its relations with workers in general, something that the call for nationalisation under workers' control often seems to brush over.

One mistake that those calling for nationalisation of Mine-Line seem to be making is that they misread the character of all states. They acknowledge that states exist for one class to rule over another. States are, however, more than this. All states, whether capitalist or socialist, exist so that a minority can rule over a majority. Entire sections of the state, such as the courts, military and police exist to enforce this. As such, all states are oppressive and hierarchical.

States don't allow for direct democracy. Even under representative democracy, elite officials decide the destinies of

the majority and then use the state to enforce those decisions. States are, therefore, not neutral entities or potential allies of the oppressed; they are part of the oppression of the majority of people.

Certainly, concessions can be won from the state through struggle, but ultimately the state will never allow full democratic freedom – it is not their purpose. It is in this context that the call for the nationalisation of Mine-Line under workers' control needs to be evaluated.

Questions about what workers would gain by nationalising Mine-Line need to be thought out. Over the years, the South African state has repeatedly attacked workers and the poor. In the last few months it even attempted to pass laws to prevent information getting to the public regarding its operations, expenditure and failings. In state enterprises, the state has attacked workers through driving down wages and cutting jobs.

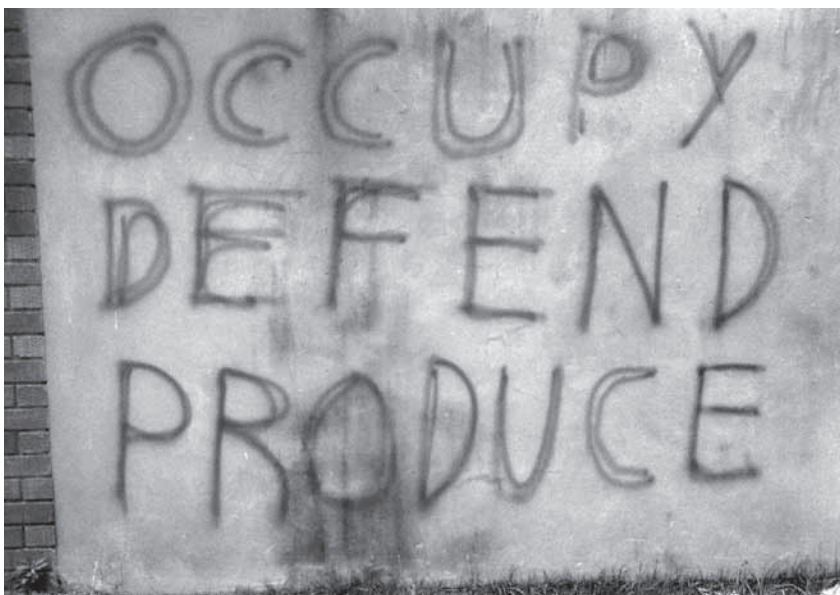
The state's interests are the antithesis of the Mine-Line workers involved in the occupation.

Some of the South African state's prime goals are to safeguard private property and to put measures in place for the capitalist economy to operate as smoothly as possible for the benefit of high ranking state officials and the rich. This is done through depriving workers of property and dominating and exploiting them.

It seems unlikely, therefore, that nationalising Mine-Line will have any benefit and it would probably lead to the further exploitation of the workers. To win concessions from the state workers have to struggle and not strengthen the state's position by letting it take ownership.

Even if the state took over Mine-Line the consequences for

Atish Kiran



Worker graffiti on Mine-Line factory wall.



worker self-management would be devastating. Ownership of the factory would increase the state's power over the workers. If a conflict between the interests of the state and those of the workers' arose, the state could easily suppress workers' demands as its power would be immense. Far from strengthening the workers' position, it would weaken it!

There are many examples from history that demonstrate that the interests of workers' self-management and state-ownership are incompatible. States have shown little interest in allowing workers to run their own affairs. The Soviet Union is an example.

The Soviet state under the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party crushed worker self-management. Shortly after the October revolution the interests of the working class began to clash with the elite of the Bolshevik Party. In 1918 Lenin ended worker self-management through decreeing one-man management.

The fact that the Soviet state had nationalised most factories which workers had seized from the capitalist class, contributed to this as the state wielded its immense power against workers. Workers never became the state even in the so-called 'workers state' so the socialisation of wealth never occurred. Nationalisation did not break the relations of production that defined capitalism. Nationalisation under workers' control has proved to be a tactical and ideological dead end that undermines true workers' control.

### COLLECTIVISATION OR SOCIALISATION

A better strategy, say at Mine-Line, than calling for nationalisation under workers' control, would be to rebuild a sense of class independence, class pride and worker self-management more generally amongst the working class.

Mine-Line has the potential to be an example of class independence and self-management. In the hands of workers it could become inspirational. Class pride could be used to win concessions from the state from an independent class basis. Calling for nationalisation fuzzes that the state and the ex-owner are enemies of workers. The call for nationalisation has the potential to generate false hopes in the state which could weaken independent worker action.

Mine-Line cannot survive in a sea of capitalism on its own. We should use Mine-Line to build a campaign to spread worker occupations and self-management. If workers took over factories, they would be taking the first steps towards socialising property and wealth.

From recent events in South Africa this may not be that far fetched. Within the last 18 months there have been numerous occupations by workers in the mining industry. There was also an occupation of a textile factory in the Eastern Cape in 2010, along with an occupation by Numsa members of a recycling plant in Gauteng.

Although these occupations were not staged with the aim of

self-management, with Mine-Line this could be different. It is likely that future factory occupations will occur but it is important that they are not isolated and that Mine-Line is an example to them.

If workplace occupations become more generalised, and if workers begin to run them democratically, this would build a sense of counter-power that could challenge capitalism and the state.

True freedom can only exist when the state and capitalism have gone. Only in a society based on economic planning from below through federated councils and assemblies using direct democracy as well as distribution by need will freedom exist.

Mine-Line and future self-management occupations could act as training grounds for a self-managed society. They could be places that generate and nurture practices of direct democracy, class independence and class pride - ingredients necessary for genuine freedom. <sup>16</sup>

*Shawn Hattingh is research and education officer at the International Research and Information Group (Irig).*