

# Would you take this job?

## Perils of cash in transit workers

Cash in transit workers often make the headlines for the danger of their job. **Kally Forrest** spoke to the general secretary of the Motor Transport Workers Union of South Africa, which is attempting to address their dangerous and stressful conditions of work.



*MTWUSA general secretary, Emily Fourie*

**B**efore Christmas last year the public were horrified to read about an SBV (Standard-Barclays-Volkskas) vehicle that was pushed off the road in a heist that saw three crew members burnt to death inside the vehicle and another dying later. Not long after a further horror hit the news when baby Kensani was killed in a shoot out between robbers and cash in transit Coin Security guards in the centre of Johannesburg. In response, over 5 000 guards defiantly staged a protest march through Johannesburg's city centre to protest their, and the public's lack of safety.

Soon after, not surprisingly, the Motor Transport Workers Union (MTWUSA) announced that its members were considering strike action. This was the culmination of a packet of grievances that had been simmering for some time.

### A STRESSFUL JOB

MTWUSA, a Fedusa (Federation of Unions of South Africa) affiliate organises the majority of the 5 000 guards in the industry. Most of its members work in two large companies - Springbok Fidelity, the largest, and Coin Security. The union has also begun to organise bank guards employed by SBV

where it has 430 members, but in the main these belong to Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions), Sasbo.

MTWUSA's members consist of vehicle drivers and the crewmen who carry the cash container from the client to the bank. The latter are in the most direct firing line and are accountable for any money that goes missing.

Recently Coin has hired additional guards who sport boots and camouflage uniforms and cover the crewmen with firearms while they carry the cash container. Despite the danger of the job these guards earn R1 000

*The smaller, lighter Hi Ace vehicles are no longer used on lonely, rural roads*



per month in contrast to the remaining crew who earn a R5 000 minimum. This has led to considerable resentment. The company argues however that the crewmen have far greater responsibility. They have to work according to strict time limits otherwise the container implodes destroying its contents. Containers cost R9 000 to replace.

“There was a case recently at Foschinis,” tells MTWUSA general secretary, Emily Fourie, “when guards had exceeded the time limit and the box began to smoke. The crewman took the decision to quickly carry it to an empty room where he allowed it to explode so that the die that was released would not stain customers’ clothes. Guards must move rapidly and avoid the public. It’s a very stressful job.”

Drivers have to be on constant high alert despite often being locked in their vehicles for the entire day. They suffer a variety of health problems as a result. These include varicose veins, haemorrhoids, diabetes, dehydration and kidney and circulation problems. The vehicles’ air conditioners frequently break down and guards have been known to collapse from heat exhaustion which at times results in damage to the pancreas.

According to Fourie, managers are mainly concerned about profit margins “so they simply don’t listen. They often accuse members of messing up the aircon.” Vehicles have to keep on the move as any loitering means danger. It thus becomes difficult for guards to exit the vehicle to go to the toilet and Fourie recounts how some are forced to relieve themselves into a bottle.

Collecting cash from smaller workplaces such as garages holds a different kind of danger. Here the garage cashier seals the cash into a container and drops it into an underground vault where it cannot thereafter be retrieved. Only the cash in transit guards have keys to fetch the containers and so at the point of removal they become extremely vulnerable. It is at this point that observant robbers have attacked guards to carry off containers. No explosive device is available in these smaller containers.

Baby Kensani was shot in such a robbery. This was partly because it is difficult in a crowded place such as the centre of Johannesburg for cash in transit vehicles to park sufficiently close to the client. This provides time for robbers to position themselves and attack guards.

There have been recent reports of a reduction in heists and robberies since December. This is

partly due to a change in vehicles. Hi Aces are more easily overturned whilst this is more difficult with the solid BMW and Mercedes vehicles that are replacing them. These heavier vehicles are now being used on lonely rural roads where heists typically take place. The four guards killed in the Mpumalanga attack had been travelling in the lighter Hi Ace vehicle.

#### **GUARDS ARE ALWAYS SUSPECTS**

Besides working in uncomfortable and dangerous conditions, after an attack guards immediately come under suspicion. Comments Fourie, “In a robbery if they fight back, they get shot as happened at a casino a few months ago where after guards were shot, they were executed. Yet if they hand over the cash it looks too easy and they become suspects in the police and company’s eyes.”

Companies run their own internal security departments often staffed by former policemen. At times these employees take the law into their own hands. Fourie painfully recalls how in 1992 the president of the union, Simon Sima, was tortured and brutally murdered by members of Fidelity’s security department. All witnesses were killed and the case never came to court although the union



*At Fidelity, the smaller Hi Aces are being progressively replaced by larger, more solid vehicles which are harder to push off the road.*

forced the suspension of employees responsible for the interrogation.

From that point, the union has tried to put mechanisms in place to prevent violence during in-company investigations. There is agreement that another person must always be present during interrogations. Although things have improved since that time there are still cases of in-company torture where guards are suspects. Charles Landsman who is now head of Fidelity's investigative unit is a former employee of the notorious Brixton Murder and Robbery Squad, which speaks for itself.

In October last year, for example, a guard emerged with broken arms and bruises on his face following an investigation by Coin's security department. In late February this year a guard came to the union to try and get his benefits. He had been shot in the chest, and shoulder after fleeing from his vehicle during a heist and crouching behind a dustbin. The rest of the crew were killed. He was then interrogated by company security and handed over to the police and is now out on bail and in a state of deep trauma.

The families and personal lives of guards frequently suffer. Fourie cited a case of a guard being

dismissed for leaving his rifle at a client shortly after hearing of the death of his brother. Cell phones are forbidden in case guards are tempted to co-operate with robbers and important events such as births, deaths and hospitalisation in their family life are frequently not communicated to them by radio. Wives of guards phone the union to complain that their husbands are behaving strangely as a result of the stress of the job. Family killings sometimes result and excessive drinking to release stress is common.

#### **UNION PARTICIPATION**

As indicated, security companies are looking carefully into the design of their cash in transit vehicles. The union however complains that they are excluded from this process when they often have valuable information to share on the design of vehicles. Fourie described how a company once redesigned its vehicles without union consultation only to find that it was difficult for the crewmen to rapidly climb in and out of the vehicle without tripping over the container. The union pointed this out to management and the range had to be discontinued at great cost to the company.

In order to address the dangers

in the industry the Reserve Bank set up a forum known as CRIM. The union was not invited to participate and was forced to complain to Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi who ensured MTWUSA was invited to participate. Fourie describes the union's participation as "frustrating". "There was no discussion of firearm calibre, or the number of people in vehicles, or guards' conditions. They only gave a presentation without any discussion around their conditions of work."

Fourie continued energetically, "I've warned them we won't have another December like this - heists and cross pavement carrier robberies. Guards killed and shot. One lost his left eye, another was paralysed. There are always increases in deaths in December. But the union reads about it in the newspapers. Employers try to hide it from us." (The union now has the opportunity to keep more accurate statistics on deaths and injuries as it has started a funeral scheme and will have to process claim forms.)

The union approached Selebi to bring in the SADF to protect cash in transit vehicles but he was reluctant to bring the army into civilian life. "But the SADF have

been brought in to assist in taxi wars.” protested Fourie. “He did not accept the state’s responsibility and he kept saying that employers must get their house in order. But on the employers’ side they don’t feel they should take total responsibility and ask what if robbers use rockets next? Everyone blames everyone else and in the meantime our members are dying.”

The union’s threat of a national strike in December which has never happened before made everyone jump as R5 billion a day is moved on South African roads. But this also makes it difficult for the union to strike. “In a three day strike,” explained Fourie, “R5 billion would accumulate which would make our members sitting ducks for robbers waiting for the end of the strike. To go on strike in this industry is a big decision.”

To a certain extent the union can negotiate improvements to workers’ conditions through collective bargaining. As a result it

has experienced co-operation from some employers who have, for example, disciplined managers for not following proper procedures in supplying correct locking devices.” But,” explains Fourie, “What do you do about vehicle design? And you can’t negotiate calibre firearms which the police control.”

This forced MTWUSA to approach Nedlac (National Economic Development and Labour Council) to facilitate a hearing on the matter. It argued that heists endanger the safety of the public and thus as a socioeconomic matter Nedlac should intervene. Ultimately if Nedlac is satisfied that it is an issue of national interest and no one else can assist then the union will be able to stage protected protest action.

MTWUSA requested that representatives be present at the Nedlac hearing on 18 January this year the security industry, the Reserve Bank, from the

Department of Social Welfare, the Department of Labour, the minister of police as well as from the CRIM forum. Here MTWUSA presented its case and the various representatives responded. CRIM argued that some issues are too security sensitive to share with the union. Importantly, however Nedlac ruled that CRIM had incorrectly excluded MTWUSA and that a resolution to this public danger could only be found through the formation of partnerships. Henceforth it recommended that CRIM should consult extensively with the union.

A further Nedlac hearing on 15 February opened the door a little further but Fourie comments, “Up to this point CRIM has not contacted us, and nothing concrete has emerged yet. At least all the departments were present though, including occupational health representatives.” Another Nedlac meeting is scheduled for April.

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## Road transport strike averted

MTWUSA has just successfully completed wage negotiations on the road freight bargaining council.

There are 60 000 workers in this sector with four unions led by the largest Satawu (SA Transport and Allied Workers Union), Tawu (Transport and Allied Workers Union), MTWUSA and the Professional Transport Workers Union. Road freight employers

agreed to a 9% across the board wage hike, plus an 8% increase on allowances. This averted what was fast developing into devastating national strike action. Workers were poised to issue a 48 hour notice to strike. Negotiations finally broke the long deadlock that was reached first in November and could not be resolved in two successive meetings, prior to the resolution

on 12 February.

This bargaining council caters for cash in transit workers, road ferry trucks, furniture trucks and long distance truck drivers. Cash in transit workers, although performing a security function, do not fall under the security industry determination where no national bargaining council exists and they have always bargained on the road freight council.