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Contesting the transition from apartheid to democracy in the workplace

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This paper is drawn from my PhD thesis "Trade Unions in the Workplace and the Community 1984-1994: A Case Study of a Steel Mill".

Introduction

This chapter explores the contestation between management and NUMSA over the transition from the apartheid workplace regime. Both the nature of the transition and its goals were the subject of contestation; the two parties had profoundly different conceptions of both the desirable outcomes of the transition and how to achieve them. The union sought a radical democratisation of the workplace and the company with the aims of replacing the apartheid workplace regime with a workplace regime that enhanced workers'control and skills, established co-determination of production and company development, and simultaneously improved the company's competitiveness in global markets. The vision of the shopstewards is described in chapter 11.

In contrast, management was determined to retain control, both over the period of transition, and within a new post-apartheid workplace regime. Unlike the union, management did not have a clearly formulated or coherent strategy, either for reforming the apartheid workplace regime or for meeting the challenge of intensified global competitiveness. Indeed, its efforts at change appeared to be marked by confusion, inconsistency and internal division. Its overriding goal was increased

managerial control, and this entailed the continuity of aspects of the apartheid workplace regime, authoritarian management and worker disempowerment in particular. To the extent that a clear strategy for increasing competitiveness could be discerned, it appeared to point towards a model of lean production in a non-union or weakly unionised workplace. The union approach to competitiveness differed sharply - at least in principle - and is perhaps best described as a model of 'intelligent production' shaped by co-determination.

This chapter attempts to grasp and interpret an extraordinarily rich range of initiatives and counter-initiatives, both on the shopfloor, and in the sphere of negotiation at company level. Despite the interconnection between these different levels of activity, for ease of analysis the chapter concentrates first on the negotiations and interactions at company level, and then on the interactions and contestations on the shopfloor in various plants of the Highveld Steel complex. The third part of the chapter assesses the NUMSA and management strategies in terms of their impact on the apartheid workplace regime.

[this introduction may need to be rewritten in the light of changes to the body of the chapter; the last sentence is probably inaccurate]

Contesting a new workplace order at company level

The 1993 negotiations[1]

The first formal occasion on which NUMSA presented Highveld Steel with its proposals to replace the apartheid workplace regime with a new high-skill, democratic regime based on 'intelligent production' was the 1993 wage negotiations. Management refused to negotiate these proposals, presented in the form of the union's three-year programme, but suggested instead that two joint company-union working groups be established to discuss them. After a short work stoppage, NUMSA won a concession: the number of grades in the grading structure would be reduced from 14 to 8.

The fate of this agreement revealed factors that would continue to undermine attempts to negotiate the dismantling of the apartheid workplace regime and replace it with a new workplace order throughout the 1990s. Firstly, while the union and the company were able to reach limited agreements on formal processes or changes, there was no agreement on the meaning or goals of such processes or changes. This rendered them subject to constant contestation and paralysis, and made cooperation impossible. Secondly, and linked to this, such agreements were limited in scope and narrowly focused rather than being integrated into a comprehensive programme for workplace reform. This demonstrated the inability of management and union reach any agreement on the necessity and nature of reform.

Finally, in those instances where the union successfully created space for proactive intervention, its own limited capacity prevented it from doing so.

The two parties reached agreement on combining pairs of the old grades to create the new ones, and on the minimum wage rates for each new grade, but avoided discussing the implications of the reduction of grades for job descriptions and tasks on the shopfloor. For the union, the reduction of grades would only be meaningful if linked to a comprehensive programme for training, multi-skilling and upgrading workers, and transforming the organisation of work. Since this had been excluded by management, they could not take responsibility for the consequences:

> 'We were happy that this was not discussed, so that once they hit a problem we could say, You implemented this alone, so we cannot take responsibility for that problem. It is your fault. We didn't want a situation where management could blame us when workers complained.'

Management on the other hand had been forced into the change and lacked commitment to it. The result was that the implementation of eight-grade system generated confusion and conflict on the shopfloor. Managers did not understand it and could not explain it clearly. Foremen assumed that workers could be instructed to perform tasks of other jobs that were now on the same grade. Workers rejected their instructions to perform additional tasks, and foremen reacted that 'your union asked for this so go and fight them, it is not our problem.' Many of the shopstewards were unable to help because they too did not understand the changes. The result was that 'everyone becomes confused and people are fighting each other.' Managers also found themselves at the receiving end of complaints from workers who felt the smaller number of grades reduced their chances of promotion, and others who resented finding themselves on the same grade as workers who were previously on lower grades.

The confusion on the shopfloor, and the interpretation of its causes, were highly contested. Management argued that workers were unhappy with reducing the number of grades. Shopstewards responded that workers had no problem with the reduction itself, but that in the process all the accumulated anomalies of the 14 grade system were being exposed, and workers were fighting for the redress of these. Shopstewards used the confusion to demand greater participation. On the other hand, some felt management was using the confusion to discredit the union among workers.

Clearly the reduction of grades did not in itself constitute a step towards a new workplace regime. Rather, it highlighted workers' grievances about their grades, wages and jobs, and threw the entire workplace order and hierarchy into question. This created the scope for further struggles for change by workers and shopstewards, both on the shopfloor – a dimension that will be examined later – and in negotiation with management. The shopstewards warned management that 'either you involve us in solving this problem, or you solve it yourself.' Management then proposed the establishment of a

third joint working group, in addition to the other two, to develop a new grading system for the company.

Although the shopstewards had made significant gains, there were also warning signals about union capacity. In the negotiations to combine grades the shopstewards were unable to develop their own proposals, because 'we could not do the mathematics', so 'thumbsuck numbers' were arrived at through a process of haggling with management. Workers did not understand the implications of the reduction of grades, despite their willingness to down tools in support of the demand. Many shopstewards also had a limited understanding of the NUMSA proposals. The limited union rights at the company contributed to this problem, making it difficult for shopstewards to meet and develop their understanding collectively, and preventing shopstewards from explaining issues to their members. But the sophistication of the programme itself, and the absence of skilled officials to assist the shopstewards, created an ongoing capacity problem. Translating broad policy principles into the practical details necessary for implementation was time-consuming and required expertise as well as strategic vision – resources in short supply for both the union and the shopstewards.

The joint committees: paralysis over the transition from the apartheid workplace regime (1994-5)[2]

The story of the rise and fall of the three joint union-management working groups established after the 1993 negotiations demonstrates the deadlock between NUMSA and Highveld Steel management over the nature and goals of the transition from the apartheid workplace regime in the company. The union had presented its comprehensive programme for moving towards a new workplace regime. This was never negotiated in the working groups. Management's participation in the groups indicated a preference for piecemeal, fragmented and gradual process of change – which should remain firmly under management control at all times. There was no attempt to develop common ground for establishing a new regime, and no agreement on the purpose, procedures or goals of the groups.[3] The result was deadlock, paralysis and frustration.

The grading committee initially seemed to be working successfully. After the company had agreed in the 1994 wage negotiations (following the lead of the industrial council where a similar agreement was reached) to implement a new five-grade structure based on skill by 1996, as demanded by NUMSA, the grading committee was given the task of moving through Highveld Steel, plant by plant, developing the new structure and grading jobs in terms of it. Nhlapo was a NUMSA representative on this committee, and because of his vision of the goals of the process, and his tactical sophistication, he was able to drive it. In his view managers on the group had little idea of what they wanted it to achieve so they did not oppose him. He had to contend with other trade unionists in the group whose

instinct was to use every opportunity to create little gaps between workers and pay them a little more – between attendant and senior attendant, pusher and senior pusher, between the driver of a 20-ton crane and the driver of an 80-ton crane. In contrast, Nhlapo worked according to a longer-term goal of eliminating minor differentials between workers and creating a grading structure based on skill and training.

He also tried to use the process to strengthen union capacity by insisting that small grading committees of shopstewards and managers should be formed in each plant to assess job descriptions, and that the working group should refuse to listen to a plant manager unless he was accompanied by shopstewards from his plant. This would give shopstewards an opportunity to start engaging with their managers and discussing the issues with their members. However, 'they're running away, very few committees have been formed.'

After some months of successful progress Nhlapo started feeling that the grading committee posed serious dangers for workers and their union. The problem was that the union proposal for broadbanding and producing grades was linked to the proposal for narrowing the 'apartheid wage differential' to 60 percent - and while management had accepted the grading structure, it had postponed discussion of the wage relativities between grades. Nhlapo was carefully distributing workers with some degree of skill into lower grades, rather than trying to push all skills as high as possible, in the expectation that the wage rates of the lower grades could be substantially increased by narrowing the wage gap. However, if the union lost that argument, the workers with some degree of skill could land up on lower rates in the new grading structure. According to Nhlapo, therefore, 'either we must agree to begin matching the process of grading with new wage relativities, so that we know exactly how workers are going to benefit at the end, or we must stop the process.'

When the human resource manager heard what Nhlapo had said, and realised how far the group had proceeded, 'He killed that committee, it was destroyed by management.' In the 1995 wage negotiations management opened by renouncing its commitment to the five-grade system, which 'removed the principal of the NUMSA programme' for 'overcoming the apartheid work organisation' and nullified six months of labour by the working group.

The working group on the relation between the company and the unions also ended in stalemate. The NUMSA shopstewards wanted to negotiate an agreement extending union rights in the company and defining a role for the union in company restructuring and decision-making. The company envisaged a more narrowly focused procedural agreement 'that disciplines us and tells us how we must behave as a union'. At different points either management or NUMSA stalled these negotiations, and they were finally suspended indefinitely when it became clear that the newly-drafted LRA would cover some of the same ground.

The third working group – focusing on production quality, multi-skilling and the restructuring of work – also proved fruitless. Since shopstewards did not have the time or resources to develop their own proposals, nor was management interested in such a possibility, the shopstewards concentrated on preventing management from implementing its own proposals. This was frustrating to everyone concerned, and the group was shut down at the same time as the others.

Thus all three groups were paralysed by the completely different understanding and goals of management and NUMSA. In the restructuring group, for example, 'management comes with proposals, with the view that we must accept them and help implement them, not discuss them'. Furthermore, management was continuing to implement restructuring in the plants, 'whether we like it or not, whether we have an agreement or not'. For the shopstewards, then, 'the challenge is can we stop them, can we counter them in various ways so that they begin to respect us?' Thus, when a plant manager presented proposals for work restructuring to the committee, Nhlapo would demand thorough discussion and analysis and insist that he be given a chance to consult his members:

> 'They're going to be blocked, giving us a chance to sit with our members and develop very clear strategies. We can explain to them what management is proposing and what we think should happen. Obviously management is not going to agree to our proposals, so the process is neither here nor there - but at least you're involving the members so that they'll have a picture of where you want to take them, because the company is not going to give us time to discuss these issues with workers. Our plans are not going to surface immediately. What is going to surface now is education around these issues.'

The shopsteward had no expectation that an agreement with management would emerge from this process – it was simply an opportunity to block management and educate workers. This meant the working group had no potential for satisfying either party:

> 'Management is coming with a framework, and we're operating within that framework but not in the direction that they wanted to operate. We're pushing it in our own direction. I must say, its frustrating. The management representative also says he wants to resign from the committee because since we started it nothing has happened. There are no result at all, and I agree.'

A process marked by such fundamental disagreement had little prospect of producing a new workplace regime marked by respect for mutually agreed procedures. Procedures would only have meaning for workers if they were located in a workplace order that they could regard as having legitimacy; in contrast, management continued to believe a legalistic notion of procedure could re-engineer workplace relations:

'You can put all the documents that you want in place, and think that the courts are going to help you, but these workers are not going to cooperate, not now. We can finalise this agreement, and go to the workers and say this is how we must behave ourselves, and they will agree with you and say *Amandla!* But when they experience problems they forget about agreements. And if we start reminding them that we've got this agreement, they will say no, we will put that agreement aside. We want to deal with management. It's because for years management has been taking us to court instead of resolving our problems. Even if the court says we're wrong, the problem remains. That's why the procedural agreement is a waste of time.'

The process of engaging with the working groups also revealed serious capacity weaknesses in the union. There was no-one the shopstewards could rely on for advice or support from the union offices. National officials consistently failed to attend meetings where they were expected. Bunny Mahlangu, the regional organiser who understood the NUMSA programme, was overextended, and then resigned from the union to take up a managerial position in another company in early 1995. Nhlapo was the only shopsteward who could consistently engage with management in a proactive fashion. He reported to the shopsteward committee that:

'The work is killing me. I am alone. The last meeting of the grading committee was cancelled because I was absent. I am carrying my union, I am carrying the other unions, and I'm carrying management.'

These weaknesses meant that the union was unable to present alternative proposals to those put forward by management in the working groups on the union-management relationship and on restructuring work. In contrast, Nhlapo felt that management was no longer simply reacting in an ad hoc way to production problems or union demands, but was beginning to develop the capacity for a strategic approach to restructuring. He told the same shopsteward meeting:

'To tell the truth, management is seriously looking for answers. Now they do not know the answers, but tomorrow they will have them. It took time for them to agree that restructuring is necessary - but now they are attending courses. Do we attend courses? We do not, we are just jumping around in the dark.'

He also felt that participation in the working groups raised fundamental questions about the goals of the NUMSA programme, and about the strategy for achieving them – questions that neither he nor the union had answers to:

'I'm not sure whether they are negotiating forums. Are we supposed to reach consensus, or does our view of socialism involve struggle? Can we strike for real participation in

decisions, or can we only participate on the shopfloor in green areas? We have never negotiated these issues in our bargaining forum, and in the committees you have to be diplomatic. We don't have guidelines for these questions.'

Imposing cooperation, imposing discipline:1994-5[4]

Two management initiatives during 1994 demonstrated that the company continued to have more faith in its ability to impose workplace order, than it had in negotiating a new order with the unions. In the first initiative, the company tried to impose worker participation through a system of 'green areas' and Total Quality Management (TQM). In the second, it tried to impose a new disciplinary order by changing the disciplinary procedure and giving foremen new disciplinary powers. In both cases, union opposition paralysed these initiatives on the shopfloor.

Green areas

Several months after the agreement on reduction of grades had been reached in 1993, the human resources manager called the shopstewards in and told them that the company wanted to introduce green areas as a forum for communication. When the shopstewards raised questions about the purpose of the green areas, and their relation to the structure of supervision, they were told the green areas were non-negotiable. The shopstewards made it clear that they would not encourage workers to participate in the green areas; instead they would mobilise against them until they were properly negotiated.

The shopstewards had themselves previously mentioned to management the idea of green areas as a structure of worker participation. They saw the green areas initiative as evidence that management was taking their ideas, twisting them to suit their own purposes, and refusing to negotiate them with the union. In the view of the shopstewards, green areas had to be linked to a restructuring of managerial authority, teamwork, multi-skilling and benefits for workers. But management showed no inclination to negotiate these issues, and green areas were to be implemented in isolation 'as an island, they don't want to link it with anything - with training, with grading, with production'.

Soon after this, the shopstewards were called to a presentation by senior management, including the company MD, on the implementation of a new system of 'total quality management' (TQM) in the company. The MD explained that it was important for Highveld Steel 'to change the way they used to do things in the past because of opening markets, increasing competition and political changes'. The shopstewards left the workshop feeling that management was not prepared to engage in a serious discussion about TQM and the company vision and strategy. TQM did not envisage changing the

management structure, but rather reinforced it. Workers could make suggestions, but supervisors and managers would make decisions and there was no clear role for shopstewards or the union. The shopstewards were told their role was to inform workers to work hard, as their management was capable and would deliver.

The shopstewards' analysis was that management was introducing change in an ad hoc and 'laughable' fashion, with no clear vision or strategic direction. Sometimes, however, they expressed anxiety that management was developing 'a coherent plan'. Since management refused to discuss their long-term plans, they would adopt a strategy of blocking every company initiative:

> 'You will say to them, Tell us your five-year plan, let us understand your vision, what it is that you want to achieve. They respond that the steel industry changes, so you cannot have long-term plans. They frustrate you. But they are introducing their plans bit by bit. They say, no, this is nothing, it is just about communication. And the next thing is nothing, it is just about something. And at the end of the day when you look at the whole thing you see complete restructuring. So we must fight each initiative they try to bring.'

Ultimately, they hoped, this would compel the company to acknowledge that cooperation could not be imposed on workers, but had to be negotiated with the union.

The shopstewards' campaign against the green areas was generally successful, not only because of the resistance of workers but also because managers and supervisors, locked into the authoritarian and non-participatory practices of the apartheid workplace regime, did not understand them. Ambrose Mthembu, for example, recounted how the steel plant manager told him to explain to the workers how green areas would function. He refused to encourage them to participate. Later the workers in his section were called by sectional management to a meeting where they were told about the green areas:

> 'I challenged management and they just said they don't understand the system, they are carrying out an instruction. I asked them how they expected us to do something that they themselves didn't even understand. So they said they don't think they are the right people I should be arguing with. It just ended up there.'

It was not difficult to discourage workers from attending green area meetings, as they quickly concluded that they were intended to buttress authority in the apartheid workplace regime instead of dismantling it. A migrant worker observed that:

> 'We have realised that the green area is taking us nowhere. We would like a green area which accords everyone the right to know everything about the firm and about production. We left the green area when we saw there is no way it can help us, because it is still

> oppressing us. It is taking us back to that apartheid of theirs, not in the direction which we as workers want.'

Another shopsteward described how green areas simply became another forum for foremen to issue instructions as they always had, with no attempt to solve problems collectively:

> 'The foreman just comes and tells us, Look, yesterday we rolled so many cobbles [reject structural steel]. Please, today don't do any mistakes. Fine. Do you hear me? We say, fine, let's go. The siren blows, we go back on duty. Here come more cobbles....'

As far as the shopstewards were aware, TQM was never implemented. The union mobilisation against green areas on the shopfloor was successful, and by the end of 1994 management had conceded as much, asking the union to put forward its proposals on how green areas should be implemented. Shopstewards talked about holding a workshop together with NUMSA officials, to formulate their own proposals, but this never took place. In early 1995 they gave management a list of issues that would need to be negotiated before green areas could be implemented, but according to Nhlapo the list - which referred to hours of work, workers' rights, affirmative action and profit-sharing - was 'just a thumbsuck'. By the end of the year the secretary of the shopsteward committee admitted that 'the problem is that the ball is in our court, because the company has agreed to talk to us and asked us how to do this thing successfully', but the shopstewards were overextended outside the company and unable to respond. The shopstewards had successfully demonstrated that participation could not be imposed in the context of a decaying apartheid workplace regime. But at the point that the union had succeeded in compelling management to negotiate participation – a process which had the potential to provide a route towards a new workplace order – it no longer had the capacity to take the initiative.

Discipline

The second management initiative discussed here was an attempt to restore discipline on the shopfloor by imposing a new disciplinary procedure without negotiation in late 1994. A consultant had warned the company that the existing code gave too much power to workers. The new code increased the disciplinary powers of the foremen (who could hold an 'interview' and give written warnings, whereas previously they could only give a verbal warning), reduced the procedural protections for the worker (enquiries held only for a final warning, instead of for all written warnings – where they were replaced by 'interviews'; removal of the principal that the person who lodges a charge cannot judge the case; no appeals except against a final warning), and whittled away at their right to be represented by a shopsteward (compulsion to attend an interview even if a shopsteward could not be found during the two hour notification period).

The shopsteward committee responded with the same strategy they had used in 1988 to negotiate changes to the disciplinary code without accepting its legitimacy. They referred the dispute to the industrial council. At the industrial council dispute hearing the union induced the company to make concessions, and outstanding issues were referred to the industrial court. The shopstewards were using institutional procedures to block and dilute management's new code, but this did not mean that the outcome would be a legitimate disciplinary order or that they would collaborate with management attempts to reconstitute discipline on the shopfloor:

> 'We've made them shift some of the things they had in there, but we've not agreed that it's binding on us. Even after the court case there's no way we'll sign the code. We'll follow the procedure if it suits us - if it does not, we'll say it's not binding on us. We are repeating the approach we used before.'

Shopstewards did not confine their resistance to formal, institutional procedures; they took their resistance into the workplace, where they mobilised their members against the new procedures. Where shopstewards were bold and their members militant, they refused to cooperate with the new procedures and threatened stoppages. Supervisors and managers avoided trying to implement them. In iron plant one, white foremen approached the union, complaining that they too were opposed to the new procedures because workers would not accept them. This ended with the majority of them joining NUMSA - a process analysed in chapter 15.

The failure of this initiative demonstrated not only that it was impossible for management to unilaterally impose cooperation on workers, but also that it was impossible to stem the decomposition of the apartheid workplace regime and reconstitute supervisory authority and power by unilaterally imposing a tougher disciplinary regime. Discipline could only be reconstituted as an element of a new, legitimate workplace order.

Summary

Part one of this chapter demonstrates the inability of the company and NUMSA to negotiate a transition from the apartheid workplace regime to a new democratic regime in the workplace during the period from 1993 to 1995.

Management appeared to be unable to imagine negotiating the terms of a new workplace order with black workers or their union. Indeed, they appeared not to be convinced that the existing order was in trouble, and to be oblivious to its illegitimacy in workers' eyes, and in this they were as much creatures of the apartheid workplace regime as its creators. Their main concern was with efficiency,

quality, cost and competitiveness. Problems of quality and waste seem to have been particularly serious. They hoped to address these by grafting green areas, TQM and multi-tasking onto the existing regime. Consultation with the union was incidental – discipline, participation and efficiency could be imposed from above without addressing the structural features of the workplace regime which were causing the process of decomposition.

NUMSA, on the other hand, had developed a vision for transformation of the workplace, and was able to put forward a comprehensive programme for transition from apartheid to democracy in the workplace. However, this lacked detail and practical guidelines for implementation, and the union lacked the capacity to develop these when the necessity arose. No union officials were consistently available to assist shopstewards, and the shopstewards themselves were overstretched both within the factory and beyond it, and lacked the rights and resources within the workplace (another feature of the apartheid workplace regime) to compensate for this. They were able to paralyse management initiatives, but were unable to elaborate their own proposals and maintain the initiative when opportunities arose.

The result was stalemate in negotiation and engagement at the level of company-union relations. Part two of this chapter turns to the shopfloor, in order to investigate how management and union initiatives played themselves out on that terrain, where the workplace regime was maintained, challenged and reformed in the daily process of producing steel.

Contesting a new workplace order on the shopfloor

Contesting lean production: the intensification of work and resistance to it

During the early 1990s shopstewards became aware of a range of measures in the workplace which, taken together, constituted a strategy to intensify work and increase the numerical and functional flexibility of the workforce. Although many of these measures appeared to be implemented in a random and unplanned way, they indicated a drift towards *lean production* at Highveld Steel. There was a growing use of non-standard contracts – subcontracting and casual labour. Underlying this was a general trend towards the reduction of labour, both through retrenchment and general attrition, increasing the workloads and tasks of the remaining workers. It was difficult for the shopstewards to get a purchase on these trends because, as Nhlapo pointed out, changes had been implemented before the union had developed its own analysis of restructuring:

'The employers had started restructuring a long time ago, before we even thought about it. They were doing it their own way. When we woke up they were already on that path. Managers have mentioned to me that the reduction of artisan assistants to the ratio of one assistant to three artisans was decided on in 1988, after the lockout. At that time we never thought that such changes were taking place. Changes are continuously taking place at Highveld Steel, but we are unaware of some of those changes because such things are not discussed with us.'

There had always been specialist subcontractors at Highveld Steel, but in the early nineties management began outsourcing a range of 'non-core' operations such as the canteen and housing maintenance. This was linked to its new 'small business initiative": an employee "who has served them very well" would be identified to run the new outsourced business. At first whites were chosen, but from the mid-nineties the company became keen to establish small black businesses. While management avoided negotiating some of these new arrangements with the unions, outsourcing the housing maintenance department involved almost 300 workers and negotiation with the unions was preferable to the risk of industrial conflict. NUMSA used this to opportunity to negotiate guidelines for regulating subcontracting and outsourcing in general: the company should ensure that subcontractors allowed free union activity and complied with any negotiated agreements that covered their sector, and NUMSA could represent their workers if they were unorganised. While outsourcing and subcontracting was a strategy to increase the flexibility of labour and reduce its bargaining power, NUMSA's strategy was to regulate this and ensure at least a minimal level of regulation and representation. In some cases, such as security, the union was actually able to prevent the outsourcing altogether. However, by the mid-nineties at least one shopsteward believed there was a growing use of subcontractors and even labour brokers for maintenance and specialist work at Highveld Steel.[5]

The NUMSA shopstewards adopted similar strategies in response to casualisation, which they first noticed in 1989. This became of growing concern to shopstewards, and by 1994 management had agreed to the formation of a committee – including shopstewards, managers and two of the casuals – to examine the records of all casuals and consider transferring them to permanent contracts. By midyear some 20 of the hundred casuals had been employed as permanent workers. This became an ongoing project for the shopstewards. As with outsourcing and subcontracting, their aim was to regulate casualisation, limiting it as far as possible by establishing procedures for converting casuals into permanent workers, and ensuring that casuals had some form of representation.[6]

Managerial initiatives to increase flexibility and reduce the bargaining power of workers by replacing permanent workers with outsourced, subcontracted or casual labour were underpinned by broader strategies to reduce the number of workers in the plants – whether through retrenchment or natural attrition. Management justified its retrenchment of 700 [?] workers in 1991 as a response to weakening global markets for steel and vanadium; the shopstewards accused them of using the market

downturn to mask an attempt to intensify work. Their inability to accomplish this systematically meant that the company was forced to re-employ the majority of retrenchees when the market recovered. However, those who had taken early retirement and others who had taken other jobs, about one hundred in all, were not replaced. In addition, since the late 1980s, many of the workers who were dismissed or promoted had not been replaced, and there was a creeping process of increasing the workload and expanding the tasks of those who remained: 'the remaining people had to share among themselves the tasks that were performed by that individual who had left'. The process of intensifying work and expanding job descriptions usually took place without changing the affected workers' grades or pay; however, it was sometimes accompanied by a random process of deskilling some jobs, upgrading others and providing some training. Thus the ratio of artisan assistants to artisans had decreased over time, generating increasing conflict between them. In a maintenance workshop a labourer had been trained to operate a machine previously controlled by an artisan. In the finishing end of the structural mill bundlers were refusing management instructions to do grinding as well as bundling, because they were not promoted into the grade for grinders.[7]

The drift towards lean production created the impression that management's notion of a post-apartheid workplace order was focused on increasing the pressure and flexibility of work by getting rid of some of the 'rigidities' of the apartheid workplace regime – some created by the privileges and leverage of white and skilled labour, others by the leverage of militant black unionism – and preserving the authoritarian practices of management. Black workers were quick to resist attempts to increase numerical or functional flexibility, whether through subcontracting or casualisation, or through expanding job descriptions, because these were reminiscent of the functional (any white can instruct any black) and numerical (instant dismissal) flexibilities of the apartheid workplace regime before black trade unionism did away with these.

The result was growing conflict on the shopfloor. The creeping changes raised issues of job description and demarcation, grading, pay, skill and training – around which there was in any case a heightened awareness because of the NUMSA programme's focus on such issues, and because of the reduction from 14 to eight grades. In some cases workers' spontaneous resistance provided an opportunity for shopstewards to launch counter-initiatives – but in others shopstewards themselves became victims of workers' frustrations.

The steel plant[8]

The steel plant exemplified the processes described above. Over a period of several years retrenchment, dismissals, retirement and promotions had led to multi-tasking, increased workloads and grading anomalies. In many cases managers persuaded workers to accept these changes with promises of upgrading and increased pay, 'making agreements' with individual workers and bypassing the shopstewards – who could see dangers but were powerless to intervene. Workers were

'not doing this with the union, they were just doing these things on their own and we, as shopstewards were not informed.' In other cases deriving from the period before 1990, workers had been induced to accept extra tasks for fear of losing their jobs. In addition, there were grading anomalies going back to apartheid as well as deriving from the more recent but partial implementation of the Patterson grading system in 1989. The senior shopsteward in the steel plant, Ambrose Mthembu, reported the admission by one of his managers of how apartheid had shaped the grading structure:

> 'With apartheid, we had to protect the whites, we had to make sure they didn't earn the same salary as the blacks. That is why we created these posts specifically to accommodate whites, instead of him losing their jobs.'

For example, the (white) senior sweeper could issue instructions to a (black) sweeper and was on a higher grade, but there actual duties were exactly the same – although 'this one works more, that one works less, because he is going to issue instructions and watch the other one carrying out the instruction'.

Eventually, as management failed to deliver on its promises of increased pay, workers became disillusioned:

'The time came when everyone was now sick and tied of hoping for the better, and that's when we found our chance to start addressing these issues. They used to raise their grievances through the foreman, not really the way they should be raised. When they realised there are no tangible results, then they started coming to this has a union. As shopstewards we had to tell them the truth, that they have done wrong by taking this to a foreman. They had to understand that we, as the shopstewards, are more capable of dropping in than their foremen.'

Mthembu raised the workers' grievances with the steel plant management. Management's response was delayed by various factors. Then, while Mthembu was away on a course, the steel plant workforce downed tools in a wildcat strike over their grievances. On his return to work a couple of days later, Mthembu found that the stoppage had created 'a platform I could stand on, I could see management was now prepared to see problems being resolved'. Mthembu was given time to examine the tasks and grading of the workers, and found that as attrition had reduced the number of grade 5 workers, those on grade 8 were required to assist them with their jobs, without any compensating increase in pay. He was able to persuade the steel plant manager that the grade 8 workers should be upgraded to grade 7, that grade 8 should be done away with, and that an additional nine workers should be employed on grade 5 to handle the workload.

It was only the workers' resort to unprocedural action which provided Mthembu with the 'platform' to make these gains:

'I couldn't have done these things if people had not come up with their grievances and exert the type of pressure which made management's heart turn in the right direction.'

But he also had to convince his manager that multi-skilling and upgrading would benefit production:

'I explained multi-skilling to my manager, I had to convince him that he is going to benefit because he will have a pool of people who can do most of the duties. If there is a shortage on one job, he can take anyone to assist – unlike presently, if there is a shortage of people then the job has to stand still. That is a way of increasing production, and we as NUMSA believe that we should increase production and profit. Then we can do better in negotiations – maybe that is where the money will come from to reinvest in training and also job creation. Our demands are relevant to the RDP, which came from the unions and has been turned into a document of the politicians. But you can't just rely on the government, we have to do it in the plant.'

The lesson drawn by Mthembu was that 'we should start pushing the NUMSA proposals in the various departments, so that management can find itself in a corner.' A problem was lack of coordination among the shopstewards, so that the committee was unaware of his efforts in the steel plant, and there was no sharing of ideas and experiences. He was hopeful that after the 1994 elections such coordination could be established.

The struggles in the steel plant illustrate how management attempts to intensify work and increase flexibility simply exposed the anomalies and racial hierarchies of the apartheid workplace regime and generated increased conflict. A shopsteward equipped by the NUMSA programme to engage on issues of grading and skills could use workers' frustration and resistance to put forward counter-proposals for upgrading and increased staffing levels, with some success. This example also illustrates a theme that emerges over and over at Highveld Steel during the 1990s: management attempts to bypass the union and elicit 'wildcat cooperation' by promising workers improved pay or skills. But because lean production measures tend to focus quite narrowly on cost and multi-tasking, workers soon became frustrated and launched their own wildcat resistance. The nature of the new workplace order to emerge from the discredited remnants of the apartheid workplace regime was still highly contested, and there was a lack of mutually accepted codes for negotiating change. The role of Mthembu suggested that a new order could only be established through accepting the central role of the shopstewards.

Workers in a particular section at Vantra had a similar experience. They launched a 24-hour wildcat strike over grading and wage grievances, and then refused to work overtime. Meshack Malinga was able to intervene and win a 20 cent per hour increase, and a new shift of 12 workers was employed to make up for the overtime.[9] In the structural mill the shopstewards negotiated the training of crane and train drivers to diagnose and fix faults in their equipment, and their upgrading to utility men.[10]

In the flat products rolling mill a five day wildcat strike sparked off by a dispute over a requirement that operators should clean beneath the furnaces during maintenance shutdowns, led to the formation of a committee to resolve workers' grievances.[11] The committee included shopstewards and rank-and-file workers, and one of the workers was given a week off to investigate and rewrite all job descriptions in the plant. Some workers were upgraded and other recommendations were passed on to the company-level grading committee. It exerted pressure for promotion of black workers, and four black foremen were appointed. The committee also negotiated the installation of conveyor belts under the furnace and mills to make the cleaning job easier. In addition, the committee was tackling the issue of racial segregation, negotiating the integration of old facilities such as mess- rooms, toilets and change-houses, including the construction of new ones and the conversion of old ones into offices where physical integration was not practical. One of the workers co-opted onto this committee commented on how empowering this had been:

'The manager told us we could only discuss safety. We said to ourselves we should work very, very hard in order to prove to him that we were not there has safety representatives, but we were going to sit around that table with them as their equals, despite the fact at they were occupying senior positions. We felt that because the job descriptions were initially written by management we should not involve them. If someone pushes you into a river, he's not the one who is going to take you out of there. You should stand up on your own – it's your duty to get out of that river yourself. We were able to achieve things that we never thought we would achieve, because our divisional management is known as a management that used to fire people at will. People were not willing to be members of that committee because they feared they would end up outside the company.'

But not all such struggles ended well for shopstewards. Shopstewards who did not understand the grading system, or the new NUMSA programme, could easily find themselves the targets of workers' anger and undermined by management. Such a situation developed at Rand Carbide where JJ Mbonani was the senior shopsteward.[12] Workers had similar grievances to those in other plants, including the fact that several categories of workers, such as crane drivers and operators, were graded below workers in the steelworks who performed similar jobs. After months of raising their grievances with shopstewards, with their union organiser, and with supervisors, workers simply downed tools and demanded increased rates of pay. They also threatened to march to the NUMSA local office and withdraw from the union *en masse* unless it did something to help them with their grievances. Leslie Nhlapo, chairperson of the steelworks committee, became involved and negotiated the upgrading of those workers whose jobs could be compared with jobs in the steelworks, and suggested the newly-established grading committee should embark on a systematic grading exercise at Rand Carbide. However, workers' unhappiness with the union in general and Mbonani in particular did not abate. Nhlapo frequently failed to attend meetings because of his many commitments beyond the workplace; the organiser was 'unable to move an inch, he doesn't understand the issues'; and management

continued to undermine Mbonani by referring workers with problems to him and telling them that they should ask him for an increase. Nhlapo commented

> 'It's sad to lose a guy like Mbonani, who has been there since the days of MAWU. You cannot continually defend him if the workers say they no longer need his services. Somewhere you should just let it go, or you will have divisions like in 1987.'

Eventually Mbonani resigned as a shopsteward, complaining that some shopstewards 'are acting like bosses' and others were not pulling their weight, and returned to his vocation as a lay preacher.

This section has shown that management's attempt to implement elements of a lean production strategy focusing on the intensification of work and increasing functional and numerical flexibility failed to create a new workplace order acceptable to workers. It was not an attempt to alter the enduring aspects of the apartheid workplace regime – the racial distribution of power, skills and incomes embedded in the grading and wage structure – but rather attempted to increase productivity and reduce costs without altering the basis of the workplace regime. The management's reluctance to consult with the union, seeking instead to bypass the shopstewards and elicit 'wildcat cooperation', indicates that a shift in the distribution of power played no part in its thinking. Management appeared to hold the view that lean production techniques could simply be grafted onto the regime that had emerged from the apartheid era, thus dissolving the 'rigidities' created by white power and privilege, on the one hand, and the emergence of militant black trade unionism on the other. This was a particularly impoverished view of the nature of a post-apartheid order in the workplace, and workers' response was resistance. To them, the lean production techniques signaled a desire on management's part to return to the flexibilities of the apartheid workplace before the union began to protect them from arbitrary dismissals and lack of job ownership.

It is quite striking that all the incidents discussed in this section involved wildcat actions. This suggests that workers recognised that there had been no significant redistribution of workplace power or reform of managerial practices, and that the only way to ensure that their voices were heard was to down tools. Their recourse to the repertoire of actions which they had created in the 1980s indicates that the illegitimacy of the apartheid workplace regime endured into the nineties. The workplace regime remained highly contested, and workplace relations remained 'ungovernable' by procedure and negotiation.

The prevalence of wildcat actions also suggests a crisis in union strategy and shopsteward representation. The emergence of 'wildcat cooperation' in some plants suggests the same thing. Workers were not automatically turning to their shopstewards to lead their resistance to management strategies (or their participation in them), but were throwing up an alternative grassroots leadership. Some of the most dynamic shopstewards were frequently unavailable, being involved in union or

political activities beyond the workplace. Many of the others felt disempowered by the complexity of the new NUMSA programme and were unable to provide leadership in response to management initiatives. The social structure of the union itself was weakened and contested – a process which forms the subject of the next chapter.

Despite these weaknesses, the wildcat resistance of workers provided the three or four shopstewards who were confident of their goals and able to develop the sophisticated proposals and strategies they required, with the opportunity – 'the platform' – to develop counter-initiatives inspired by the union programme and spearhead their implementation. These counter-initiatives give some idea of the potential of the NUMSA programme for reforming the apartheid workplace regime.

The union construction of a new order: worker control and intelligent production on the tapping floor

The shopstewards – Leslie Nhlapo in particular – made several attempts to implement the union strategy in a more coherent fashion on the shopfloor in specific workplaces. This was successful in only one case, the tapping floor in iron plant one, where the collective solidarity and militancy of the workers reinforced by the strategic sophistication of Nhlapo compelled management to accept a different way of organising work.

Nhlapo started identifying opportunities in the early nineties to experiment with the new perspective developing within NUMSA, when some managers started to approach shopstewards for help in implementing changes:

> 'Seemingly Trevor Jones [the MD] would go around and look for ideas, and once he has got an idea he calls his managers tubular and says, Look, I have got this fine idea. Can you go down and implement it? Then they would leave that room, not sure of what they had to do, so they would come to us and say, Look guys, we must do this. And we asked them to explain further, and they wouldn't be able to explain.' [13]

Thus in 1991 the manager at the structural mill told Meshack Malinga and Leslie Nhlapo that he wanted a 'productivity deal' whereby various jobs would be combined.[14] The two shopstewards came back with a proposal to reduce the number of grades from 14 to five, multi-skill and upgrade the workers, and place redundant workers elsewhere. The manager responded angrily that he 'never wanted such crazy ideas' so 'we left him and he was stranded'.

Nhlapo got a bit further with his second experiment at the beginning of 1992. The manager of the flat products division, Mike Bowker (his name will crop up again), was a particularly innovative manager. He wanted to combine the workers from the trimming and cutting machines on the two production lines – plate and strip – into one 'cut-to-length crew'. Leslie Nhlapo and Ezekiel Nkosi developed a proposal that the eight workers involved on each shift should all be trained to operate all the machines on both lines, be upgraded to the level of the most skilled worker in the group and paid accordingly, and operate as a team. Bowker agreed with this, but was 'frustrated' by senior management who insisted that new ways of organising work should not cost the company increased wages. Management fashioned a counter-proposal in which the members of the crew would be graded at three different levels according to their most frequently performed tasks, but would still be required to fill in for workers on higher grades when necessary. The shopstewards rejected this, and the plan was abandoned.

Nhlapo's third attempt was successful.[15] At about the same time as the flat products proposal, he heard that there were problems on the tapping floor in the iron plant. The tapping crews were initiating frequent stoppages in support of their demands for upgrading and better wages. The six tapping floors are located at the bottom of the six furnaces in the iron plant. The job of the tapping crews on each floor is to open the tap-hole when the smelt is ready, so that the molten iron and slag can run out of the furnace, through the brick-and-sand launders which function like gutters, and over edge of the tapping floor into the waiting slag-pot and iron-pot. The slag is dumped and the molten iron is transported to the steel plant for processing into steel and vanadium slag. The tapping crew drills the tap-hole open, monitors the separation of iron and slag by the skimmers in the launder, releases the flow of separated iron into the iron-pot at the right moment, and tries to prevent spills. After the tap, their job is to clean the launders of iron and slag, clean up any spills that occur when slag or iron overflow the launder, and then prepare the launder and skimmer for the next tap.

Conditions of work on the tapping floor are arduous and dangerous in the extreme. Workers have to work in thick protective suits because of the heat of the molten iron and the danger of spills. Dehydration and heat exhaustion sometimes caused workers to collapse, and workers were injured and sometimes died in spills. Leaking carbon monoxide gas had also caused fatalities. One of the tapping floor workers described these conditions:

> 'Conditions on the tapping floor are very dangerous. I am used to the place so I can work there with ease, but for a new person it is a very dangerous place. Whenever you are on the tapping floor you should always do what the people who work there do, not run away or take the wrong direction.'

The tapping floor was a harsh working environment, not only because of the physical conditions, but also because of the treatment by supervisors:

> 'It was tough on the tapping floor. If they regarded you as cheeky they would send you there. If you complained about wages you were sent there as well. It was a white-dominated working site, it was an apartheid workplace. The treatment there was not fair.'

Most of the tappers were illiterate migrant workers, many of them Pedi-speakers. Many had worked on the tapping floor for long periods of their working lives. More recently, with the change in the company's recruiting policy, relatively highly educated young township residents had begun to appear on the tapping floor, but these workers tended to be promoted fairly quickly to operate the kilns or furnaces. Each tapping team was led by a *baas-boy* or *induna*. When the furnace operator decided that the smelt was ready for tapping, he informed the foreman, who then instructed the *baas-boy* to start tapping. The *baas-boy* then instructed the members of his team to get ready, while he drilled open the tap-hole. The tapping team members were graded as labourers on grade 14, while the *baas-boy* was on grade 13. Absenteeism was fairly high on the tapping floor, and after they had finished tapping their furnace tappers in one team were frequently instructed to join another team and assist with tapping a second furnace. This was a chafing point for the workers, who felt entitled to rest between taps because of the grueling nature of their work.

The tappers felt that the harsh conditions of their work merited higher wages, and during 1990 they launched a series of small stoppages demanding to discuss their problems with their manager. Eventually they were promoted – the tappers by one grade, and the *baas-boy* by three. This exacerbated the tappers' grievances, and they began demanding to also be promoted three grades. Although the *induna* was supposed to open the tap-hole, all the tappers knew how to perform this task. It had long been a custom on the tapping floor that if the *induna* was not present, the foreman would instruct another member of the team to do so. Now they refused, on the grounds that they were not paid to perform this task:

> 'Management would come and just point at anyone and tell them to do the job. So we realised at we have the same knowledge, but we are not paid for the work. That is why we came up with this grievance, after realising that we almost knew the same thing.'

Management bent company policy and offered to pay the tapper who filled in for the *induna* an acting allowance at the higher rate. This worked for three months, and then the tappers again refused to cooperate:

> 'If the *baas-boy* was absent no-one would open the tap-hole. The operator could not move from his pulpit and come down to the tapping floor. So he would phone the superintendent. The superintendent, not knowing the skills of open the tap-hole would phone the manager, and he would come and start begging the guys to open the hole. But they would just sit down and say, You do it. Once the tap-hole is open we will work. But now the tap-hole is closed

and there is no-one to open it. If the manager called another *baas-boy* to come and do it the guys would threaten to walk off the floor. If management called a worker who refused to open the tap-hole, or refused to assist another team, to a disciplinary inquiry, all of the workers on the tapping floors would leave their work and go to the inquiry, and say, We are going to witness this inquiry.'

It was at this point that Nhlapo intervened:

'If you go to the tapping floor, that's where the strength of the union is. These guys are highly, highly militant, so you need to be cautious on how you deal with them. I never had good relations with them. If you take the period from 1987, those were the guys who were against artisans becoming shopstewards. I used this opportunity to prove to them that it is not true that artisans would mess you around. Sometimes we can help, because we might have better ideas, where the other shopstewards might not understand.'

Since the tapping floor occupied a key place in the production process – any delay here brought the entire steel plant to a standstill – management was under intense pressure to resolve the workers' grievances. The iron plant manager agreed that the tappers could be upgraded to grade 12, but insisted that it should be paid for by reducing the number of workers per team. The numbers per team had been reduced from nine to seven in the 1991 retrenchments, and at the same time a mechanical grab had been introduced to help clean the workplace after tapping. Management proposed that the size of the teams be frozen at their new levels, and justified this by arguing that the grabs had reduced the workload. Since this would not entail any fresh reduction, workers 'were ready to fall for it' until Nhlapo pointed out that it could intensify work because the grabs were subject to frequent breakdowns, and that it would make it more difficult to have their former workmates who had been retrenched re-employed.

Nhlapo proposed to the tappers that, instead, work should be reorganised so that they worked as a self-directed workteam. Their job descriptions should be expanded to include drilling open the tap-hole for tapping, using the..... gun to shoot open the tap-hole when it was blocked, repairing the brickwork in the launders, minor welding work, and checking and replacing the safety screens. All tappers should be trained in these tasks and in leadership and team skills, and upgraded to grade 10. There should no longer be a *baas-boy*, but each team should elect its own leader and this position should be rotated. The workers agreed. This seemed like a proposal that would not only satisfy their demand for more money, but also alter the racial and skill hierarchies of the apartheid workplace. This was attractive to migrants who were located at the bottom of the apartheid hierarchy:

'Leslie came to our rescue with the suggestion that since there were jobs that what were doing that we could do, why don't those jobs be done by us, so that our rate can also be equal to theirs.'

The proposal was put to management. At the same time, workers applied their work-to-rule tactics to the grab. Whenever the grab ceased functioning – which was a frequent occurrence – the entire team would stop working until two extra workers were found or the grab was repaired. At about this time the progressive manager from flat products, Mike Bowker, was shifted to the iron plant. Being more open to cooperating with the shopstewards, and welcoming innovative suggestions, he agreed to get rid of the grabs and expand the teams again, and motivated acceptance of proposals for teamwork and upgrading to senior management. Agreement was reached on a two-month training programme. While one shift was attending this program, the other two shifts each worked a 12-hour shift.

The new organisation of work on the tapping floor constituted a radical break with the work organisation of the apartheid workplace regime. For most of the unskilled migrants on the tapping floors this was the first training they had received. This was the case for Albert Makagula, a migrant who had worked there for ten years:

> 'We only realised how well we do the job after we had been for training. The job is the same, nothing changed, but what has improved now is the sense that we all have equal knowledge about the job and everyone knows what to do, and there are no conflicting ideas on the job that we are doing. That is the fulfilling thing, that everyone knows exactly what to do and why, and that's why it's better now.'

The training, upgrading and increased pay for tappers implied a recognition of the skills, experience and importance of a group of black workers who had been least acknowledged in the apartheid workplace regime. According to collective memory on the tapping floors, white workers had once been responsible for open the tap-holes, and the black workers who replaced them had been paid much less: 'Throughout the years we were paid in a discrimination way. Now for the first time we succeeded in forcing management to pay us equally with the whites.' The tappers had also won the right to 'job ownership' defined by a job in a particular team on a specific tapping floor. Tappers could no longer be instructed to assist in another team some of whose members were absent. Instead, workers from the preceding and following shifts would be requested to work overtime - 12-hour shifts rather than 8-hour shifts - to cover absenteeism, which meant increased overtime pay.

The culture of solidarity on the tapping floor had always been strong, and it was reinforced by the new way of working. The workers there felt it was important for new workers to share their experience:

> 'The new people who come in should also go for the same training, so that whatever they are paid and whatever job they do is equal to everyone else. That is what the fight is all about now, that every person who comes into the job should also go for training.'

The creation of self-directed teams was a direct challenge to the racial structure of power centered on the foremen – and management resistance to removing them suggests how important they were to the functioning of the workplace regime:

> 'We said, OK, remove this foreman, because when there are problems, when there is spillage, this foreman just stands there and says, *Werk! Werk! Werk!* – but he has got no idea how to do this work himself. Remove this foreman, he must never be in contact with these people. The furnace operator, let it be his responsibility to move from the culprit and tell the tappers that it is time to tap. So when there are problems the operator and the tapping team can communicate, unlike the foreman who just gives instructions and goes away – when there are problems there is no-one to talk to. It was a tough battle. Management said, No, this foreman is important. We said, He has got no role here. Eventually management agreed and the foreman was removed.'

The importance of the new way of working, in Makagula's view, was that workers could control their work and protect each other from the racism and victimisation of management:

> 'Before, the manager would come to tell us to start tapping and would interfere with our work in many ways – even though we knew what we were supposed to do. Sometimes there would be fire and someone would be dismissed for it without any proper investigation. That's when we realised the need for unity amongst ourselves. Multi-skilling and teamwork are important, in this way we are more protected and we can protect each other. The way we now work at the iron plant is one of the ways I hope to see democracy in the workplace, because I find myself feeling happy with the way we work. There is no harassment from white people.'

Instead of being oppressed by the foreman, workers could develop their own leadership skills:

> 'If workers are scattered and there is a job that needs to be done, the leader is the person who organises everyone and calls them together and tells them what to do. If management comes about a problem in the plant, or wants to know why a particular worker is absent, then he knows who to speak to. That is why there has to be a leader at all times. The former *baas-boys* are still with us, and probably they are happier than us with the new arrangement, because it used to be the difficult for them.'

A second of the tapping floor shopstewards, Hendrik Nkosi, commented on how workers' attitude to work had changed with the change in the structure of power:

> 'Before, the *baas-boy* was part and parcel of the foreman. The foreman had to assist the *baas-boy* because the people didn't do the job properly. The people were not working properly – not to say they didn't know the job, but the *baas-boy* was driving the people and the people were fighting the bosses. Now people are doing the job properly, the people are happy about this system. They assist the team leader, whereas they never helped the *baas-boy*. I don't see the foreman's job at the tapping floor now, he's got nothing to do.'

Nkosi described the collective resolution of disciplinary problems:

> 'The leader calls the whole team to say, Let's talk with this gentlemen, because it's many times he has come late, or maybe when he's present he is not doing the job properly. Lets get from him what is his problem. So the team sits down and talks to the gentleman.'

If that doesn't solve the problem the leader would call some members from another team to assist, or even involve a shopsteward. This was a process of trying to solve the problem through discussion rather than punishment. Management's disciplinary procedures remained in place if the problem could not be solved by the workers. Nkosi stressed that this approach also protected workers from managerial discipline:

> 'It is important to understand that if the man is absent and he didn't report to the team, the team can't defend him from management's disciplinary inquiry because they can't explain why he is absent. If he talks with the team, they can tell management not to worry, he explained that he would be absent today.'

There were limitations to the tapping floor experiment. For Nhlapo, there had not been a shift to real multi-skilling. He would have liked to see the tappers trained to operate the furnace as well, thus abolishing the distinction between tappers and operators, but the tappers' lack of formal education made this impossible. Welding was not including on the training course, and in practice the tappers did not patch the launders. Several of the tappers confirmed that they had not learnt new work skills on the training course, since they already had the skills to do their job. What was new was the training in leadership skills, and information about how the furnace worked. Other than that, the chief contribution of the training course was that it gave formal recognition to the informal skills of the workers.

The new organisation of work on the tapping floors was not based on a reorganisation of work and production in the entire plant, but was rather like an enclave of workers control carved out of the apartheid workplace regime. This rendered it vulnerable to erosion over time. The migrant worker activist, Tshagata, moved to the tapping floor after the new arrangements had been put in place, because he had heard that the pay was better. He did not receive any training, and observed that the

racial division of labour persisted because the task of shooting open the tap-hole if it was blocked was still reserved for the white foreman:

> 'We blacks mainly work for the whites. I must go and elect the gun and place it properly for him, so that he can shoot. The white man will just come and shoot, and this job of shooting is not really work. After he has finished he goes away, and I continue with the work.'

Despite the limitations, the union was able to combine the traditional militancy and solidarity of the tapping floor workers with the insights of its new programme in constructing a new regime on the tapping floors, even if it was only an enclave in the still-intact broader apartheid workplace regime. As one of the iron plant shopstewards put it: 'we have taken the workers out of their Egypt, now they are in Jerusalem.' This new regime dismantled the racial hierarchy of skill, income and our, and replace it with the collective organisation and control of their work by black workers. This new regime nurtured workers' solidarity, democracy and leadership skills. Workteams elected and rotated their own leaders, removing the racist and authoritarian power of the foreman. Workers endeavored to resolve problems of discipline and performance collectively, building their collective solidarity and protecting workers against managerial discipline. While the new regime entrenched a greater sphere of workers control over their work, it also created the possibility for greater cooperation with management.

Workers did in fact try to extend their control over discipline – in cooperation with management – but this revealed the instability of a new regime established within the greater apartheid workplace regime. It started with the continuing problem of endemic absenteeism on the tapping floors. Bowker and the tapping floor shopstewards discussed this, and reached agreement that the tapping floor workers should establish their own disciplinary committee with the authority to suspend persistent absentees for periods of up to several days without pay. In return, management would suspend its own disciplinary procedures. Accounts as to the source for this proposal differ. Some iron plant workers and shopstewards argued that workers developed this strategy in order to protect themselves from excessive work and their workmates from final warnings and dismissals, and it certainly had parallels elsewhere in the company, both during the eighties (chapter 4) and the nineties (chapter 11). Others say Bowker first approached workers about the problem of absenteeism. Nhlapo believed that the idea had originated with Bowker – who had floated it with him, and been put out when Nhlapo rejected it out of hand. Nhlapo argued that management was responsible for discipline because it paid workers' wages; it was 'immoral' for workers to discipline another worker, and it would cause division and cliques among them.

Then came the 1994 elections, and the workers on the tapping floor tried to turn their disciplinary powers to use in building their collective solidarity in the union. In the days preceding the elections the workers in iron plant – particularly the migrants on the tapping floors – became concerned about

how they would participate. The union had negotiated an agreement with the company that workers would come to work the polling days, but that management would find ways to accommodate workers who had problems. How would workers who lived in faraway rural areas vote, the iron plant workers wanted to know? By this time the shopsteward leadership at Highveld Steel was working full-time on the ANC election campaign. The iron plant shopstewards raised their concern with management. They argued afterwards that management had agreed that workers could leave work for two days to vote, but management clearly had a different understanding. When the workers returned to work, they found that two workers – including a black foreman - had actually worked through the elections. They decided to apply their disciplinary powers, and suspended the two workers for two weeks.

These events demonstrated how far management and workers were from establishing a mutually understood workplace regime. The iron plant constituted an uneasy coexistence between two incompatible regimes rather than a single new regime. Management was incensed at the election stayaway and at the suspensions. For workers this simply confirmed that what managers continued to ignore the concerns of black workers. One of them recalled his confrontation with the human resources manager:

> 'So I asked Hugo if he did not know that the were going to have elections, and having that knowledge, what arrangements had he made to ensure that Highveld workers would have easy access to the writing stations. He could not answer me, and said that according to him voting was not that much of a problem. I asked whether we as blacks have voted before? He said, No. I then said if voting was not a problem, do you think that we knew that? I further asked him whether he knew what voting meant to us blacks. He responded that it was a new experience for us. I said to him, since it was a new thing to us, it was bound to give us problems. Because you had experience, you should have enlightened us and helped us make arrangements so as to avoid the problems. He just left in the middle of the meeting.'

At a second meeting the same worker argued that iron plant management had agreed that workers could go home to vote, and threatened that in future workers would no longer agree to work on public holidays[16]:

> 'I then told Hugo that since the government has changed, we now have a people's government, from now on, for each holiday under this new government we at iron plant one of not going to come to work, whether he paid us for not. He left in the middle of the meeting again.'

In the first exchange the worker points to the white manager's inability to understand the significance of the election for black workers. In the second he underscores the significance of the new 'people's government' – which highlights the illegitimacy of the workplace regime which continues to entrench

white power – and threatens that workers will reject all customs and agreements that originated within that regime. This conflict was intensified by the harsh conditions workers worked under:

> 'Conditions there are bad. You have got very militant workers and management trying to put pressure on them. But now management is saying they must relax the pressure, and instead make them more cooperative by involving them. But these guys don't have those things in their minds. They still feel the conditions as bad as they were. That's why there is always a clash between iron plant workers and management.'

Workers had attempted to appropriate disciplinary powers from management in order to further extend the enclave of workers' control. The internalisation of disciplinary problems by workers also suited management's purposes, and agreement was reached. However, this arrangement was deeply unstable. The political transition highlighted the continuity of white domination and racial inequality in the workplace, and workers made use of their new disciplinary powers to buttress black solidarity and ensure they could participate in the elections. This was not what management had envisaged, and the agreement broke down.

One of the iron plant shopstewards commented that the strong form of worker-controlled discipline had not been fairly applied. Some workers were treated leniently while others were punished harshly by the disciplinary committee, and there were no clear procedures or rights to representation. It appeared that Nhlapo had been right. Nonetheless, management had benefited from improved discipline, and they invited the iron plant shopstewards to discuss new ways of cooperating on discipline. The latter had drawn their own conclusions and rejected the invitation:

> 'We as shopstewards don't want to be involved in such things, because we are not going to charge the people. We as shopstewards will represent the people. That is our job.'

Tshagata, on the other hand, expressed regret that workers' control of discipline had ended. It protected workers' jobs and pointed to a regime governed by 'the law of freedom':

'I'm sad about the end of that committee. It was able to consider that the children of the worker should continue to eat, because when he came back from suspension he was not dismissed. In my view it was good, because it accorded with the law of freedom.'

Management initiatives and wildcat cooperation: a management-driven construction of a new workplace order[17]

The previous section of this chapter described how the union successfully established a new democratic workplace regime as an enclave within the broader apartheid workplace regime in the iron plant. The iron plant was also the site for the most comprehensive management initiative to construct a new workplace order on its own terms.

Mike Bowker was shifted from flat products and appointed works manager at iron plant one in the course of 1992. In the shopstewards' experience he was different from any other manager at Highveld Steel, keen to innovate and experiment, open to discussion and consultation with the union and the shopstewards. He had a different style, interacting and discussing with ordinary workers on the shopfloor and visiting shopstewards at home.

His strategy for eliciting cooperation from workers was to work with groups of workers in different sections of the plant on ways to reorganised work, without the constraints of negotiating with the union over the broader implications of these local changes. He would identify common interests through a process of negotiation and consultation with workers, and try to accommodate their demands – usually for increased pay – by linking these to a reorganisation of the work process. In this way, the workers would be won over through increased levels of skill, pay and responsibility to his goals of increasing efficiency and reducing costs. In driving this process, Bowker could build a worker constituency supportive of his vision of workplace change, weakening the union's links to its own constituency and the shopstewards' ability to challenge his project and drive their own. Through constructing this kind of participation, Bowker could ensure that management retained ultimate control over workplace restructuring and over production.

Leslie Nhlapo first became aware of Bowker's plans when these were presented at the company-level restructuring committee. The centrepiece of Bowker's thinking was to restructure the work of the foremen. Traditionally, two foremen supervised the..... kilns and the hot-charge cars which loaded the pre-reduced iron into the furnace bunkers, and three foremen supervised the six furnaces with their tapping floors, as well as the transport of the molten iron to the steel plant. Bowker proposed that instead there should be six foreman, each responsible for controlling the entire production process from kiln through hot-charge to furnace, tapping floor and transport to the steel plant. Nhlapo thought this 'a marvellous proposal' promising 'very significant changes that I can call real restructuring' because it would replace the fragmented structure of supervision with one where the foreman would have responsibility for an integrated production process and for the quality of the product at the end. This had the potential to reduce the high level of waste product in the iron plant, and have a substantial impact on efficiency in the steel plant, where the frequency of poor product from the iron plant meant constant monitoring and corrective measures.

Despite his enthusiasm for the proposals, Nhlapo was concerned that Bowker was reluctant to discuss the broader implications of more skilled and responsible foremen for their grading, both in the iron

plant and the rest of the company, and for the flattening of managerial structures above the foremen and increasing the skill of operators below them. He also feared the impact of increased efficiency on staffing levels, particularly in the steel plant where the inefficiency of the iron plant generated extra work. Finally, there was no discussion about how workers would benefit from increased profits:

> 'This means more profits. Now, how do you benefit from these profits? By upgrading two people and employing two extra foremen? Until we are involved in how the profits are distributed, I don't think we should cooperate with management – although they like to see us cooperating.'

As important, if not more so, were his concerns about the *politics* of workplace change. As described earlier in this chapter, management did not see the restructuring committee as a forum for discussing and negotiating proposals, but expected shopstewards to endorse and help implement management ideas. It was important for the union 'to counter them in many ways so that they can begin to respect us' and so compel them to accept that change had to be negotiated. Workplace change was as much about the balance of power and control as it was about grading or efficiency. This applied to Bowker's proposals as well, since he showed no inclination to negotiate with NUMSA shopstewards.

Fortunately for the union, many of the white foremen, worried about their own skills and ability and the extra responsibility and workload, were as concerned about Bowker's proposals as Nhlapo. Concerned also about the pressure to implement the company's new disciplinary procedure, they turned towards the one organisation able to resist management and joined NUMSA (see chapter 15). This gave the union the leverage to block Bowker's ability to implement his proposals. This was likely to be only a temporary stalemate, however, because the white foremen were hardly likely to become an agent for democratic counter-initiatives to those of management, as NUMSA's analysis of their role in the workplace regime made clear.

Meanwhile, Bowker was busy building other constituencies for change in the iron plant, bypassing the shopsteward leadership who were 'frustrating' him. He cultivated cordial relations with national and regional officials, and let shopstewards know he discussed problems with them. He also devoted time to eliciting 'wildcat cooperation' from workers in various sections of the plant, letting them too know about his contacts with union officials. By the end of 1995, Nhlapo had to acknowledge that Bowker 'has managed to get me out of his way'. The group of energetic new black foremen appointed by Bowker supported the new way of working, and the white foremen had caved in. The foremen were shifted to the new way of working as a trial project. The hot-charge car drivers supported Bowker's restructuring plans because it meant increased wages and responsibility for them. Nhlapo 'doubted' whether the iron plant shopstewards were still really union representatives, since they too had been won over to Bowker's idea. Nhlapo's absence from the factory on the NTB project based in Johannesburg had given Bowker crucial space:

> 'It's also a question of capacity – if I was in the factory, Bowker could not have moved an inch. He had all these plans a long time ago, but he was blocked. We said we need to have an agreement before he can implement them. Now if I come in there I'll come in as someone who's going to block progressiveness from Bowker. We're divided in iron plant. Most blacks want this thing in place, most whites are saying no to this thing.'

White workers did not provide a global constituency for the union. Besides the fact that they were a minority, they were primarily motivated by a fear of change and a desire to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, they didn't 'have this culture of debating things to their final conclusion', coming to a decision and taking action. By mobilising the desire of black workers for change, Bowker had won their support and undermined the ability of the shopsteward leadership to intervene. In the next section we shall explore the way in which this 'wildcat cooperation' was constructed.

'Wildcat cooperation' in the iron plant

This section describes how Bowker was able to construct support for his vision of restructuring the work of kiln operators, furnace operators, hot-charge car drivers and shopstewards in iron plant one by encouraging participation and accommodating immediate concerns.

The kiln operators complained that as white kiln operators were replaced by blacks, management had done away with the kiln attendants. This meant the operators had to perform extra tasks, like cleaning their workplaces or unblocking the chutes that fed the kilns, which made it impossible to control the kilns properly and resulted poor production. Frustrated by management's lack of response, a shopsteward on the kilns proposed in a meeting with management that they working group should be established to investigate the problem and propose solutions. A shopsteward from the furnaces added that they had a similar problem with a shortage of operators. The shopstewards and Bowker agreed that two working groups should be established, one for the kilns and one for the furnaces. The kiln working group consisted of the shopsteward, seven rank-and-file workers, the superintendent and assistant manager, and the furnace group had a similar structure. The shopstewards saw these working groups as participative structures where managers and workers should work together as a team, rather than negotiating as representatives.

According to the kiln shopsteward:

> 'It was an idea that flashed into my mind – that if we continue to put the whole problem on management they will do nothing. We better get ourselves involved. There is no win, no

lose, in actual fact. When we are disputing on a certain issue we are trying to find a solution, we are not trying to win. What are you going to win there? We all win if the solution is found, we all lose if there is no solution, because the problem will still be there.'

Although he regarded the working group pays as union structures, the shopsteward did not feel it necessary to discuss this initiative with the rest of the shopsteward committee beyond the iron plant:

> 'We have support for this throughout iron plant, but the other divisions don't know anything about it, because this involves the problems of iron plant. It's just a working group, we have agreed with management.'

The shopsteward in the furnace working group agreed that the participatory forum should transcend the usual bargaining relationship between managers and unionists, but found that the manager was unable to do this:

> 'I found something which is not right. If we are talking about a group that means we are a team. But the manager who was chairing the meeting was separating himself from us, from the team. He was talking on behalf of management, which means that we're supposed to talk on behalf of the workforce, which is wrong. I told him that we're supposed to forget that you are a manager and I am a shopsteward. I'm not coming to represent someone here, we're coming to try and solve the problems of these people, all of us, as a team. But he didn't understand and nor did the other workers in the group who knew nothing about negotiating. They just accepted what he said. He wants to change our demand, to drive us in his election. We should follow him instead of sharing ideas. If he really wants to drive us, I'm going to crush this working group and we can go back to square one, to negotiating with management.'

These two quotes show how 'wildcat cooperation' can emerge out of workers' desire for a different relationship with management, a desire for management to cooperate with them. In the process, the potential for new definitions of collective identity are present: workers and even shopstewards may start to distance themselves from the union as the representative of the general interest of all workers in the company, and constitute into smaller, more local groups with specific work-interests – iron plant workers, or kiln and furnace workers.

Bowker clearly succeeded in sorting out the problems on the furnace working group: a year later the shopsteward reported that the working groups had developed a successful proposal to solve the shortage of labour by employing and training a new category of workers called swingmen to operate kilns, furnaces and hot-charge cars. The swingmen formed a flexible, multi-skill group of workers who could be deployed wherever there were shortages – to the kilns, furnaces for hot-charge cars.

Twelve extra workers were employed and trained for this position. The furnace shopsteward counted this as a success: new jobs had been created, the workload of operators had improved, and management and workers had cooperated fruitfully. The only problem was that the new multi-skilled workers were graded and paid two levels below the operators, although they were even more skilled. The shopsteward did not see this as a major problem: shifting identityagain he and other shopstewards had 'as the union' demanded that this anomaly be addressed. Management had satisfied them by promising that it would be once the restructuring of work in iron plant as a whole had been completed – again, successfully establishing a constituency in support of Bowker's programme of restructuring.

While the furnace shopsteward was pleased with the success of the working groups, one of the white foremen who had joined NUMSA argued that management had pulled the wool over the workers' eyes. The swingmen were happy because they had been upgraded, but their presence was allowing management to continue reducing the number of other workers, some of them paid more highly than the swingmen: kiln and furnace operators, furnace attendants, hot-charge car drivers and radial gate attendants. Swingmen had applied for vacant positions as kiln or furnace operators, but were refused and the posts were kept vacant. Contractors were being brought in to do work previously done by furnace attendance. Management was planning a programme of automation that would do away with hot-charge car drivers. Management was, in other words, slowly implementing a programme to create a smaller, multi-skilled and flexible workforce which would simultaneously reduce costs and increase responsibility. The iron plant shopstewards, focused on immediate and local concerns and grievances, were missing the broader picture and failing to protect the collective interests of all iron plant workers. Bowker had successfully mobilised localised interests in 'wildcat cooperation' and undermined the union as the representative of the broader collective interest of workers.

This tendency was exacerbated by the new opportunities for talented black workers – and especially shopstewards with leadership skills – to benefit from upward mobility in the restructuring process. The kiln shopsteward was promoted into the ranks of management and shifted to a different plant. The furnace shopsteward – who had started out as a shopsteward on the tapping floor – was regularly appointed an 'acting foreman', and clearly expected to be promoted as a full-time foreman. Cooperation with management clearly held potential to advance their personal careers as well.

The furnace shopsteward commented on the dangers of Bowker's style:

> 'He is a good guy. He changed many things at iron plant. Before he came we worked very hard as shopstewards to show management the way. But Bowker us what is the main problem of the people, because iron plant was very militant. So we explained to him, and he said OK, I will try to assist you. So even the shopstewards are trying to assist him. He's clever. If you talk with him you're supposed to be very careful. He tries to pull you from

your side to be with him now, to be on the management side. If you don't look carefully, you can't see him pulling you from that side. He wants to use you. He knows that if he gives a report together with you to the workers, they are going to accept that. Maybe later they will recover and say this thing was not right. They are going to fight with you, not with him.'

But a year later, he was convinced that fundamental changes had taken place:

'Racism is totally changing. It really is. The management and workers are friends. If the foreman makes tea he doesn't make tea for himself only. He ask all of us whether we want tea. Before, the foremen did not talk with the tapper. Now they talk not only about work, but generally. The whites are coming to NUMSA. And they even come to my place to visit me, these whites. Before, by was the enemy to them.'

This also meant the role of the shopsteward had changed:

'There are no more disciplinary enquiries. The foremen can solve problems with the workers. For the past ten months nothing has been required of me as a shopsteward. Before, it was good with the apartheid system – negotiation were very easy. We said, because we are black we want 25% across-the-board. Now you can't tell the management, I want this because I'm black. No, you're supposed to think now. The time for fighting is past. Now you can negotiate. The door is open. If there is something you are not happy about you can go and talk about it.'

In the view of this shopsteward, a new workplace regime had been constructed through cooperation between workers, shopstewards and management. In the view of the shopsteward leadership, and in particular the chair of the steelworks committee, Leslie Nhlapo, through the process of 'wildcat cooperation' management in the iron plant had managed to undermine the collective identity of the union at Highveld Steel, co-opting the shopstewards and, through participation, building a constituency supportive of work restructuring among workers. The result was management control over restructuring, which held potential dangers for workers, and the inability of the union to contest, negotiate or put forward its own demands in relation to restructuring. Workplace restructuring was removed from the terrain of company-level negotiations where safeguards could be built in, long-term goals established, and the distribution of increased profitability negotiated.

At an earlier phase of work restructuring in the iron plant – a phase dominated by wildcat actions such as the two-day stayaway for elections – Nhlapo had expressed confidence that management would be unable to proceed on the basis of 'wildcat cooperation' because that in turn generated wildcat opposition. Management needed the institutional relations with workers established by the trade union:

> 'The iron plant is one of the few places where the green areas are being implemented, to such an extent that you can no longer make a distinction between a shopsteward and a green area group. There is no role for shopstewards at iron plant now. Management is confronted by many people coming to them with complaints and complaints. People can group themselves from the green area and approach management if they want linking. That is exactly what we told management, that if you don't clearly define the role of the shopsteward you will have problems. Now they want the union to go back and tell our members that they must do everything through the union structures, through the shopsteward. But workers are no longer going to agree. I understand there are about 14 workers at iron plant now who negotiate on behalf of the workers, so obviously the union has got no rule there now.'

This meant management had to deal with 'undisciplined people' who would not follow negotiating procedures or the disciplinary code, who 'at any moment can come to you and demand an increase and threaten to strike'. Management would have no recourse to the union, because they would be negotiating with workers, not union representatives. It was preferable, therefore, from a management point of view, to maintain strong unions structures.

However, developments in the iron plant suggested that Nhlapo's confidence that management needed the union was misplaced – particularly in a context where the leading shopstewards were not consistently available to either managers or workers. In the iron plant, management lost patience with the union and instead cultivated 'wildcat cooperation'. This became the basis for transition from the apartheid workplace regime to a new hegemonic regime under managerial domination.

Assessing the NUMSA strategy

Negotiating a model agreement[18]

By mid-1995 there seemed to be little prospect for cooperative agreement between management and unions at Highveld Steel. The three working groups had been shut down, and management opened the House Agreement negotiations by withdrawing its commitment to implementing a five-grade system. However, management surprised NUMSA by proposing a new 'Agreement of intent' to govern restructuring in the company. This sought to overcome the conflict and paralysis in the working groups in two ways. Firstly, it proposed that, 'in view of the uncertainties, the lack of trust and inadequate benchmarking', management and unions should jointly decide on a pilot project in a specific plant and focus their energies on this. The limited scope of such a project could reduce the fears of both management and shopstewards. Secondly, the project would be overseen by a joint

management-union steering committee. This implied institutionalising a high degree of union influence, which management hoped would persuade the union to drop its strategy of resistance.

The shopstewards perceived this as a promising offer, and proceeded to develop proposals to amend the document 'to suit our own thinking and make it possible for us to achieve our goals'. The two key clauses finally accepted by the company effectively gave the union a veto over change in the workplace by stating that 'no other change would be implemented with regard to work reorganisation without reference to the joint management / union steering committee' and adopted the principles of co-determination - 'the full and equal participation' of the unions in 'the conception, development and implementation of any changes, and the sharing of information pertaining to this programme'. These were the clauses where shopstewards felt 'we are going to get our leverage to deal with management'. The final agreement also implied that the steering committee was not only to oversee the pilot project, but to identify projects and oversee change generally at Highveld Steel. The shopstewards rejected a clause which implied restructuring would necessarily lead to surplus labour. They fought for a commitment to a safer workplace, and after five meetings secured a promise to 'endeavour' for this goal. They insisted on a reference to the inefficiencies of management through the recognition that not only demarcations and work practices, but also 'the levels of supervision' should be 'scrutinised'.

More broadly, the agreement committed the company and the union to making Highveld Steel 'the best manufacture of our products in the business' through increased efficiency, lower costs, increased quality and a reduction of waste. This would provide the justification for more investment. Broad points were made about changing attitudes and working together 'at beating the competition'. The document proposed changing work practices, removing artificial demarcations and increasing flexibility, investing in training and rewarding skill.

The agreement appeared to hold the promise of a new beginning, in which unions and management could negotiate a transition to a new workplace order acceptable to them both. However, profound disjunctures undermined this promise. There was still no substantial shared ground on how the workplace should change or what the goals should be. The shopstewards had fought to include clauses that pointed in the direction of their vision – but this did not mean that management understood or accepted the implications of such clauses.

Furthermore, despite the protracted negotiations and the signing of the agreement, senior management was still not committed to cooperation. The problem was that other options were being to emerge – options that seemed more attractive because they promised to secure managerial control and sideline the union by cultivating 'wildcat cooperation'. Bowker's project in iron plant one was the most advanced and coherent of these. Thus management continued to pursue such projects, and even initiated a major new project at Vantra, without involving the unions, after the agreement had been negotiated. Here the Highveld Steel management planned that Vantra workers and managers

would elect their own steering committee, modeled on the workplace forums proposed by the new LRA. The Vantra shopstewards would be included as a minority in this forum, which would not be accountable to the steering committee established by the Agreement of intent.

The agreement therefore got off to a bad start, exacerbated by attempts on the part of management to dilute the powers of the steering committee. . When the full steering committee finally met, Nhlapo observed that, 'Things are just as they used to be - management is supposed to make the decisions and we must accept them.' Management 'sort of' agreed to put plant-level changes on hold until the steering committee was able to meet with managers and shopstewards in the relevant plants.

How can this anomaly be explained? The same senior managers who had negotiated the agreement were undermining it. In the view of the shopstewards, even the MD and the human resources manager who had negotiated the agreement were profoundly ambivalent about it. On the one hand, they knew that 'the rules of the game have changed now' and accepted that they had to cooperate with the union. On the other hand, they were still unable to grasp what this really meant, so 'it is a shift, but a shift that is on paper'. It had been made clear to some of the shopstewards that even the executive committee of the company did not fully support the 'paradigm shift'; and managers down the line 'are going to block everything we try to come up with', as the human resources manager had confessed. The majority of managers from top to bottom of the company were seemingly unable to transcend their history as creators and creatures of the apartheid workplace regime.

Clearly the shopstewards would face a tough battle to ensure that the agreement actually had any meaning in the workplace. The problem was that the union itself lacked the capacity to take up this battle. In the first place, the Highveld Steel shopstewards were operating completely on their own without any support from regional or head office officials - as the negotiations over the agreement of intent had shown[19] - and had effectively been doing so for about two years. They found that union policies were too broad and generalised to help them in implementing workplace strategies and engaging with management, and were forced to improvise. The handful of shopstewards who had the confidence and skill to do this was growing ever smaller. The key strategist and driver of the shopsteward committee, Leslie Nhlapo, was increasingly involved in union work at a national level; from early 1996 he was seconded full-time to work on a National Training Board (NTB) project in Johannesburg and was able to spend very little time at Highveld Steel. Other shopstewards were increasingly involved in political careers, as described in chapter 10, or positioning themselves for promotion within the company.

A shopstewards committee workshop held at the end of 1995 to assess their strategic positio emphasised this issue. Discussion centred on successful efforts of management in iron plant one and GMPD – with the newer threat of the Vantra project – and on formulating strategies to gain control over 'wildcat cooperation', re-establish the leadership of the shopstewards and union structures in the

affected plants, and steer restructuring under the control of the steering committee to be set up by the new agreement.

But the steady attrition of skilled shopstewards promised to render this a Sisyphean task. Once again, union resistance had won a major concession which it lacked the capacity to make effective use of. The agreement was unable to breach the divided perspectives produced by the apartheid workplace regime, and it was effectively a dead letter.

Assessing the NUMSA strategy

The experience of the shopstewards at Highveld Steel suggests that there were two fatal flaws in the NUMSA strategy – it overestimated the willingness of management to cooperate with the union, and it underestimated the kind of union capacity required to implement the strategy.

Management did not at any point demonstrate an understanding of what it might mean to negotiate a new workplace order and cooperate with NUMSA. There were moments in the engagement between the two where they were able to reach formal agreement on a process of negotiated cooperation – but management's behavior suggested an inability to comprehend what this might mean in practice.

Management's inability to cooperate with the union was linked to its location in the apartheid workplace regime. Management did not appear to recognise the crisis of the regime, it's deep illegitimacy in the eyes of workers, it's burden of racist, authoritarian, inefficient and incompetent managers, and its structural inequalities. As the creators and creatures of this order, they could not see how apartheid had structure workplace institutions, culture, practices and relations, or that this legacy needed transformation. As a result, they did not formulate a comprehensive strategy, but implemented a series of ad hoc and often ill-conceived measures. It is clear that they recognised inefficiency as a problem, but prepared to deal with this without acknowledging a role for the union – first through attempted to impose cooperation and discipline, and then through cultivating 'wildcat cooperation'. Management's own lack of capacity was also significant; the only manager who stands out as having a clear grasp of the issues at stake, and a clear strategy for dealing with them was Bowker.

The question of race and class arises out of the attempt to understand these weaknesses. Were the managers of Highveld Steel acting primarily as whites who could not contemplate a serious sharing of power with blacks, or were they acting simply as capitalists, who generally avoid cooperating with union and resist union incursions into their 'rights' and 'prorogatives'? The behavior of the Highveld Steel managers might be recognisable and endorsed by capitalist managers everywhere. On the other

hand, few are faced with such a legitimacy crisis, such divided workplaces or such inefficient labour processes.

The lack of union capacity has been discussed at several points in this chapter. It is clear that when it embarked on the path of strategic unionism, NUMSA underestimated its complexity and the kinds of skills and resources it would required. This was especially so in the context of national liberation, which generated a wave of upward mobility among trade unionists. These weaknesses meant that, at a certain point, shopstewards lost faith in the strategy and even in the union. Nhlapo articulated this at the end of 1995 – the union could continue to paralyse management initiatives, but had no alternative initiatives of its own:

> 'The first step is to make sure that within Vantra nothing happens. You block that thing, use your old tactics, call strike action, make sure that a similar thing does not happen in GMPD. Then force them to implement the agreement by form the steering committee. Then once you've done that, I don't know what the steering committee is going to do. That is how far I can think about this thing - block Vantra, block GMPD, then establish a steering committee - don't ask me then what. That's precisely the problem, because from here - what?'

The union had no guidelines for how to participate in green areas, how to form teams without being 'divided by capitalist ideas', how to negotiate production bonuses for profit-sharing. While management was building on experience, engaging at the NTB, learning from other companies both in South Africa and abroad, and developing their strategies, the handful of union officials who were familiar with union thinking on these issues were leaving NUMSA and COSATU. The result was that the shopstewards could not move from shaping the process of engagement with management to shaping the content:

> 'How do I counter his argument? Do I have something concrete that I can put on the table? No. We said as the union that training is the key to workers' advancement - but we are not equipped to deal with these issues. We don't have people that are committed to these things. That's why I say we're a bit lost.'

The next chapter explores the impact of 'strategic unionism' on the social structure of the union.

There was a third problem area in the union struggle – that of the impact of increased efficiency on working life and job loss. Generally the shopstewards argued that increased efficiency was compatible with – and depended on – increased training and skills, better pay and increased job control, but at times expressed anxiety about the dangers of losing jobs and of greatly increased workloads. They frequently acknowledged that there was a great surplus of labour at Highveld Steel, and that restructuring would lead to redundancy. This was easier to fight in opposition to

management – but how would the union be able to deal with it if it was cooperating with management to improve efficiency? What would this mean for the credibility of the union, or its ability to represent its members? This issue never had to be confronted in practice, because management rejected cooperation.

The future of the apartheid workplace regime

Chapter 11 argued that the contrast between political liberation and the persistence of the apartheid workplace regime, and the disjunction between them, generated a further decomposition of the workplace regime. This affected discipline, supervisory authority and work performance. The failure of the union strategy to transform the workplace, and the general failure of managerial strategies to recompose the workplace regime, meant that the core features of the apartheid workplace regime – including its decomposition – remained in place. Two incidents illustrate this point: a conversation between Leslie Nhlapo and his workmates, and the re-emergence of industrial action against racial assault in 1996.

'I went into the mess-room 15 minutes before tea-time, only to find artisans and labourers already there – not washing their hands, but eating already. I said to them, I'm working on a project that workers must be more effective, they must take charge of the production process. But here you are eating! What's going on? They said, We've voted Mandela into power, and unless we see serious changes we're not going to change the way we operate, we're going to continue as we are continuing now. I said, we need to motivate that you guys work hard. They said, No, we can work hard if they give us money. Why are the whites getting more money?'[20]

While the above conversation illustrates the persistence of racial alienation and resistance to work discipline among black workers, the racial assault case illustrates both this and the persistence of apartheid practices among managers and supervisors.

In September 1996 a black labourer went to the shop to buy bread for tea.[21] On his return he was confronted by his white charge-hand for being absent from were without permission, and was assaulted by him. He lodged a grievance. A disciplinary inquiry was held and both workers were dismissed for assault. Both were reinstated on appeal with final warnings. Some 2000 NUMSA members at the steelworks launched an immediate illegal strike, demanding the dismissal of the white supervisor and the reinstatement of the labourer with a clear record. The strike lasted 12 days. The strikers ignored a supreme court interdict to ordering that they return to work. After a week the company and NUMSA reached agreement that the dispute should be referred to an arbitrator, but could not agree to the union's demand that, should the arbitrator find that the workers were correct

and that the company had failed to apply its disciplinary procedure fairly, its members should be paid for their time on strike. After several more days stoppage, the company agreed to this demand.

The arbitrator found that on the labourer's return from the shop the charge-hand grabbed him and began to force him towards his office. The labourer was justified in resisting this assault by attempting to push the charge-hand away, whereupon the charge-hand hit the labourer on his cheek with his fist hard enough for a doctor to record bruising and laceration. The white charge-hand was therefore guilty of assault and the labourer not guilty. The arbitrator did however comment that the labourer's attitude to work and supervision was 'reprehensible'. He was frequently absent from his workplace without permission and his attitude 'indicated an arrogant disregard of his duties as an employee'.

This case read like a carbon copy of the confrontations of the 1980s, and repeats the patterns of the 1993 strike against racial assault discussed in chapter 11 – minus the militant involvement of the MWU and the AWB. Clearly important elements of the apartheid workplace regime were still present in 1996, six years after the unbanning of the liberation movement and more than two years after the democratic elections. The case suggests that not only was racial assault still a factor on the shopfloor, and not only that managers continued to support white supervisors against black workers and apply discipline in a racially discriminatory way, but that despite a professed concern about the high incidence of assault on the shopfloor, the senior management of the company were prepared to support white managers without question through a costly 12 day strike. The persistence of racial tension on the shopfloor seems to have been invisible to senior white managers, and in a newspaper advertisement the company blamed the union for behaviour which was discouraging investors and 'very damaging to the entire national effort'. It is difficult to imagine how a 'national effort' could be built on the foundations of apartheid workplace which the company was implicitly defending.

The persistence of the apartheid workplace regime – or at least of core elements of it – ensured the continued illegitimacy of the workplace regime in the eyes of workers. This is implicit in the workplace behavior of the black worker – which recalls Nhlapo conversation with his workmates – and their strike behavior. The strikers ignored the dispute provisions of the new LRA – newly enacted by the democratic government – as well as the court interdict. The company complained that the union showed 'disregard for agreed procedures' and 'for the law', and that workers 'barricaded roads, manhandled and threatened employees going to work, hijacked contractors' vehicles and damaged a number of vehicles'. As Nhlapo had commented earlier, when provoked workers would put aside any agreement or procedure in order to 'deal directly with management'. The cost to the company – and the national economy - is high, both directly through the strike which was estimated to have cost the company R30 million, and through ongoing inefficiencies.

The diversity of experiences at Highveld Steel discussed in this chapter makes it difficult to predict the future of the workplace regime, at Highveld Steel or in industry more broadly. The evidence suggests rather that the transition from the apartheid workplace regime is a complex, slow and contested one, and that several different outcomes are possible. The nature of a new, 'post-apartheid' regime will be defined by struggles in workplaces across South Africa, by contestations at industrial and national levels, and by (contested) interventions by the state as well. While a particular kind of workplace regime may come to dominate nationally, there are likely to be a wide range of variations in different workplaces, depending on labour process, union and management, regional dynamics, etc.

It is possible to discern three different possible outcomes on the basis of the Highveld Steel evidence.

1. *A neo-apartheid workplace regime.*

The workplace changes through a series of ad hoc, partial reforms, some negotiated and some imposed. There is a connection shift in the racial division of labour and the racial structure of power, but the legacy of incompetent, authoritarian management, high levels of inequality, and a low skill, low productivity workplace continued to define workplace culture and practices. Relations between unions and management remain antagonistic. Managerial hegemony is only partially established; workers form a strong defensive and resistant block, the workplace order is characterised by a partial legitimacy and the legacy of the decomposition of the apartheid workplace order continues to affect discipline and workers commitment to work.

2. *Lean production and managerial hegemony.*

Management succeeds in marginalising the unions and reconstituting workplace relations under managerial hegemony. This takes the form of 'wildcat cooperation' where the labour process is relatively complex and workers are relatively skilled and exercise a degree of control over their work, as at Highveld Steel. Where the labour process is relatively simple – simple assembly work for example – management may be able to construct a more authoritarian workplace order. The workplace rapidly becomes relatively non-racial, with a high emphasis placed on training and black advancement – indeed, the rapid and widespread promotion of black managers and workers characterises this regime. The unions are seriously weakened.

3. *A democratic workplace regime:*

This regime is distinguished by strong, proactive trade unionism and management cooperation with the unions. This is a source for a comprehensive programme for the transformation of the workplace regime. The workplace is increasingly characterised by higher levels of skill, improved efficiency and

innovation. Managerial weaknesses may be compensated for by union and worker involvement. Unions are strong and there is a significant level of worker control of production and the shopfloor.

The Highveld Steel evidence suggests that the third workplace regime is highly unlikely, although much of government's legislation and intervention is directed towards encouraging it. Managerial resistance and union weaknesses mean that a neo-apartheid or lean production workplace regime are far more likely to emerge from workplace and industrial contestations and become the prevalent workplace regime. Again, the lack of capacity both of management and of labour suggest that the first is more likely than the second; perhaps a mixture of these two regimes is probable, with islands of lean production based on managerial hegemony in a sea of conflictual and inefficient neo-apartheid workplaces.

[1] This section is based primarily on Leslie Nhlapo (2), 50-8, 60-3, 70; also Bunny Mahlangu (2), 9-10; Ambrose Mthembu (2), 31-4; Ezekiel Nkosi (1), 44-7; (2), 9-10; Jacob Skhosana (2), 3-7.

[2] This section is based on *Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel shopstewards meeting, 19 May 1994*; *Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel shopstewards meeting, 12 November 1994; Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel shopstewards meeting, 9 December 1995*; *Fieldnotes 11/4/95; 7/6/95; 18/7/95*; Ambrose Mthembu (4), 1-3; Leslie Nhlapo (4), 8, 31-2, 37-8; (5), 15-29; (6), 33-4; *Highveld Steel letter, 29 April 1994: Appendix C: Technical negotiating structures.*

[3] I am referring here to the lack of a common underlying understanding on these issues; there was a formal agreement according to which each technical committee would meet at least once per fortnight, decision-making would be by consensus, agreements and disagreements would be referred to a steering committee, and unresolved issues would be referred to mediation or arbitration.

[4] The following account of the green areas and TQM initiatives is drawn from Ambrose Mthembu (1), 29-32, 34; Leslie Nhlapo (2), 39-44; (3 b), 1-9; (4), 13-16; (5), 23-4; Ezekiel Nkosi (1), 59-64; (3), 1-2; (4), 5-7; (5), 24; Johannes Phatlana (1), 25-6; Tshagata (2), 3-4. The account of the disciplinary initiative is drawn from Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel joint shopstewards committee meeting, 12 November 1994; Koos Fouche, 25-30; Ambrose Mthembu (4), 12-13; Leslie Nhlapo (3), 17; (5), 13-15; (6), 66-9; Hendrik Nkosi (3), 22-3; Johannes Phatlana (3), 16-18.

[5] This paragraph is based on Ambrose Mthembu (1), 28-9; (4), 11; Leslie Nhlapo (2), 29; (4), 5-6.

[6] This paragraph is based on Ambrose Mthembu (1), 33-4; (4), 10-11; Ezekiel Nkosi (2), 34.

[7] This paragraph is based on Ambrose Mthembu (1), 15-16, 34-5; Leslie Nhlapo (2), 29-31; Johannes Phatlana (3), 20-2.

[8] This section is based on Ambrose Mthembu (2), 1-5, 16-23; (3), 21-7.

[9] Leslie Nhlapo (4), 10-11; *Fieldnotes, 9/6/94.*

[10] Johannes Phatlana (3), 23-4.

[11] The account of the changes in flat products is based on Philip Mkatshwa (2), 4-7, 16-17; Ezekiel Nkosi (5 tape 2), 27-9; Sidwel Nkosi, 6-9.

[12] This account of events at Rand Carbide is based on Leslie Nhlapo (4), 7-9; JJ Mbonani (2), 18-21, 25-6; *Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel shopstewards committee meeting, 19 May 1994*; *Fieldnotes 9/6/94* and *9/6/94 (2).*

[13] Leslie Nhlapo (2), 10.

[14] The next two paragraphs are based on Leslie Nhlapo (2), 10-13; Ezekiel Nkosi (1), 47-8; (3), 16-17.

[15] This account of the struggle to construct a new order on the tapping floor draws from Albert Makagula (1), 1-9, 22-4; (2), 6-8; Leslie Nhlapo (2), 13-27; (3), 15; (3 b), 12; Hendrik Nkosi (1), 1-25; Veli Majola 6-9, 13-14.

[16] Since Highveld Steel was a continuous-process plant, workers attended work on public holidays but were paid overtime rates.

[17] This and the next section are drawn from Koos Fouche (part one), 1-13, (part two), 4-5; Paxon Mokoena, 21, 32-39, 43; Leslie Nhlapo (3b), 14; (4), 3-5, 7, 22-3; (5), 15-18, 27-8; (6), 48-51; Hendrik Nkosi (2), 9-12, 15, 19; (3), 1-7, 12-13, 25; Daan van Niekerk, 6-8; *Fieldnotes: conversation with Mike Bowker, iron plant manager, 24/3 /94.*

[18] This section is based on *Fieldnotes: Highveld Steel shopstewards meeting, 9 December 1995*; *Fieldnotes 16/2/96*; Ambrose Mthembu (4), 3-9; Leslie Nhlapo (6), 30-5, 36-46, 59-62; Ezekiel Nkosi (5), 12-14, 23-4, 24-6; *Approach to multi-skilling: NUMSA* (prepared by shopstewards in March 1995; *Agreement of intent: efficiency improvement programme* (draft 6 July 1995 and final draft with *Structures and procedures*, 9 September 1995; *Workplace changes* (shopstewards' response to July draft of above, n.d., handwritten; *Into the bushes* (document prepared by shopstewards in early 1997 for bosberaad with management).

[19] When the shopstewards had finished negotiating the agreement, the national organiser and regional organiser responsible for Highveld Steel refused to sign on behalf of NUMSA, citing the clause on redundancies as unacceptable. The shopstewards were scathing in their response, pointing out that the organisers had failed to attend negotiations, that the clause stipulated consultation on retrenchment and that in any case the House Agreement laid down procedures for negotiating retrenchment, and arguing that their agreement was far superior to what the national union had achieved in the industrial council. Eventually NUMSA did sign.

[20] Leslie Nhlapo (6), 57-8.

[21] This account is based on the arbitrator's award (faxed mimeo, reference no. GAR 001597); *Business Day 1/11/ 96, 5/11/96, 12/11 / 96; The Star 7/11/ 96*; Highveld Steel 'Cautionary announcement', advertisement in *Business Day 13/11/ 96*; NUMSA advertisement in *Business Day 13/12/96*.