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FROM THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE TO THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION: THE UNION AND 'UNGOVERNABILITY' IN THE WORKPLACE[1]

Karl von Holdt

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has undergone momentous change over the past decade. The trade union movement in the shape of COSATU has played a central role in that change. During the late 1980s it became the most organised and visible component of the internal mass democratic movement. After 1990 it became the major alliance partner of the unbanned ANC.

On the one hand COSATU was an important advocate and organiser of the mass mobilisation campaigns which kept up the momentum of national political negotiations. It was the originator of the Reconstruction and Development Programme [RDP], later taken up by the ANC as the core of its election and governmental programme. COSATU also provided much of the organisation and the personnel for the ANC election campaign in 1994. At the same time the trade unions were trying to develop new policies and new strategies appropriate to the new conditions of a democratic - or democratising - society. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa [NUMSA] was at the forefront of developing such policies, focusing on reform of human resource policies and institutions, and on industrial strategy. These developments have been characterised by labour movement analysts as a shift from 'social movement unionism' to 'strategic unionism' founded on a strategy of 'radical reform'. (see Joffe et al, 1992; Von Holdt, 1992b; Von Holdt and Webster, 1992)

A fair amount has been written about these developments, but mostly from a macro-organisational perspective. Moreover, evidence for such commentary and analysis has been limited to policy documents and statements emanating from organisational headquarters and office-bearers. There have been no studies on whether strategic unionism is being taken up and implemented at the local level or in the workplace.

This paper - based on a larger research project in progress[2] - seeks to explore some of these questions. It focuses on the history of trade union organisation and struggle in one large workplace organised by NUMSA. This account of what has happened there and its meaning is based on extensive interviews with 28 union members, shopstewards and officials, union and company documents, and observation of union and shopsteward meetings from late 1993 to the end of 1995.

In part one I describe union organisation and struggle at Steelco during the 1980s. I analyse an internal conflict rooted in the dual identity of the labour movement as a collective bargaining agent on the one hand, and an agent in the national liberation struggle on the other. This dual identity - a response to the specific nature of racial managerial domination of the 'apartheid workplace regime' - produces an internal contradiction and 'ungovernability' in the union, corresponding to the 'ungovernability' in the workplace produced by resistance

politics.

In part two I turn to union organisation and struggles in the 1990s. I analyse the new union agenda of 'strategic unionism' in the workplace and problems it is encountering: managerial resistance, a re the-emergence of ungovernability, uncertainty and contestation over the meaning and goals of the union, and disempowerment of shopstewards.

I conclude with a discussion of the prospects for proactive or strategic unionism, and the possibilities of establishing this as a dynamic form of unionism in the workplace.

The workplace is a large steel company, Steelco, in a small mining and industrial town in Mpumalanga Province [formerly the Eastern Transvaal]. The company consists of seven divisions - three of them constituting the large Steel Works complex, three others sited in the same town as the Steel Works, and an iron mine some 150 km away. Steelco is the biggest employer in the town, and is owned by South Africa's biggest conglomerate, the Anglo American Corporation.

By far the greatest number of workers are employed at the Steel Works, and it is the centre of union activity. Employment figures are difficult to come by, as the company has refused to cooperate with this research. However, in 1987 NUMSA had some 3,500 members out of roughly 4,300 black employees. Since then there have been large retrenchments, and currently the union has 2,500 members. Five other unions are present in the company, of which two are significant: the all-white right-wing Mynwerkers Unie [MWU] with 900 members, and the non-racial South African Boilermakers Society [SABS] with between 100 and 200 members.

NUMSA is organised on the basis of shopstewards elected by their constituencies in each plant. The Steel Works and each of the divisions outside the Steel Works has a shopsteward committee. These committees meet together at times to discuss company-wide issues in the Joint Shopstewards Committee. The most important of the shopstewards committees is that in the Steel Works. NUMSA was itself formed through a merger of four metal unions in 1987. The biggest of these was the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) which started organising at the company in 1981.

Wages and conditions of work are regulated by a House Agreement under the auspices of the National Industrial Council for the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industries. Collective bargaining therefore takes place at company level between the company and all six recognised unions. Collective bargaining is fairly closely coordinated with industry-wide negotiations at the Industrial Council [IC], since all but one of the unions negotiates at the IC as well, and the company is represented in the employer association, Steel, Engineering Industry Federation of South Africa [SEIFSA]. Collective bargaining at the IC results in the Main Agreement which regulates wages and conditions for the entire industry except those companies covered by House Agreements, and certain exempted employers.

I. THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE: 1982-1990

A. THE UNION COMES TO STEELCO

Workers describe the regime at Steelco before MAWU arrived as structured by racism. There were no clear lines of management authority - any white worker could give instructions to any black worker. Black workers were expected to make tea and go on errands for whites, and wash their cars. Foremen exercised harsh discipline. They could dismiss workers for any offence, great or small, real or imagined. The threat and use of physical violence was ever present. These practices took place in a broader context in which power, skills, the division of labour, and incomes were racially structured. All managers were white and lived in the white town. African workers lived in the poorly serviced township and its hostels.

In the first years of its existence at Steelco, MAWU concentrated on establishing disciplinary procedures and grievance procedures on the shopfloor, and using these to fight arbitrary discipline and the right of whites to require black workers to perform services such as washing their cars. A shopsteward described this period:

> The first few years after the union as introduced, I would regard as the stage where people were still trying to understand more about this union, trying to see whether it has got some teeth... Then they realised that... if you have got a problem with your supervisor, the approach was not as it used to be where he would simply say to you. "Now go!"

Another shopsteward commented:

> Once some cases had been won, gradually people started to see their Messiah having now arrived on the workplace.

This "arrival" had a political dimension:

> It would be something highly unimaginable from the workers to see a shopsteward fighting to defend another worker by fighting management, who was a white person that nobody would dare challenge at that time. So the union was this new thing that is there now to come and challenge this system. Because of that you can put that political element - that there was this political perception from workers.

By the mid-1980s the workers at Steelco had become extremely militant. Workers participated in national stayaways over that period, as well as spearheading a local seven-day stayaway. They participated in national stoppages over wages, as well as local ones. They struck in support of workers at a neighbouring metal smelter when they were dismissed - and won their reinstatement. They launched a "midnight strike" when two workers were arrested on charges of intimidation, and charges were withdrawn. Between these major strikes were frequent stoppages and go slows over racism, discipline and assaults. In 1986 a strike committee was formed. Initially seen as a group of marshals whose role was to maintain discipline during strikes, it soon became the focus of militancy:

> In 1985 we had these mini-strikes where people would just scare management and then get scared themselves and get back to work... but 1987 was the worst. That was the year where we had a strike almost every week. I was elected the chairperson of the shopstewards committee at Highveld that year and I found myself in this mist, as the

> reasons for the strike would differ every time. But the real problem was that in 1986 we formed what we called a strike committee (made up of) all these really militant guys, guys that would always like to see action. For any petty thing they would just stop people and say, "no, today we are not going to work - there's a strike." So sometimes, as the chairperson, I would come to work and find there is a strike and I didn't know about it.

This period of "chaos" was marked by a rejection of the legitimacy of management authority and procedures. This was shaped by a conscious political alignment with the national liberation movement on the part of the worker leadership in the Works, as well as a more spontaneous response from the rank-and-file. The vice-chair of the shopstewards was also chairperson of the COSATU local, and a member of the townships 'coordinating committee' of community activists. According to him:

> The aims were quite political, and it was simply to overthrow the government...All these actions, boycotts, stayaways, they were strictly speaking directed at that objective...Before the Harare Declaration [in 1989, setting out the ANC's conditions for participating in political negotiations with the Pretoria government] the concept of negotiating was out of the question. There was no differentiation between the state and the companies, because whether you are in the company or in the township, if you engage in strike the police would be around.

According this shopsteward, negotiations at company level were not, strictly-speaking, negotiations.

> That atmosphere of negotiations was to put forward certain demands and strike for those demands...it was seen as inevitable to articulate whatever demands that you need, accept putting it before management for discussions, but...June 16 and other days were non-negotiable. We will simply stayaway. We will submit a demand that we want June 16 recognised as a public holiday and that's it. It is not going to be negotiated. On June 16 we will not come to work. We are planning with other structures that June 16 is the stayaway. Now the approach was that of confrontation.
>
> We acknowledge that we are working and that we have from time to time to use these people but...we never trusted them as much as they never trusted us. Whatever demands we are putting were seen as very unrealistic or that cannot be met. If it comes to a point where we need to strike we would simply strike. We were even reluctant to use the industrial council (and the procedures) of the LRA...We would put forward demands and we decide to strike and we strike the following day. We strike whether it is legal or illegal. We used to argue that there is no such thing as a legal strike on the part of the workers. Those processes were not relevant now. We are not only challenging the individual employers, we are even challenging the state in terms of the LRA.

The rank-and-file, too, rejected procedures, even if they had been negotiated by the union:

> If you talk to the shopfloor about a procedures, they don't know anything about

procedures, they have never been subjected to procedures in their past.

The union, then, both negotiated a new order on the shopfloor and engaged in constant challenges and disruptions to it. The consequence was not only disorder on the shopfloor, but a destabilisation of the union. As the shopsteward chairperson - who was ousted as a "moderate" in 1986 - put it:

> The shopsteward committee at the time was aware of the disciplinary code and the procedure of the company, and was finding it difficult to cope with the demands of workers who were now saying "away with your procedures. If we are saying we want this we want it tomorrow". They tried to make some sort of clash between the shopsteward council and the workers. They tried to develop some mistrust towards the shopstewards. Then that mistrust led to the formation of the strike committee. And then the strike committee also wanted now to impress the shopfloor and do more than the shopstewards.

The strike committee triggered off stoppage after stoppage, increasingly resorting to the *sjambok* (whip) to maintain discipline. Matters came to a head in 1987, when Steelco initiated a pre-emptive lock-out after the union held a strike ballot over its wage demands. The strike committee took control of the strike. The locked out workers met daily at the hostels, where the strike committee was based. Shopstewards had to report to the strike committee before reporting to members. Violent intimidation became rife as workers became divided and increasing numbers were inclined to accept the employers' terms:

> One had to be very careful that you do not say something that might be against the strike committee...I remember a guy who said in a general meeting, "let us fight while having food on the table for our children," meaning let us fight, but while working. And then he had very good support. People clapped their hands to show that they agree. After the meeting one member of the strike committee came to him and said , "Now, please, we would love to see you." They took him to block six, and there he was accused of dividing the workforce and he was flogged.

Eventually, as the majority turned against the strike committee, the shopstewards were able to regain control and lead the defeated workers back to work. Seventy eight strike committee members were dismissed for intimidation.

The conflict between the shopstewards and the strike committee expressed a structural tension. The shopstewards had to play out a contradictory role. On the one hand, they were involved in negotiating procedures, in monitoring these, and in strategising around collective bargaining goals. On the other - they saw themselves as agents of national liberation, rejecting the possibility of any accommodation with management which was regarded as an extension of the apartheid regime.[3]

The strike committee activists, on the other hand, did not negotiate with management and frequently accused shopstewrads of "selling out". They could engage in militant confrontation without being bound by procedures or concerns with the negotiating relationship. The strike committee at its height resembled a movement within the union: some 800 workers would

rally behind it and wear its T-shirts.

However, the strike committee was not only expressive of the structural tension within the union: it was also shaped by other cleavages. The most important was a tension between hostel dwellers and township residents. The strike committee was based in the hostels, and many of the leading shopstewards were township residents. This cleavage had ethnic undertones: the majority of migrant workers in the hostels were Pedi-speakers from the Northern Transvaal, whereas the township residents tended to be Zulu-speakers. There were also political overtones, which became prominent in 1989-90, when the shopsteward committee split in two. The UDF aligned Youth Congress and community activists had established strong links with militants in the hostels - and they were suspicious of the "workerism" of NUMSA and the leading shopstewards. Youths were prominent in the activities of the strike committee, together with older migrant workers.

These currents would persist in the evolution of organisation and struggle at Steelco. In 1990 the shopstewards split into the township committee and the hostel committee. The township shopstewards saw themselves as defending the constitution of the union against what they called *bhovas*: ugly dogs that are anti-union. The hostel committee, for their part, accused the township shopstewards of being too close to management, of accepting bribes, corruption and being anti-ANC. The union head office had to establish a commission to conduct an investigation and oversee fresh elections.

B: THE APARTHEID WORKPLACE REGIME AND UNGOVERNABILITY

Relations in the workplace were structured by a distinctive workplace regime - the apartheid workplace regime. I take the workplace regime to be a social structure as defined by Moodie. Social structure, he argues, should be thought of as allocating rights and resources unequally among differently socialised actors:

> Once structures have been established, dominants' maintenance of control as well as subdominants' resistance involves strategic action within established but contested patterns of social interaction on changing historical terrain... Actors experience structures as formally or informally patterned rules of conduct, more or less firmly sanctioned, which exist outside of them, both constrain and empower their social practices and distribute material goods according to regular procedures... (Moodie, 1994:275)

Moodie regards social structures as "sites of struggle... always in contestation and subject to interpretation." (ibid:3)

The apartheid workplace regime, together with oppression by apartheid beyond the workplace, generated a new form of unionism - political unionism, which was based on linkages with community and youth organisations, and increasingly with the liberation movement in the form of the UDF and the banned ANC and SACP[4]. Political unionism became increasingly militant, coordinating and participating in a range of mass actions. But political unionism did not only focus on struggles beyond the workplace - it also added a new dimension to struggles within the workplace. The apartheid workplace regime was regarded

as an extension of the broader apartheid regime. Racial or national oppression defined relations inside and outside the workplace. Increasingly the legitimacy of the workplace regime was challenged to through confrontation and direct action. This was an attack on management and an attempt to weaken apartheid in general. Procedures negotiated with management also came to lack legitimacy, despite having been negotiated. The social structure of the workplace regime was in profound crisis. It had produced an actor which sought to destroy it. The resistance of the subdominants could no longer be contained within "established but contested patterns of social interaction" - nor could they be constrained by "formally or informally patterned rules of conduct, more or less firmly sanctioned". This is a state of disorder, or - in the words of the shopstewards - "chaos", where mutually binding agreements cannot be negotiated because the parties are seeking to defend or establish radically incompatible social structures. I call this ungovernability[5]

However, even this ungovernability was contradictory. For on the one hand, the union led or was drawn into a range of symbolic confrontations with, and assaults on, the apartheid workplace order; while on the other, it was engaged in collective bargaining and dispute, grievance and discipline processes within agreed procedures, and over concrete ends. There was a continual tension between negotiating order, and contesting definite outcomes within the patterned rules and codes of that order, and the eruption of struggles and activities that broke through the rules, codes and procedures of what was essentially a provisional and illegitimate order, in the name of a struggle to establish a profoundly different order.

The prevalence of disorder, of ungovernability, in this period was not without consequence for the union's own internal structure and collective identity. It became extremely difficult for the union to maintain itself as a coherent social structure, with its own internal codes, procedures and goals. Sharp conflicts, sometimes violent conflict, emerged among shopstewards and workers - signs of a profound contestation among members over the meaning and goals of their movement. At times the union itself became ungovernable as when it split into two shopsteward committees.[6]

II. THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION

In 1990 the ANC was unbanned. After three years of negotiations, the ANC, the governing National Party, and other parties agreed on a new, non-racial, democratic interim constitution. On 27 April 1994 the first democratic elections in the history of South Africa were held, and the ANC won with 63% of the vote. A Government of National Unity was formed under the rules of the interim constitution, consisting of the three political parties which had won more than 5% of the vote.

What would the impact of these fundamental political changes be on the very trade union movement which had done so much to bring them about? The identity, symbols and strategies of the unions had been forged in the struggle against apartheid in the workplace and in the broader society. The result was political unionism, whose manifestation in the workplace has been the subject of analysis in part one of this paper.

How does political unionism respond to the consolidation of democracy? Is it able to develop new identities, new strategies and symbols? To what extent does it continue to be shaped by

preceding dynamics and strategies?

In the second part of this paper I seek to explore these questions as they play themselves out in Steelco. In the light of the conclusions of part one, these questions can be posed more concretely: have union struggles changed, or have they continued to take the form of resistance politics and ungovernability? Has the union succeeded in overcoming the legacy of internal instability and ungovernability inherited from the 1980s? Can it fashion the diverse constituencies and interests in the workplace into a unified collective agent, or do new conditions, new aspirations and new strategies impose new strains and divisions?

Before pursuing these questions at Steelco, it is necessary to describe broader shifts in NUMSA's policies in response to new conditions. These would have a considerable impact on the union at Steelco.

A. NEW UNION GOALS

As a national trade union NUMSA has engaged in strenuous internal debates, polemic and research in developing new goals in the changing South Africa. At an important policy workshop in late 1990, NUMSA members and officials discussed the new challenges, possibilities and responsibilities in a South Africa moving towards democracy. The prevailing view which emerged in the workshop was that the unions should "initiate and lead the formulation of economic policy, rather than simply responding to the initiatives of the state and management." This would imply the trade unions developing policy on, and engaging with, a restructuring of the economy, at macro, industrial and workplace levels. The goals of the working class in such a restructuring were summarised by the workshop as :

> increasing employment; a living wage and income and job security; meeting society's basic needs; increasing the power of the working class; orientating the economy to take account of international economic conditions and the world market.

Participants in the workshop stressed that:

> A working class strategy for industrial restructuring and economic development would have to focus on *increasing* the organised strength and consciousness, and the skills and control, of the working class, or it would never lead in the direction of socialism.

At the time I commented that these ideas indicated a shift from the "politics of resistance" to the "politics of reconstruction" in the trade union movement. (von Holdt, 1991). The attempt to establish a new form of proactive unionism has also been called 'strategic unionism.' (Joffe et al, 1992; von Holdt, 1992b; von Holdt and Webster, 1992)

By the beginning of 1993 NUMSA had adopted a new negotiating strategy based on some of these ideas. At the same time, through COSATU, it had been an important participant in the process of drawing up the Reconstruction and Development Program [RDP] - which had been prefigured in the 1990 workshop by discussion of the need for a Reconstruction Accord between the union movement and the ANC. The new NUMSA bargaining strategy set goals to be achieved over a period of three years rather than annual bargaining goals as had

previously been the case.

The thrust of the bargaining strategy was to establish a new framework linking grading, training, skills development and pay in the industry. These changes would be linked to new forms of work organisation referred to as teamwork. Broadly speaking, the aim was to move from the present highly differentiated, racist and anomalous system of 14 grades, to a 5 grade system based on skills levels and known as broad banding. Workers would have a clear career path up the grading ladder based on acquiring new skills through training. Wage gaps would be narrowed and wage levels would be determined by the level of a workers' skill.

Workers would benefit from a narrower wage gap, access to a career path through regular access to training which would mean upgraded skills and wages, and payments according to skill qualification rather than the actual job performed. Restructuring would be based on more skilled work and higher value added as the workforce became more skilled. The shift away from narrow job demarcation entailed in broad banding, would open the way for flexibility and teamwork based on multi-skilling and so would allow for a more competitive industry as well as more satisfying work for workers. Other aspects of new union strategy included seeking to negotiate industrial policy for different sectors in the metal industry and negotiating a framework for implementing productivity improvements in the workplace.

The union has made some progress in negotiating framework agreements on these policies at the national industrial council for the metal and engineering industry since 1993. (Von Holdt 1995a; Maserumule 1995; Collins 1996) However, in large part the NUMSA plan is a programme for reform *in the workplace*. It is a programme for establishing a new kind of governance; it is not a programme for resisting governance, for ungovernability. How would this new proactive programme be taken up in the workplace described in part one? Would the shopstewards be able to formulate a strategy for winning these demands? Would they be able to win support for them among workers? Could they induce management to accept a new agenda of negotiations? What would be the impact on this new strategy of the history of trade unionism at Steelco: of resistance, of ungovernability in the workplace and within the union?

Steelco seems quite well suited as a test case for the questions posed above. Towards the end of 1993 union officials at the NUMSA head office focused on Steelco as a pilot project. Two of the Steelco shopstewards were well versed in the aims of the new union strategy, and one in particular had spent three months as a participant in an intensive union education, research and policy programme, which included travel to Europe, to develop the outlines of the new strategy. The shopstewards referred to, the chairperson of the Joint Shopsteward Committee, and the chairperson of the Steel Works Shopstewards Committee - expressed their understanding of the strategy and the problems it might face.

> In the 1980s we embarked solely on resistance, we never wanted to concern ourselves with production, as part of the struggle to bring down the system of apartheid, economically and otherwise. But yes, now that we are having a democratic government, we want to see this democratic government succeeding, and of course no political power can be maintained if there is no economic power. So I therefore believe that the culture definitely has to change from the culture of resistance and

ungovernability to the culture of productivity.

> You ask me if we are going to succeed in doing this? I hope we are going to succeed though one must say that there are problems. It is difficult for the workers to change from that culture, the workers still believe that they must always resist anything that comes with management, be it right or wrong. A culture of resistance is inherent in the heart and mind of the workers. I am sure to change that culture there has to be a process of learning.

The second shopsteward is more cautious about the "culture of productivity." He defines the goals of restructuring, from the union's point of view, as being:

> to give more control, more power to the workers in the activities...to make work more easier for workers and...to change the relationship between the management and workers [and to ensure that workers and] those outside that particular industry or factory [benefit from the process].

He sees productivity and quality gains as "incidental" to restructuring:

> Should there be co-operation between the management and workers, the end results would be more productivity and more quality goods....As I see it, through this approach the union will at the end be able to take power or to take control of the factory. But I do not think that will ever, ever happen through the strategy....I think the union must come up with a very radical stand and push forward issues and seriously take issues to action if there are no clear agreements. This is the debate that even within the union circles is being avoided nowadays.

Indeed, developments at Steelco since 1993 have been complex - and mixed. It will be useful to give an overview of these developments before going into a more detailed analysis.

In the House Agreement negotiations Steelco has followed to the letter the general employers' position in Main Agreement negotiations. It has agreed to reduce the 14 grades to 5 by 1996[7], but it has not agreed to reducing the wage differentials between the top and the bottom. The company refused to negotiate any other aspect of restructuring, but began unilaterally to implement its own initiatives.

To this the shopstewards responded with their classical weapon: non-compliance and resistance. Only in one site have shopstewards managed to wage - and win - a more proactive strategy for training, upgrading and teamwork.

On the other hand, after launching their first successful wage strike in the history of the union at Steelco (a joint strike by black and white workers in 1993), shopstewards have been unable to launch any consistent struggles at Steelco. Instead, there has been a resurgence of militant wildcat actions directed as often against the shopstewards as against the company: a resurgence, in other words, of ungovernability on the shopfloor and in the union.

Finally, towards the end of 1994, the company recognised that it was unable to proceed with restructuring without involving - or perhaps neutralising - the union in some way. As this

happened it became clear that NUMSA's strategy was itself beset by serious difficulties. The union had been unable to translate the "culture of resistance" into a new form of struggle. It had failed to "push forward issues and seriously take issues to action."

Now, with some sense of the thrust of developments, the focus shifts to a detailed analysis.

B. THE NEW GOALS AND RESTRUCTURING WORK AT STEELCO

The union first tabled its demands at Steelco in the 1993 round of House Agreement negotiations. Management stalled in responding to these, but began unilaterally to implement "participative management" projects over the next six months. In late 1993 management informed the shopstewards that 'green areas' would be implemented in all departments.[8] Some months later, in early 1994, management again called shopstewards to a meeting to be briefed on TPQ [Total Production Quality], which was to be introduced. Shopstewards commented that it was not clear what the implications of TPQ were for workers, that they rejected anything that was not fully negotiated with them, and that they could only involve themselves in productivity improvements if there were material gains for workers. The union wanted a comprehensive strategy for restructuring work, not piecemeal tactics. Meanwhile they would campaign against ' green areas'.

At the same time one of the more astute managers tried to introduce a form of team work and multi-skilling in his division. The two shear lines in the plate mill have different kinds of cutting machinery and the operators are graded differently. The manager proposed that the operators on the two lines form a team, so that all operators would be trained to operate all machines. As each worker would be able to work the equipment on either of the lines, they would be able to cover for each other as the need arose, or be deployed to whichever line was busiest. The shopstewards were enthusiastic, on condition that all operators were regraded to the highest grade and paid accordingly. When this was rejected by senior management, the shopstewards refused to cooperate with the project and nothing came of it.

In this struggle of resistance against management proposals, the shopstewards counter-posed their own ideas based on the NUMSA programme: skilling through training, upgrading of all members of teams accompanied by higher pay, and the removal of supervision. Management refused to entertain these ideas. But in one particular case, the chairperson of the shopstewards was able to work together with some of the most militant workers in the company, to implement this vision.

In late 1992 it came to this particular shopsteward's attention that the tappers on the tapping floor of the Iron Plant were putting forward demands for upgrading and increased wages, and backing this with stoppages. The tapping floor is the hottest and most dangerous part of the Steel Works. Workers work in tapping teams below the furnaces in which iron is smelted. Each team consists of nine workers. When instructed by the foreman, the team opens the tapping hole at the bottom of the furnace and guides the molten iron through 'launders', a kind of gutter constructed from bricks and sand. In the launder the slag is separated from the iron and the molten iron pours over the edge of the tapping floor into giant pots below, which are then driven to the Steel Plant.

The dispute had its origins in the late 1980s. The tappers were on Grade 14, the lowest grade in the company. In each team there was a supervisor with the authority to control the team and to open the tapping hole in the furnace. The supervisor was on Grade 13. The workers wanted a wage increase because of the conditions under which they worked, and they launched a series of stoppages to back these demands. Eventually the workers were promoted to Grade 13, but the supervisor was promoted to Grade 10. The workers were still dissatisfied as the supervisors had been promoted further, and they wanted more money. The stoppages continued. When one of them was summonsed to a disciplinary inquiry "they would not go to the enquiry alone, these guys would leave their tools there and all of them would come and say we are going to come and witness this enquiry."

The workers also started using work-to-rule tactics. They refused to do the supervisor's job of opening the tap hole. If the supervisor was absent, which appears to have happened quite frequently, work would come to a standstill, notwithstanding the fact that all the workers in the tapping team knew how to perform this task!

> If it is during night shifts and he is absent, no one is going to open the tap hole, and the operator cannot move from the furnace at the top to come in and open the tap hole. So the operator would phone the superintendent. The superintendent, not knowing the skills of opening the tap hole, would phone the manager and then this guy would come down and he would start begging these guys to open the hole there and these guys would say, "Look, you do it. Once the tap hole is opened we will work. But now the tap hole is closed and there is no one to open it."

Then management would instruct a supervisor working at another furnace to come and tap at the furnace where the supervisor was absent:

> These guys said, "Look, you do not touch this thing. Once you touch it we move, you will clean and do everything." Hey, then those were problems. So from there then we started having real negotiations with the manager.

Management then agreed to upgrade the workers by one grade, but at the same time reduce the team from 9 to 7 workers because some operations had been mechanised. At this point the shopsteward then suggested to the workers on the tap floor that they work out a detailed proposal to move towards team work. This proposal entailed removing supervision and upgrading all the workers to Grade 10. The workers on each furnace would work as a team electing and rotating their team leader, and each worker would be trained to do a range of tasks. They proposed that workers should receive training on how to open the tap hole (although this was a job they already knew how to perform), how to "shoot" the hole open when it gets blocked, how to patch the launders through which the molten iron runs, how to do welding repair work on the launder, and to change the safety screens without calling a foreman or artisan.

> There you have a superintendent, you have got a foreman, you have got a furnace operator, and then you have got these guys on the floor here. And then the foreman on the furnace floor is the one now who would give instructions to these guys to open or not to open. 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 on how to do this work, right. Remove this foreman, this foreman must never be in contact with these people. The operator himself, let it be his responsibility to move from the room there and tell these guys that in five minutes time everyone must be ready, we are tapping. So that when there are problems then these guys can talk to the operator and say "OK, can you slow down or can you do this," unlike the foreman who just gives instructions and goes away - when there are problems there is no one to talk to. So the foreman was removed - they agreed to this. It was a tough battle. Management said, "No, this foreman is important." We said, "No, he has got no role here, he must just co-ordinate with the furnace operator and once there is an agreement between him and the operator that they must open, then he must just leave." The furnace operator then must talk to these guys because he will be always in the pulpit [work station], he cannot go away.

The workers also proposed that management remove the mechanical grab and that the number of workers in a team should remain at 9. The workers pointed out that the grab frequently experienced breakdowns, and to prove their point, they started a work-to-rule:

> These guys were saying, "Look, if you say this grab is going to work then it must work. At no stage must this grab not work....immediately it is not working we stop working too, till such time we get extra people."

Due to the strategic nature of work on the tapping floor, management was forced to accede to these demands. The foremen were removed, workers received two months' training (the first training that any of them had ever received from the company, although some had been there for 10 to 15 years), they were upgraded to Grade 10, and they worked as a team electing and rotating team leaders. Tap floor workers commented that they had won higher pay, they were no longer oppressed and overworked by the foreman, and they could collectively control the way they worked. Some 160 workers in 3 shifts were affected by these changes.

This was a partial but significant victory in terms of the union's new bargaining agenda. It combined well-known methods of struggle - militant action over wages, tactics to undermine management, resistance to the foreman's authority - with new proactive goals focused on new ways of doing work, upgrading and training. But while this was a significant victory, it was the only one. Management flatly refused to contemplate shopstewards' proposals elsewhere, and the latter were unable to mobilise similar struggles. We shall return to the reasons for this later.

C. 'UNGOVERNABILITY' RE-EMERGES

Meanwhile, the old tradition of ungovernability re-emerged in different ways and in different sections of the company during 1994. Militant actions appeared to be directed against the union or the shopstewards as much as against management. An example from the Iron Plant, including the tapping floor where the victory outlined above had been won, will illustrate this.

Prior to South Africa's general election on 27 April 1994, the shopstewards at Steelco had reached agreement with management that there would be no stoppage or stayaway during the

election period, but that management would provide transport for workers on duty to go to the polling stations. During the week before the elections very few of the more experienced shopstewards remained in the Works, as they had taken time off to campaign and organise voting for the ANC. Immediately before election day workers in the Iron Plant called a general meeting and decided on a stayaway for that day, ignoring the agreement reached by the shopstewards and management. On returning to work after the stayaway, they found that a handful of workers had in fact attended work on election day. They decided to discipline them.

To understand what happened, it is important to note that after team work had been established as outlined above, workers on the tapping floor reached agreement with the Iron Plant manager that they would elect a disciplinary committee to maintain discipline among workers. This committee would have powers to suspend without pay workers found guilty of absenteeism, arriving late at work and drunkenness at work. Management agreed to end all of its own disciplinary activities. Leading shopstewards had warned management against this arrangement, but it went ahead. After the elections, the disciplinary committee sentenced workers who had attended work during the stayaway to between one and two weeks suspension without pay. Management objected strongly. Finally, after protracted negotiations, agreement was reached that the committee would be dissolved and those workers who had been suspended would be paid.

But these events in the Iron Plant were linked to something else - the emergence of a "committee of concern" which claimed that there was a widespread dissatisfaction with shopstewards among the grassroots membership in the Steel Works. They claimed that shopstewards were not servicing the members, that they were seen talking to managers but seldom reporting back, that they had been 'bought' by management, and that one sign of this was that management had agreed that the chairperson of the shopstewards would be seconded to the ANC election campaign for a period of three months before the elections. These echo some of the claims and allegations made by the remnants of the strike committee based in the hostels after the 1987 lockout/strike. At least two of the members of the committee of concern had also been members of the strike committee in the late 1980s. Thus, older traditions of conflict and suspicion of shopstewards re-emerged in a new context.

The committee of concern claimed that it had mass support and that it would oust the shopstewards. When shopstewards from the rest of the Steel Works tried to intervene in events in the Iron Plant they were told that they should keep out as these were issues of the workers of the Iron Plant, not of the union. Management called the union and expressed concern that the shopstewards in the Iron Plant had lost credibility, and that events were moving out of control.

At this point shopstewards were clearly alarmed that the conflicts of the late 1980s were resurfacing in the company. Some felt that it was the same people with a similar agenda to the strike committee and the hostel committee of the 1980s. The chairperson of the Joint Shopstewards Committee talked about "enemy agents." The training officer in the Iron Plant, who had been chairperson of the shopsteward committee in the mid-1980s until he was replaced by a more militant shopsteward, was talking about the concerned committee when he commented that:

> Some guys came into my office and they said to me, "Now, we want you back." I said, "Are you saying I must avail myself for the elections?" They said, "No! We are kicking them out - we have got a list of new people who must serve us now on the shopsteward council."

He refused and comments that:

> At Steelco, if I want to be a shopsteward tomorrow I must say the current chairperson is a piece of rubbish today... that is how I will get in.

The chairperson of the Steel Works Shopstewards placed a large portion of the blame at the door of management. Management was happy, he argues, to set up a disciplinary committee and 'green areas' in the Iron Plant as a way of bypassing the union:

> The problem is of such a nature that you cannot make a distinction any more between a shopsteward and a 'green area' group. There is no role for shopstewards at Iron Plant now. Management is confronted with many people coming to them with complaints and complaints and complaints. So, at the end, the shopsteward is no longer having a role. From that 'green area' people can group themselves and approach management if they want one, two, three, four. That is exactly what we told them [management], that if you do not clearly define the role of the shopsteward there, you are going to have problems. Now they want the union to go back to the members and say look you must do everything through the shopsteward, but the workers are not going to agree.

Shopstewards also blamed management's refusal to allow the union time to hold general and shopsteward meetings, which made it very difficult to keep all shopstewards and members on the shopfloor informed about developments.

After a meeting between representatives of the committee and the shopstewards, where the concerned group demanded to be included in the shopsteward committee as shopstewards (a demand rejected by the shopstewards on the grounds that shopstewards have to be elected by specific constituencies) a general meeting was held in the Steel Works. There the attempts of the concerned committee to raise complaints about the shopstewards found no support from the rank and file.

The comments of the chairperson of the Steel Work's Shopstewards offer interesting insights into the theme of rebellion against the union:

> These guys wanted to come with their grievances. The workers just said to them, "Look, if you have got any grievances, take them to your shopstewards. This is not the place where we are going to discuss these grievances. These are the shopstewards that were elected and you are going to stick to them. If you have got problems with your shopsteward go to your plant and elect another shopsteward, do not come with shit here."
>
> People that are wanting to revolt against the union, we call them *bhova*, and a *bhova* is a big ugly dog, now each and everyone who wants to revolt against the union, we call him a

bhova. Now all the time, it was the people who stayed in the hostel, those are the ones who never wanted the union to operate as it is operating now. Now you have got a new kind of *bhova* that is more localised. You have got guys from the township that are having serious complaints about the union. So now these guys from the hostel were saying, "These guys from the townships must be dealt with now, in this fuckin' meeting, you must just *bliksem* [lit. lightning; thrash, beat] them." And they were generalising that everyone from the township must just be *bliksemmed*, we cannot deal with such people. And these are the guys who were real *bhovas* in the 1987, 1988 struggles. Now the thing is turning around.... one guy was one of the biggest *bhovas* you have ever met in your life.... He was the first guy who spoke there, speaking against these other *bhovas* and saying, "No, you guys look, you are going to meet with something. We are going to fuckin' sjambok you. You keep quiet." So meaning that now he in a way has been educated, he understands the union now. You can leave him in whatever situation. He will be able to defend the union.

Apart from a number of wildcat strikes and stoppages in different plants and divisions of Steelco during 1994, there were several incidents that, like the action in the Iron Plant, had a specifically anti-union dimension. In one division, for example, workers struck for two days over anomalies in the grading system. They rejected their senior shopsteward on the grounds that he was not dealing with their problems in the grading system (he has since resigned as a shopsteward and turned to preaching). They marched to the union offices demanding that local organisers improve their servicing of workers' complaints, and threatened to withdraw from the union. The chairperson of the Steel Works commented that the problem was that neither the shopstewards nor the local organisers understood the current grading system or the union policy on grading.

A month later there was a two-week strike in the Flat Product division at the Steel Works. Once again, the NUMSA shopstewards in Flat Products were pushed aside, and the strike was led by a small union called NUSAAW. NUSAAW is a splinter union with some 100 members, which was formed by former shopstewards and members of the strike committee who were dismissed for intimidation after the lockout/strike in 1987. The strike centred on a demand for a wage increase for all workers in Flat Products, a highly unprocedural demand as wage negotiations for the entire company had already been concluded. As with the earlier events in the Iron Plant, shopstewards were told to keep out of the strike as it concerned workers at Flat Products alone.

At one point in this strike a heated general meeting was held at the Steel Works, during which the concerned group again raised a number of accusations against shopstewards, and one worker suggested that all shopstewards should be killed immediately. Eventually, however, shopstewards managed to regain control. The meeting did, however, elect some members of the concerned committee to work with the shopstewards in trying to sort out the problems in Flat Products.

What accounts for this re-emergence of instability and ungovernability on the shopfloor?

In the first place, the apartheid workplace regime has scarcely changed. While apartheid as a political doctrine is no more, in the workplace its legacy continues in the form of low pay,

racist differentials, authoritarian management and racism (it also, of course, continues to exist in the spatial organisation of the town, in which most Africans and whites live in separate residential areas). Although an increasing number of black foremen are being appointed, racism and racial conflict are constant themes of shopfloor relations. This is the case in a context of far-reaching political change, which generates expectations of a change at work. There is a pervasive contestation between shopstewards and management about whether there will be change, and what sort of change it will be. Shopstewards want to negotiate a comprehensive new approach, but management refused, and instead unilaterally introduced Green Areas. Shopstewards campaigned successfully against this, but found that in some plants management has undermined the role of shopstewards by encouraging other channels of communication.

Management continues to deny the union rights in the workplace that many commentators have assumed to be widespread in the 1980s. There is, for example, no provision for general meetings during working hours; shopstewards get limited time-off for meetings and there is no paid leave for shopsteward training; there is no full-time shopsteward and shopstewards do not have access to specific facilities such as a shopstewards' office and telephone. This creates a situation where shopstewards are continually challenging and defying procedures laid down by management. For example, shopstewards regularly call general meetings during working time and this constitutes a work stoppage. Management introduces a tougher disciplinary code, and shopstewards campaign to make it unworkable. Workers enter directly into the contestation over this change - they want the day off to vote, they want their grades sorted out, they want more money.

At the same time, the most active shopstewards are also involved in a tremendous range of activities outside the company. Many simultaneously participate in union structures, ANC elections, local development forums, and the transformation of local government structures. They are not at work consistently enough to take up workers' grievances, to campaign for their new programme, to build organisation.

New personal aspirations also enter the picture. The chairperson of the Joint Shopstewards Committee left soon after the elections to work for the new provincial government. The chairperson and the secretary of the Steel Works committee are now local government councillors (after hours). Leading shopstewards are offered positions as foremen and even managers. The regional organiser - a former shopsteward - has taken a management job in another metal company.

Workers on the shopfloor are aware of these new opportunities for shopstewards. Some resent this or fear that the union is being abandoned; others see an opportunity to challenge shopstewards and become leaders themselves, and so to gain access to new opportunities in turn. Shopstewards are accused of "selling out" to management. Some of the concerned group seem to have been motivated by the belief that if they became shopstewards they would get access to the opportunity to establish themselves as independent contractors to the company, which is currently contracting-out a range of services.

The rapidly changing political situation, together with new personal opportunities and aspirations, seem to have opened up a new uncertainty about the identity and purpose of the

trade union. There is a sharpening contestation by different groups over the leadership, meaning and identity of the union. Strikers in the Iron Plant and in Flat Products told the shopstewards to "keep out" as their struggles concerned workers in those plants, not the union. Conflicts take the form of different claims on the union "tradition." Some migrant workers feel the union has been taken over by artisans from the township, although it was started by migrants in the hostels. Artisan shopstewards believe they represent the authentic union tradition based on union policies, strategies and constitution, and that their challengers are *bhovas* - anti-union "big ugly dogs." This situation is aggravated by the company attempting to bypass the union by setting-up other channels of communication such as 'green areas'.

In this situation of general contestation - among and between management, shopstewards and workers over change, and among workers over the leadership and meaning of the union - it is not surprising that workers draw on a repertoire of actions that developed out of the resistance struggles of the 1980s.

Finally, the shopstewards have been unable to root the union's new bargaining programme on the shopfloor, or mobilise a union campaign as a way to build a profile for the organisation and forge a new unity. This is partly because management has provided no space for this, and shopstewards have been so busy outside the company. Partly it is also because many shopstewards appear to lack a sense of direction. Given the number of union members in the Steel Works, it should have some 50 shopstewards. There are only about eight who are active. Shopstewards meetings are regularly attended by about 15 shopstewards. NUMSA's new programme is extremely complex, and most of the shopstewards do not feel confident that they understand it.

This became very clear when the stalemate appeared to crack towards the end of 1994.

D. CRACKS IN THE STALEMATE, CRACKS IN UNION STRATEGY

Management eventually acknowledged that Green Areas were not working, and that it could not proceed with restructuring without involving the union in some way. Three joint union-management technical committees were established. One was to draft a procedural agreement governing union-management relations at Steelco. The second committee was to work on restructuring, which entailed looking at job redesign, multi-skilling, profit sharing and work reorganisation. The third committee was to develop a new grading system based on five grades as proposed by NUMSA, and regrade all the jobs at Steelco in line with this.

Thus significant progress had been made in opening space for the union to become involved in restructuring. Yet the union strategy was running into its own difficulties. Of the two Head Office officials who had spoken about prioritising work on Steelco, one resigned from the union at the end of 1993, and the other was caught up in national industrial council negotiations. This was in addition to the loss of the regional organiser and shopsteward chairperson referred to above. This left the chairperson of the Steelwork's Shopstewards as perhaps the only shopsteward in Steelco - and one of the few trade unionists in the region - with a complex understanding of NUMSA strategy and the ability to implement its policies.

In a meeting with the shopstewards in November 1994, this shopsteward reported back in detail on his work in the grading technical committee. He also reported that the fellow shopsteward who was supposed to sit in this committee had stopped attending meetings. The shopstewards who were supposed to attend the restructuring committee were also failing to attend its meetings. He reported that he also needed to support the shopsteward in the procedural agreement committee. He summed up:

> Work is killing me. I am alone. The last meeting of the grading committee was cancelled because I was not there. I am carrying my union, the other unions and management. It is killing me.

It is clear that most of the shopstewards are feeling increasingly disempowered and unable to deal with the new issues the union is becoming involved in. The report-back meeting was attended by only 15 out of the 50 shopstewards at Steelco. In the course of the three hour workshop, discussion was almost entirely dominated by the chairperson.

Apart from feeling over-extended, the chairperson also feels that both he and the union are entering uncharted waters without sufficient expert backup:

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

He also raised a more fundamental strategic question.

> We have no guidelines about approaching these forums. The technical committees are sort of consultative, we are not sure if they are negotiating forums. Are we supposed to reach consensus? Or does our view of socialism involve struggle - can we strive for real participation in decisions? Or can we only participate on the shopfloor in Green Areas? We never negotiated these issues in a bargaining forum, and you find that in the technical committees you are not negotiating, you have to be diplomatic.

With inadequate support from outside, the NUMSA policies at Steelco seem to be contributing to a serious organisational malaise. Shopstewards feel disempowered and confused, and tend to become passive. This makes it difficult to maintain a dynamic relationship with the rank-and-file. The shopstewards are unable to show tangible or clearly understood benefits from their strategy. Shopstewards advocating complex, long-term strategies, without clear benefits in the short-term, are in a relatively weak position. Shopstewards who do not even understand the strategy are in an even weaker position. This opens the shopfloor structures to all kinds of conflicts and division. The shopstewards' leadership is open to challenge from groups prepared to mobilise the impatience and anger of the rank-and-file.

The same problem is replicated in the union structures outside the workplace. For example, a NUMSA Regional Congress was held in March 1994 to formulate a mandate for the union central committee on negotiating demands for the 1994 round of National Industrial Council

negotiations. At the meeting it became clear that only one out of the four NUMSA locals in the region had actually discussed the documentation circulated by the general secretary as the basis for discussion.

The regional organiser reminded congress delegates about the changes in bargaining strategy that had been made the previous year, and of some of the problems arising from it:

> Last year NUMSA completely changed the approach to collective bargaining. We adopted a three-year programme and established ongoing working groups instead of once-off negotiations. We have a problem within the union - our representative to the negotiating committee does not give report backs in this region. We do not know what is being discussed where....it is important to avoid the problems of last year - now members are resisting the implications of the three-year plan adopted last year. We should not rush a decision when the members do not understand...

The congress failed to take any decisions on bargaining matters. This meant that the regional representatives in the union's central committee meeting had no mandate from the region, with the result that the region had made no contribution to the bargaining proposals and demands that were put to employers at the Industrial Council one week later.

This was not an isolated example. In several other meetings during the course of 1994 shopstewards and officials repeatedly complained that they no longer know what is being negotiated, or what is contained in agreements, or even what union policy is. One of the problems is that the negotiations have become increasingly technical and complex. In 1993 and 1994, unlike in previous years, there was no attempt to mobilise workers or launch a campaign around the Industrial Council negotiation[9]. So far the new union bargaining policy has not been translated into a campaign that can be run in the plants.

CONCLUSION: UNGOVERNABILITY, WORKPLACE CHANGE AND UNION IDENTITY

A common thread that runs through the NUMSA experience at Steelco in the 1980 and 1990s is the continuous struggle of the union - through the shopstewards - to establish itself as the collective representative of the workers. From the mid 1980s the shopstewards were under threat of being outflanked by more militant groupings in the form of the 'strike committee' and later the 'hostel committee'. Only the assertion of Head Office authority in the form of a commission of enquiry was able to resolve this problem.

Many of these tensions and conflicts re-emerged during 1993-94. Shopstewards were challenged by the 'committee of concern', by the splinter union NUSAAW that had emerged out of the earlier conflicts, and by wildcat actions in which the union was rejected as an outside agent with no stake or interest in the concerns of the workers in the particular location where action was being organised.

On the face of it there is a continuity of 'ungovernability' in the workplace and within the union. The earlier struggles established a tradition of opposition to, and criticism of, the shopstewards. There was a repertoire of accusations, actions and structures available to

disgruntled individuals or groups, which could be drawn on to mobilise challenges to the shopstewards. Underlying this is another constant theme - of conflicting interests of migrant workers in the hostels, and residents of the townships. This cleavage is reinforced by a range of other differences: many of the migrants tend to occupy the least-skilled jobs, while most of the artisans - from whom the most prominent shopstewards of the late 1980s and early 1990s were drawn - are township residents; most township residents are Zulu speakers, while the hostels are dominated by Pedi speakers from Northern Province (formerly Northern Transvaal). The hostels are tightly-knit communities of men who hail from the same rural areas; who live, cook and work together. MAWU was initially organised in the hostels; the strike committee was based there; the hostel committee of shopstewards continued their tradition.

However, there are important differences between the earlier conflicts and the later challenges. The strike committee had a more durable structure and a highly mobilised constituency, mostly based in the hostels. In its heyday in 1987, the strike committee consisted of some 800 workers - a quarter of NUMSA's membership in the company. The hostel committee of 1989 and 1990 recognisably continued this tradition. It also had informal political links to the UDF and ANC.

In contrast, the 'concerned committee' and NUSAAW lacked a mobilised base. They consisted of small groups which were able to take advantage of spontaneous actions, grievances and fears among various groups of workers. They did not in any ongoing sense base themselves among the hostel workers - many of their most prominent members were township residents. For their part, hostel workers would at times reject the 'concerned committee' as troublemakers from the township who were destabilising the union and should be *bliksemmed*. [thrashed, hit] At other times their fears that the union or shopstewards no longer represented their interests, did not attend to their problems, and no longer "belonged" to them, made them supportive of the accusations of the 'concerned committee'.

Although there is a continuity of ungovernability and instability in the workplace and the union, the different form of the conflicts outlined above suggest different dynamics and different explanations. The political situation has also changed. The trade union movement is no longer part of a broad liberation movement against apartheid, but it is an alliance with the democratically elected ANC government. The evidence in part one of this paper suggested that the broad struggle against apartheid, and the nature of the apartheid workplace regime, were crucial to understanding 'ungovernability' in the workplace. Political change means we should look for new explanations for the persistence of 'ungovernability.'

I would suggest that the trade union in the workplace is facing very different problems in the 1990s, as compared with the 1980s. In the earlier period the union had a very powerful dual identity as a militant collective agent engaged in a struggle for worker rights, and a struggle against apartheid. In the 1990s, the problem for the union is to establish a new dynamic identity through which shopstewards can unify workers around clearly defined and perceived goals. NUMSA has not yet achieved this.

During the 1980s the identity of the union was based on opposition to management and state. Shopstewards and workers were highly mobilised. There was contestation and struggle over

tactics, strategies and leadership, but the value of the union itself was never questioned. Both the struggle for worker rights and negotiation, and the struggle for liberation and ungovernability, required militant and united trade union organisation able to challenge managerial authority. At times these struggles overlapped and reinforced each other, at times they ran at cross-purposes. This was the nature of political unionism. It was a vehicle through which different interests and groups could assert their agendas and secure mass support.

Thus political unionism created scope for increasing conflict and fierce power struggles within the union. The contradiction between negotiation and sustained ungovernability was experienced as conflict among shopstewards and even within individual shopstewards as they played the role of union agent in negotiation and liberation agent in ungovernability. It took the form increasingly of conflict between shopstewards and the strike committee, and exposed an antagonism between township residents and hostel dwellers. Both shopfloor industrial relations and the union itself were rendered unstable by this conflict - indeed it came close to tearing the union apart.

In the 1990s the union was faced less with a problem of a dual identity, than with the problem of establishing a new and coherent identity in new conditions. Forging a new identity is made more difficult by the complexity of the stance the union has adopted towards employers and the government. This is no longer a stance of simple opposition. NUMSA and COSATU are broadly supportive of the ANC government and the RDP, but reserve a critical independence. NUMSA seeks the cooperation of business in transforming the workplace and developing South Africa. It is prepared to campaign for its views on these issues, and at the same time undertake militant action in defence of workers' interests.

While NUMSA has adopted a new set of policies and a new negotiating programme, it has been unable to translate this into a dynamic unionism in the plants or the region. Shopstewards were preoccupied with political activities outside the workplace, and some of the most experienced and active worker leaders and officials were attracted by new job opportunities. In addition, the union's new negotiating programme took a complex and technical form that few shopstewards could apply creatively. They were unable to use it to develop a new campaign and so unify their membership, nor did they return to older forms of militant mobilisation. The result was a sense of disempowerment, apathy and a tinge of cynicism about the union Head Office and ANC government.

With little sense of direction or activism coming from shopstewards, wildcat actions became the norm. There has been very little change in the workplace regime, so workers' grievances and deep sense of injustice remain. Opposition groups motivated by grudges or personal ambition took advantage of this to articulate the aspirations and fears of groups of workers. But, unlike the strike committee of the 1980s, this did not manifest itself in a coherent mobilisation or set of tactics. These spontaneous actions and challenges were more a sign of the lack of a coherent programme or dynamic identity on the part of the union. NUMSA has not been able to overcome the legacy of unstable organisation inherited from the 1980s. The result is a decomposition of union structure and identity in the workplace.

This may be simply a temporary state of affairs - precisely a *transitional* state in the context of

a society in transition. In principle there is nothing to prevent NUMSA from redefining itself and its new programme as a dynamic project of workplace reform and democratisation - and by early 1995 there were signs of this happening. (von Holdt, 1995a). But the Steelco case study suggests that, if this is to succeed, NUMSA will have to find a way of 'speaking to' the grievances, aspirations and fears of a range of groups and interests in the workplace, and to fuse these into a unifying strategy that addresses immediate and long-term needs. Such a strategy would have to provide shopstewards with the resources - the vision, ideas and skills - to engage in an active process of organisation-building and mobilisation, through which they can establish themselves and the union as the undisputed collective bargaining agent. The successful struggle over team work in the Iron Plant provides some pointers as to what this might mean.

If the union fails to constitute itself this way, there is likely to be an increasing demobilisation in the workplace, punctuated by outbreaks of wildcat militancy. The very slowly reforming apartheid workplace regime will generate plenty of grievances, and an ongoing low-level ungovernability would be likely. At a more general level this could translate into a weakening trade union movement with enclaves of militancy, but lacking any general strategic direction.

The implications of these dilemmas for the role of the trade unions in transition are complex and serious. The need to mobilise and engage in struggle - to reinterpret the militant traditions of the past - may alienate a government increasingly sensitive to the concerns of business for industrial stability and competitiveness. On the other hand, a weaker union movement becomes a weaker and less reliable negotiating partner, whether in national forums such as NEDLAC, sectorial forums such as the Industrial Council, or the workplace itself.

Organisational weaknesses and the lack of a militant and well-organised base will mean that the union cannot get employers or the state to accept elements of its own agenda for reform. At the same time, its members are likely to respond to aspects of agreements which they do not like with "ungovernable" militant actions which the union lacks the credibility to control. Their members will not understand, and will not have participated in, the process of reaching agreements. Employers may well conclude that they can achieve better results without negotiating with the union.

This scenario would mean a union movement that is weakened and marginalised from those institutions and forums where decision making takes place. The ambitions of the union movement to shape the democratic transition in South Africa will finally have come to nought. If the union movement wishes to avoid this scenario, it will have to develop a new strategic vision which draws on the resources the union brings with it from 1980s - the ability to campaign, to mobilise workers around union demands, and the experience of building and maintaining militant workplace organisation - and harnesses them to its new proactive goals in the workplace and the industry.

Developing such a strategic vision is a necessary condition for the success of strategic or proactive unionism in implementing a "politics of reconstruction." But the question still has to be posed, whether the union movement, even if it forges the necessary strategic vision, has the capacity to drive change in the workplace against the resistance of employers? The stalemate at Steelco is not encouraging. Of course, if shopstewards were confronted with a more open-

minded, inventive and change-oriented management, as they are in some companies, they might find greater opportunities to influence change - as well as dangers of losing control. However, the evidence suggests that change from the apartheid workplace regime to a new workplace regime will take place gradually as a result of struggles at workplace, sectoral and national levels, and of legislative and institutional interventions by the new government[10] Whether such changes will be in the direction of the kind of despotic lean production regime that prevails in many dynamic economies today, or of a more democratic regime characterised by co-determination, is not yet clear.

NOTES

1. The Albert Einstein Institute and the Sociology of Work Unit at the University of Witwatersrand for the financial support that made this research possible. I would like to thank the shopstewards, members and officials of NUMSA who made themselves available for lengthy discussions when they were under many other pressures, Eddie Webster and Glenn Adler for their encouragement, debate and criticism over the past three years, as well as the staff and associates of the Unit for every kind of intellectual, practical and logistic support.

2. This paper is based on research for my PhD.

3. This contradiction is related to the general contradiction experienced by trade unionists operating simultaneously as agents of struggle and agents of negotiated order, which is explored by Beynon (1973), Lane (1974) and Hyman (1975) amongst others. The apartheid workplace regime differs from this in that the struggle for a different order, and the resultant ungovernability, becomes so concretely inscribed in the daily activities of the shopstewards and worker activists.

4. For an analysis of the emergence of political unionism see Lambert and Webster (1988). They use the terms "social movement unionism" and "political unionism" interchangeably; I prefer the term political unionism because the resistance politics of the national liberation movement is so central to understanding its character.

5. "Ungovernability" arose as a slogan in the struggle of the UDF-aligned community organisations to render apartheid "ungovernable" in the mid- to late 1980s. It was not, as far as I know, ever applied formally or officially to workplace struggles. For a similar argument, but made in relation to community struggles, implying that "ungovernability" entails a contestation between radically incompatible social structures, see Mayekiso (1996:89-90): " Ungovernability became a captured catchword for challenging the regime... For while ungovernability was aimed at hitting state organs, the next step beyond ungovernability was to build organs of people's power... We were firstly trying to make the township and country ungovernable, and secondly sowing seeds so that, given the opportunity, the would actually have something in place to solve the problems."

6. To what extent can generalisations be made from the Steelco case? There is a fair amount of evidence of ungovernability of both the workplace and the union, although it is not analysed as such: see for example Maller (1992), Moodie (1994) and Von Holdt (1990a). My argument for the concept of "ungovernability" is made more fully in the context of a critical review of the literature in Von Holdt(1996).

7. Since renounced by the company.

8. Green areas are similar to quality circles: workers meet with supervisors and managers in specially designated sections of the factory (painted green!), to discuss that day's operations.

9. For an account of this problem, and a description of efforts to mount a campaign during the industrial council negotiations in 1995, see Von Holdt 1995a.

10. The new Labour Relations Act which is due to come into effect towards the end of 1996 contains provisions for "workplace forums" modelled closely on the German system of works councils. A workplace forum will exist separately from the shopsteward committee, and its members will be elected in separate elections by all employees below senior management. I have argued elsewhere that providing for *two* elected bodies in the same workplace is likely to heighten conflict and contestation among workers rather than usher in a new order characterised by co-determination (Von Holdt 1995b).