

KARL VON HOLDT and WILLIAM MATLALA visited three factories in Natal, two of which were sites of struggle in the 1973 wave of strikes: Alusaf in Northern Natal, Frame Textiles in Pinetown, and Unilever in Durban.

Alusaf aluminium smelter at Richards Bay is a huge factory set in the green canefields of Northern Natal. Pot Room A is located under the longest factory roof in the southern hemisphere – 1,3 km long. Inside it is warm and dusty, lit up by lights in the roof and by the flames flickering off the molten aluminium in

at right angles from each other. Up and down the middle of pot rooms A, B and C, workers drive forklifts and tractors, loading new alumina powder and tapping off tons of molten aluminium and driving it to the furnaces in the cast room.

In 1973, hearing about the strike wave further south in Durban, Alusaf workers also downed tools and demanded higher wages.

They were dismissed. The Metal and Allied Workers

Union (MAWU) started organising Alusaf in the mid-70s, but only won informal recognition after a renewed organising drive in 1979. Then,

in 1982, workers went out on an ill-prepared strike over wages and pension fund demands. The entire workforce was dismissed. After four weeks they called the strike off and returned to work. A number of key shopstewards were not re-employed.

Now there are four unions in the plant: NUMSA (1 322 members), SA

Boilermakers (415), Yster en Staal (213) and Amalgamated Engineering Union (122).

Fifty percent of the aluminium smelted at Alusaf is exported. The company is so successful its owner, Genmin, is planning to invest R7,2 billion in a second smelter across

ALUSAF: *violence and racism in Northern Natal*



giant pots set below the floor down each side of the building. Enormous quantities of electric current pass through each pot, melting the alumina and reducing it to aluminium. The current is so great its magnetic field inside the factory causes the keys in a bunch to stand out

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the road. The raw material – alumina powder – that goes into the Alusaf smelting process is all imported. But the people who work there –

2 800 of them – are not. And the huge, hot, dusty factory is charged with high voltage political and racial tensions of South Africa.



Workers die

Thirty-one Alusaf workers have been killed since 1991 in the low-level war between Inkatha and the COSATU-ANC-SACP alliance in Natal. Workers die, not in the factory, but in the townships when they go home. According to shopstewards, gangs of Inkatha supporters wait for workers to arrive in the townships, and then demand to see their pay-slips. If the pay-slip shows a stop-order deduction for NUMSA, the worker is beaten up or killed. Some 200 workers have resigned from NUMSA and joined the SA Boilermakers Society to escape this danger.

It takes a brave worker to become a shopsteward at Alusaf. The previous chairperson of the shopstewards committee, Jeffrey Vilani, was forced to leave employment and the area after surviving assassination attempts and having his house burnt down twice. Current chairperson Bheki Ntuli's house has also been destroyed, and shopstewards live in constant fear of attack.

These dangers have seriously weakened union organisation. Not only is NUMSA losing members, shopstewards find it difficult to stay in touch with their members or mobilise them around demands. "We no longer have general meetings after work," says Ntuli. "If Alusaf workers arrive home later than others, it is said they have been attending meetings, and they will be attacked."

Shopstewards tried holding regular weekly meetings at lunchtime. Lunchtime is only 30 minutes, but workers were traditionally able to take an extra 15 minutes. "The meetings were successful in mobilising workers, but then management stepped in and applied the 30-minute rule very strictly. Now there is no time to have a meeting." This year shopstewards proposed that the company give workers four hours paid leave per quarter to attend meetings. "This was rejected. It proves management is not sympathetic," says Ntuli.

These conditions make it very difficult for workers to wage struggles around their demands. There has been no strike since 1982, although workers have many grievances. "Workers voted to strike in last year's metal industry strike, but they could not. In the township Inkatha would ask them, 'Why are you not at work?'"

Racial conflict

Violent conflict with Inkatha is not the only problem Alusaf workers face. Shopstewards say black workers are prevented from using company transport, are given inferior benefits and are not given adequate opportunities for promotion and training. They give the following examples:

- The company provides buses to transport white employees to Empangeni, where they live. Black workers are given a travel allowance for tickets for Umfolozi Transport buses. According to shopstewards, when this was queried, management said the company buses are provided for "staff and those who do not get travel allowances". This excludes black staff since they are given travel allowances like



Alusaf buses waiting to transport workers back to Empangeni – if they're white

Photo: William Matlala

all other black workers! However, when black employees are late because of a bus strike or other delays, they are penalised. They say that even when a company bus has only three white passengers, it will not stop for black workers. Workers threaten that next time there is a transport strike they will board white buses "no matter what". They demand that the company provide buses for all employees or none.

- Shopstewards believe the company is deliberately trying to exclude black staff from the benefits white staff members get. Black staff are kept on the provident fund negotiated by the union, whereas white staff are on an Old Mutual pension fund with higher company contributions. Shopstewards say management explains this by saying black staff were members of the union when it negotiated the provident fund. At the same time, say the shopstewards, the company says black staff no longer qualify for holidays on 21 March and 16 June won by the union, as they are no longer shopfloor workers! On the other hand, white scheduled workers (ie shopfloor

workers) get the same benefits as white staff.

- Workers say that racism is rife on the shopfloor. For example, when Alusaf employed its first black engineer, an Indian, and housed him and his family in a company flat in Empangeni, he was tarred and feathered by whites. According to Ntuli, the white men who were arrested for this are still working at Alusaf. When the same Indian engineer disciplined a white artisan and his black assistant for unsafe behaviour, the white artisans in his section said he was biased because he is black, and threatened to strike. According to Ntuli, "We said, You are playing with fire because you are five and we are 21 in this section. We threatened to strike against their strike. I said I would be forced to organise the whole factory against them. So they left it at that."
- Shopstewards also allege black workers do not have the same training and promotion

opportunities as whites. As an example, they mention the case of Z E Myeni who they say was given the same training for the position of loco driver as whites, but was put on a different grade and job after white workers complained. "Whites don't want to see a black foreman," say the shopstewards.



Smiles on the shopfloor – but shopstewards say that racism is rife
Photo: William Matlala

Although Alusaf has a number of black artisans and apprentices, the shopstewards allege that there is no affirmative action as far as technician training is concerned. They also complain that black apprentices are trained in inferior Kwazulu government institutions, rather than the well-resourced technikons in Durban and Newcastle attended by white apprentices.

Alusaf general manager (personnel) Dr J C van der Walt acknowledges that there is racism among Alusaf's workforce, but states the company has taken many steps to overcome it. He refers to the fact that a third of all supervisory staff are black, that Alusaf was one of the first companies to train black apprentices and that some 770 employees, the majority black, have become home owners through company loans. "We don't like to hammer the issue of black and white," he says.

However, shopstewards feel they are engaged



Dr JC van der Walt, general manager (personnel)

Photo: William Matlala

in a constant struggle against racism, and that senior management colludes with racism rather than trying to end it. This makes them suspicious of most management initiatives.

Conflict over participation

Management speaks with pride of the company quality circles and the suggestion scheme, which pays out R500 to any worker whose suggestion is implemented. But this is one of the initiatives which seems to have fallen foul of racism.

According to Ntuli, after they were trained how to use quality circles, "black workers made some suggestions for changing the pots to make work safer and easier. The senior foreman and shift controller said they could not accept that because it was the idea of blacks. They said it was going to waste money. Management agreed. They just side with them because they are white. I said this is the right thing to get people creative, to think and suggest. But their attitude means we are blind to think sharply, there was no use to continue. We then preached to our members to reject it."

The other shopstewards agree. "We don't know any person who has got suggestion money," they say. "Only white suggestions get money. We see it as our right to make suggestions, but they are subject to approval and the foremen throws our ideas out."

The shopstewards argue that the quality circles are intended to undermine the union. For example, "As NUMSA shopstewards we demanded that the shunters should have two-way radios. Management refused. But when the same suggestion - for the same reasons - came from the quality circles, they accepted it. Why?"

The difference over quality circles is linked to broader questions of participation in decision-making in the workplace. Ntuli says, "Workers are being pushed from behind by management forcefully. They do not want to train workers, they see training as a waste. They want to be cops, just to stand behind us." He says quality circles would be good "if we were allowed to debate our ideas democratically. Management could come back and say, 'Look, we accept your viewpoint but it is very expensive. Can you think of another one?' Or come up with an alternative themselves."

Health and safety

This conflict extends to health and safety. Management speaks about the success of their health and safety programme and about the enthusiastic involvement of workers. They showed a video which includes a sequence of workers singing a song to welcome NOSA (National Occupational Safety Association) inspectors. Van der Walt pointed out Ntuli among the singers: "Workers did this on their own," he said. "Workers are very proud of health and safety."

Ntuli rejects this. "We were just told there are some visitors and we should come and sing. We did not even know who they were. After singing, we had to go and management continued meeting with NOSA alone."

The shopstewards say, of course they comply with regulations – they want to be safe. But they are angry that, as shopstewards, they have no rights to participate in health and safety matters and that management refuses to negotiate a health and safety agreement.

They give the example of Xolani Dlamini, who was killed driving a tractor due to what they allege was management negligence. Shopstewards had no rights to investigate the accident and fear there could have been a

cover-up. They accuse management of using health and safety as a disciplinary issue, and refer to the example of a shopsteward, B S Mthethwa dismissed from the same department where the tractor accident happened simply for keeping a bicycle without rubber pedals.

As senior shopsteward, Bheki Ntuli sits on the company safety committee, but regards this as useless because he is always outvoted by the managers. He argues there should be a safety committee in every department with strong worker representation. According to Ntuli, the company recently logged two million hours without disabling injuries under the NOSA system and, in "recognition of workers' efforts", gave everyone a special ID badge. According to Ntuli, the badges are piling up in his office to be handed back to management. "We reject this kind of unilateral decision-making. We also reject the two million hours – we have had two accidents, but the company put the injured workers on light duties so they were not recorded as disabling."

Opposite views

According to Van der Walt, management is satisfied with its relationship with the union. He explained the negotiating, grievance and disciplinary procedures. He described the pension and housing benefits. "We have never retrenched," he says. "Now we have a moratorium on retrenchments – it is dangerous, but it creates a sense of security." At least half the employees at Alusaf have been there longer than 11 years. There has been no strike for 11 years.

Another achievement, says Van der Walt, is that Alusaf has reduced the number of grades to seven, with labourers earning 45% of artisans' wages. Alusaf also played an important role "making it possible for MAWU to join the industrial council". Van der Walt was industrial council chairperson at the time.

Ntuli describes the relation between management and workers as "bad". "They are not ready for the new era," he says. He relates with anger how the company refused to provide facilities to help the shopstewards organise shopsteward elections in the company this year. The shopstewards wanted to use the



Bheki Ntuli, shopsteward chairperson at Alusaf

Photo: William Matlala

elections to educate their members about national political elections, and to prove there would be no intimidation. "Just because we highlighted that, they refused assistance."

He says they are defending cases every day, and even minor cases are made big issues by management. He cites several cases:

- ☐ Tito Mthiyane, a very active shopsteward, was fired when he missed work because his house was burnt down. "Management said it was not their problem, you have chosen to be an activist, that is why you were targeted. If you were only a NUMSA member you would not have been targeted."
- ☐ Another worker on his way to work was told by Inkatha to get off the bus and toyi-toyi. He told other workers to inform his superior, but he was fired for coming late.
- ☐ Shopsteward Bekinhlanhla Mthethwa was dismissed for having an unsafe bicycle, as described above.

Ntuli comments that these incidents make people reluctant to stand for election as shopstewards, for fear of being fired. He says the workers' relationship with management deteriorated after MAWU merged with other unions to form NUMSA in 1987. "We became stronger and they saw us as a threat. They went back to their initial tricks of hating the trade unions." ☆