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South Africa

# Internal Democracy and Social Division: Lessons from NUMSA's shop steward tradition for the South African labour movement

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**ASK ANY NUMSA SHOP steward what happened to the once-mighty National Union of Miners (NUM). How did it allow its membership to collapse? You'll very likely be met with a consistent answer: 'social division'.**

This is the term NUMSA stewards use to describe the social, economic and political divide that emerged within NUM between the shop steward network 'who worked above ground in offices and were often supplied with phones and cars by the union' and the membership 'who worked below ground often in dangerous environments for low wages.

As many observers have pointed out, it was this gulf between the living standards, social authority and even career prospects of organisers and rank and file members that led to the total breakdown of relations between NUM shop stewards and members at Marikana, and thus to the wave of mass defections from NUM to AMCU throughout the platinum belt.

There is nothing particularly remarkable about this observation. Many analysts have written about the role that NUM's dysfunctional grassroots organisation played in the build up to the brutal massacre at Marikana. The fact that workers were forced to organise independently of the union through grassroots committees shows that NUM's organisational model had totally failed its members, even before the massacre.

But the significance of NUMSA's conclusion has ramifications beyond the collapse of NUM. Indeed it tells us something significant about NUMSA's own grassroots culture and structures.

NUMSA has discussed NUM's collapse at length and throughout the union, from the factory floor right up to the national conferences. It did this not in order to heap scorn on a union with which it had a tense and somewhat uncomradely relationship, but to develop a sense of the efficacy and culture of its own shop steward networks. It asked whether the same kind of collapse could ever occur within its own ranks and it did so to educate members about the role and responsibilities of shop stewards in the union.

From my own research within NUMSA locals, it is clear that many other COSATU unions are beginning to show signs of divisions between the members and the leaderships, but NUMSA itself continues to enjoy a high level of loyalty and pride amongst its membership towards their union.

There are clear reasons for this. The differences between NUMSA and a union such as NUM begin with the shop stewards. For a NUM miner, the appeal of becoming a shop steward is clear: it offers the chance to work above ground in an office as opposed to the dangerous conditions in the mines, to have a phone, to have a car, and perhaps to advance through the structures of the union.

In NUMSA, however, the 'worker-leader' structure (of which shop stewards are generally immensely proud) ensures that shop stewards must continue to work alongside the members they represent, for the same pay and in the same conditions as before.

For NUMSA members, becoming a shop steward is not a chance to escape difficult or unpleasant working conditions, but an opportunity to become a worker-leader and earn the respect of fellow workers. There are no material incentives for workers to become shop stewards within NUMSA, but such a role offers what may be the only

good opportunity many workers are likely to have to develop themselves as individuals.

NUMSA has a long history of taking worker education very seriously and this is still the case today. From employment law and worker rights to Marxist ideology and thought, NUMSA members and worker leaders in particular receive extensive political and legal education.

If you spend time in any NUMSA local, you will find shop stewards who are just as comfortable quoting Lenin and Gramsci or discussing the role of the vanguard party, or the nature of hegemonic order, as they are in assisting members to understand the finer points of the Labour Relations Act. Given the enduring barriers to education and training that poor black workers still face in South Africa today, many see NUMSA's worker education programmes as representing their only opportunity to develop themselves as individuals.

As a result of all this, NUMSA members see being elected a shop steward as a huge mark of respect and prestige and demonstrate huge pride in being elected 'worker leaders'. Indeed, one of the things I found surprising during my research in NUMSA locals was the reaction of members who were not shop stewards when I engaged them in conversation.

Without fail, every time I posed the question 'Are you a shop steward?' to a member who was not one, they would look sad or dejected for a moment, then tell me that although they were not, they hoped to be soon. They were always at pains to point out that they were 'active' members in their local, and that they hoped to be shop stewards soon.

It was clear that by attending meetings such as shop stewards councils, which they were not required to be present at, many were attempting to prove that they were dependable and committed – that they could be trusted with the honour of representing their fellow workers.

Furthermore, the embedded culture of grassroots accountability within local NUMSA structures places intense pressure on shop stewards and local office bearers. Stewards are expected to provide regular reports on the situation in their workplaces, to attend shop stewards' councils and act as a link between the particular workplace they represent and the union.

Failure to attend shop stewards' meetings without providing a legitimate reason in writing can lead to a steward being removed from the post. Likewise, failure to provide sufficient reports from the factory floor to shop stewards' committees that help to make local office bearers and other stewards aware of potential issues and problems, can equally be grounds for removal.

Workers' expectations of new stewards are clear; they have responsibilities and they will be held accountable. This practice goes beyond a simple bureaucratic procedure. Having had the opportunity to observe NUMSA shop stewards' councils and meetings, I can attest that stewards are subjected to serious scrutiny on all aspects of their conduct if other stewards are concerned that they are not pulling their weight or living up to their responsibilities, as a steward. If it is deemed necessary, stewards can be quickly removed from the post and new representatives elected.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, NUMSA members see themselves as having 'ownership' of their union, and control over what it does. Frequently in my observations of NUMSA meetings, workers and shop stewards would declare: 'NUMSA is not Irvin Jim or the National Office Bearers. NUMSA is all of us. We are NUMSA.' – or some variation on that theme.

In every interview I conducted, all respondents agreed that political discussions started at the factory level, before being discussed locally, regionally and nationally. NUMSA members place huge emphasis on the importance of democratic discussion from the bottom up.

This strong culture of democracy, accountability and pride in the union at the grassroots level stands in stark contrast to the clear disconnect between the union and its members in evidence within NUM in the platinum sector. Indeed it stands in strong contrast to the majority of unions in South Africa in the current period.

This is not to suggest that NUMSA represents a perfect model of how a workplace union should operate, or that it has done away with 'social divisions' entirely; far from it. It is simply not realistic to envisage a union without 'social divisions' of any kind between the members and the local or national leadership.

But in the wake of NUMSA's expulsion from COSATU and the seemingly inevitable split which will follow, the confidence NUMSA members have in their union makes it possible for the organisation to be bold, to challenge the trajectory of trade unionism in South Africa and put forward different ideas.

It is this confidence that allowed a senior NUMSA official to tell me of MAWU (a newly registered rival union to NUMSA that has been set up by a former NUMSA leader, rumoured to be bankrolled by the SACP): 'We are too strong on the shop floor for them to challenge us.'

It is this confidence which means that NUMSA's membership will not be dented by its expulsion from COSATU. And it is this confidence that means NUMSA, alone amongst COSATU's affiliated unions, holds sufficient trust among workers to play a leading role in creating a working-class, explicitly socialist political alternative to the ANC government – should the national officer bearers of NUMSA be prepared to do so, that is.

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