

# Political consciousness on the factory floor

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SALB visited shopstewards at a factory in the Witwatersrand area to hear their views on the current situation.

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**W**e sit in the shopsteward's office and discuss the issues facing the labour movement. The window looks onto the factory floor where workers are operating machines and carrying loads back and forth. Every now and then a forklift plastered with yellow anti-Bill stickers passes by the window. We have to speak loudly to be heard over the din of machinery.

The first topic of our conversation is the Labour Bill. Moses, the chairman of the shopstewards committee, kicks off. "To me it seems as if the government sat and looked at what is happening - strikes in many plants, people negotiating for higher wages - and realised that if it could use a new law it could divide the workers. The Bill means there will be no union. There cannot be a union without structures and procedures. But most actions will be illegal, so the structures cannot sur-

vive. If ever a worker wants to negotiate higher pay or an unfair dismissal, the bosses will just say, Oh, that's illegal. Just like that. The government will be our union because it will say, 'This is the law'."

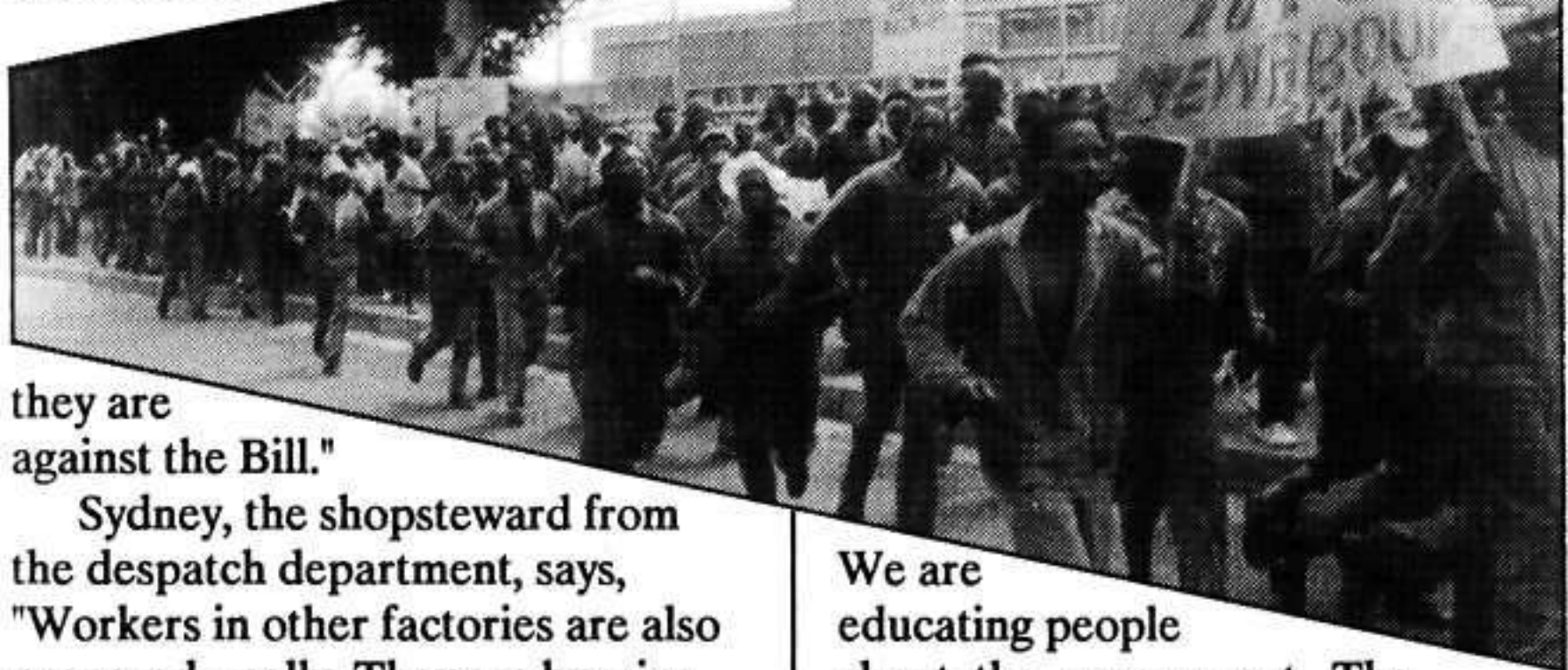
An older, greying worker takes over. "The Bill is going to kill our struggle for a living wage for all workers. It is going to tighten our hands and mouths. Our unions are going to be limited from here to there, and no further. They are going to draw a line that you must not jump over."

Thabo, a young shop steward, adds that big companies such as Anglo American support the Bill "because it will tie our hands. They have seen the mine strike and the OK strike and they don't like that."

The shopstewards describe their demonstrations against the Bill. "We demonstrated last Tuesday. We sang up and down from that cor-

ner to the gate about five times. We carried placards saying 'Away with the Bill!', 'Away with AWB!', 'Down with minority unions!'

"On that day people were dancing all over. The placards had a lot of messages for management. Our aim was that management should write a letter to Manpower saying that we are dissatisfied with the Bill. This was just a warm up. The workers are prepared to take any action, because



they are against the Bill."

Sydney, the shopsteward from the despatch department, says, "Workers in other factories are also prepared, really. They are burning. We are waiting for our Congress. If that is banned, something will happen. Then we are going to act strongly."

"To add to what the comrade is saying," says Thabo, "here we have an industrial area committee which meets every week to discuss joint action. Most factories on this side are prepared. There is even one NACTU factory in that committee."

"We are always preaching about this new Bill on the trains. It's a way of mobilising workers, especially in companies that have not been par-

ticipating. Then you find they are changing when they come to the companies. You see a guy at work singing who never used to sing before. He learnt it on the train."

The older shopsteward explains: "By chanting freedom songs on the train we are promoting people who know what is happening with the new Labour Bill."

We are educating people about the government. The government is bringing corruption in South Africa. That corruption is going to kill most of us workers. We are trying to clarify what is happening here in South Africa."

"And comrades," adds Thabo, "it is spreading, it is happening on more trains than before..."

The discussion turns to the political restrictions imposed on COSATU, and the virtual banning of 17 major anti-apartheid organisations including the UDF. Moses, the shopsteward chairman, speaks again: "Banning these organisations -



it makes us angry. By banning UDF, SAYCO, and other organisations, it is the same as banning us, because we work hand in hand with these organisations. So we the people must build unity and action to fight the restrictions. They are the same as the Bill.

"When they are hitting in our areas we are also hitting, because we are residents of those areas. So we feel that we are attacked by the bannings, and we cannot allow that. There are enough organisations underground, there won't be enough space for all of us if we go underground, really." The room bursts into laughter at this point.

Moses continues: "I don't think this will make any comrades working in this company or anywhere to not take part in politics. Because they have already learnt more about the struggle and about jailed leaders like Nelson Mandela. They have also learnt that there are other organisations. For instance the ANC is banned, but it is still operating underground. Restrictions will not stop people. They can only ban the name, but we are going to operate, we are going to discuss, we are going to preach wherever we are."

"We have been oppressed for a long time. Before we came our fathers were oppressed. When we came as a new generation we were oppressed as well. Now, bringing the union helped a lot of people. Even those who are oppressed have managed to get a living wage, some

of them. Some have managed to get better education for their children, some have negotiated for better housing and living conditions in townships. All those things were done by the unions."

The older shopsteward clears his throat and speaks: "Whenever one says something that is true the government calls it politics. By banning our organisations the government is declaring war, because it wants to prevent black people from moving anywhere that the government doesn't want. We the workers and all the people of South Africa see that the government is declaring war. In coming years people will not stand for such things. They will just take weapons." The workers in the room are nodding their heads in agreement.

Then Sydney turns the discussion towards the question of tactics. "It is true that people want to act. In the past we have used the stayaway, but we think the stayaway is not so effective. Staying at home and doing nothing - people just sit in the township drinking beer, or watching TV. They are not gaining anything from that. There is no action involved. Then after the stayaway we go back to work and nothing has changed. The state is used to the stayaway."

Thabo takes this point further: "Some comrades have proposed that we should come in to work as usual at 8. But we should not go to the machines, we should start demonstrating. Other companies would

be doing the same thing. Then the different companies can join up, and also get the other companies where there is no union, and small companies, and pull them out from their plant too. If every industrial area had such demonstrations - East Rand, Johannesburg, Kempton Park, Pretoria - and if the youth also had the same demonstrations in the township, that would be involving everybody. People would be really taking part in the struggle. That is the direction some people are proposing."

This discussion is cut short when a worker comes in to report that a labourer has been injured by a falling stack of boxes. Three shop stewards go out to see whether an ambulance has been called, and to take eye-witness accounts of the accident.

On our way out the shopstewards take us onto the factory floor,

showing us the anti-Bill stickers plastered everywhere. Prominent on the wall is a framed picture of Govan Mbeki with the caption, "Welcome Home!" Suspended over one of the machines is a poster with the words: "Happy Birthday Comrade Oliver Tambo", beneath a photograph of the President of the ANC. Newspaper pages with articles of political interest are pasted all over the factory walls.

It seems that politics is firmly rooted in the consciousness of union members on the factory floor. No amount of political restrictions will root it out. However, after the political restrictions on COSATU and the de facto banning of UDF and major affiliates, the key question is what organisational structures and what kinds of action will best serve to link the factory floor with the political struggle. (March 1988)