

Andries Raditsela: Monitoring the Protests in Natal

In Durban, the death of Raditsela was first discussed formally on Wednesday May 8 at a meeting called by the "new federation unions" (FOSATU, GWU, CCAWUSA and FCWU) to evaluate the May Day stoppage and celebrations. (For details of decisions taken elsewhere see SALB 10.7) The meeting, made up of organisers and secretaries of the unions, decided to hold a second meeting to consider reaction to Raditsela's death. This meeting, on May 9 - a council of FOSATU shop stewards from Durban and Pinetown locals - was felt to be a more appropriate forum to discuss the issue. This meeting was also attended by the other new federation unions.

The meeting on the 9th felt that there had to be a response to the issue in the form of work stoppages. Proposals by shop stewards for a stoppage ranged from a whole day to a half an hour. In the course of debate it was decided that shop stewards ought to get a mandate from workers in the factories before meeting again. This decision was communicated to the executive committee of FOSATU before its meeting of May 11. In the meantime, in Natal a consensus was reached that there should be work stoppages for a maximum duration of two hours with management getting prior notification by May 14 - the day of the funeral.

Two separate decisions were taken - by FOSATU nationally and in Natal by the local councils - but they more or less corresponded. It was left to workers to make decisions on the duration of the stoppage and on how to approach management in each factory. However, some unions felt that the call lacked precision or that they had been given inadequate time to make sufficient preparations. Others had already negotiated stoppages with management on their own. As a result, participation varied in form and extent fairly substantially. Little communication between the "unity" unions and others occurred.

Durban-Pinetown area management survey

On the afternoon of the work stoppage, a survey of the day's events in Durban industries was planned. In addition in-depth interviews were made with management and trade union repre-

sentatives. The media coverage of the stoppage also was monitored. The Department of Statistic's Manufacturing Census, (modified through the use of regional economic statistics from the Department of Economics, University of Natal) was used as a basis for sampling firms. Employers of some 52,000 workers, approximately one-third of the industrial labour force of Durban-Pinetown, were earmarked for contact. Ninety firms, chosen through strict quota sampling, were divided between the following sectors:

Food & Beverage	15
Textiles	9
Clothing & Footwear	12
Wood & Wood Products	5
Paper & Printing	8
Chemical	8
Non-Metallic Mineral Products & Plastics	8
Metal Products, Motor Vehicles	12
Other	10
Total	88

Management was asked to respond to eight questions on the telephone as follows:

1. Was there a stoppage in the factory and, if not, any other type of appropriate action?
2. What was the duration of the stoppage and when did it happen?
3. What form did the stoppage take in the factory?
4. Was it paid or unpaid time off for employees.
5. Were employers forewarned and, if so, what type of negotiations followed?
6. What number of workers were involved in the stoppage?
7. What unions, if any, participated in the stoppage?
8. What was the employers' response to the issues?

The response rate was in general excellent:

Food & Beverage	100%
Textiles	87.14%
Clothing & Footwear	100%
Wood & Wood Products	60%

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Paper & Printing	100%
Chemical	78%
Non-Metallic Mineral Products & Plastics	100%
Metal Products, Motor Vehicles	100%
Other	60%

Unfortunately, the few negative responses included the largest textile manufacturing firm which particularly served to bring the figures down. Firms that responded were estimated to employ 42,100 workers. Of these, stoppages involved some 7,850 workers or just under 19% divided between the following sectors:

Food & Beverage	44.25%	3,100
Textiles	8.57%	600
Clothing & Footwear	0.00	
Wood & Wood Products	0.00	
Paper & Printing	0.00	
Chemical	25.6%	1,000
Non-Metallic Mineral Products & Plastics	56.25%	1,800
Metal Products, Motor Vehicles	14.3%	1,000
Other*	36.66%	950
Total		<u>7,850</u>

* Basic Metal, Cementmaking etc.

In order to arrive at the total number of Durban-Pinetown workers involved in the stoppage, it was decided, after examining trade union figures that later were claimed for the stoppage, that a factor of 2.2 was not unreasonable. This would give anticipation of 17,270 in all. The correct figure must range, however, somewhere between a multiple of 2 (15,700) and 3 (23,550). In addition, attested figures from other sources supply a minimum of 1,037 non-industrial employees in the region involved and 5,670 in other centres in Natal. Thus in Natal as a whole, 23,870+ workers can be said to have been involved.

Participation in the stoppage correlated closely with membership in the industrial unions associated with the proposed federation, primarily FOSATU but also Food and Canning Work-

ers Union and General Workers Union. Within FOSATU organised factories, 56.67% took part. By contrast, workers not in unions and those organised in SAAWU and in TUCSA unions, were completely uninvolved. Interestingly, we estimate that the African and Indian workers in the factories covered in our survey divide roughly equally between FOSATU (31.85%) members, TUCSA members (27.59%) and the unorganised (29.12%). In addition, we estimate 8.31% SAAWU members, 1.91% GWU-FCWU and 1.24% other unions.

Finally, we estimate that some 63% of workers involved took part in commorative services or stoppages lasting for half an hour, 30% being lunch-time prayer meetings or extended tea-times and 33% were during working hours, 30% lasted more than half an hour and 7% involved a half-hour stop followed by the workers leaving the factory without resuming labour. At another Pinetown firm, workers were effectively locked out and proceeded to union offices for the rest of the day.

Survey summary

A number of significant results came out of the survey as follows:

- a) We estimate that some 17,270 workers participated in a variety of symbolic actions as a response to the call of protest in Greater Durban-Pinetown. The Natal total was certainly well over 20,000. Outside Durban-Pinetown, reports reached us of stoppages, among others, in textile mills in Hammarsdale and Corobrick in Pietermaritzburg.
- b) The protest was confined almost exclusively to workers in FOSATU, together with those unions planning to participate in Federation. Among these, we estimate that more than half were involved as opposed to 19% of the industrial workforce in general.
- c) As a result, it was the food and beverage, non-metallic minerals, chemical and metal sectors that were most affected. The stoppage achieved some success in the important textile industry mainly outside Durban-Pinetown.
- d) Despite the rather widespread nature of the stoppage, actions involved tended to be quite brief (63% of half an hour only) and often took place at lunch hour or over an extended tea break. Most of the longer stoppages lasted one hour.

From our interviews, management expectations, perceptions and responses varied. There were some common threads:

- a) Managements received directives and information from the Chamber of Industries. It advised them that they should expect "something big" and that they should not provoke further union or worker antagonism. They should furthermore, it advised, press where they could for half an hour commemorative service preferably during lunchtime. Any working time lost should be unpaid.
- b) In the factories organised by the "new federation unions" all expected something to happen and were genuinely worried because they did not know what form the action would take. But after the May 11 decisions (nationally and in Natal) many were approached by shop stewards and held discussions over the issue. Some expressed surprise about the fact that they were approached at all, thinking that the stoppage would happen without prior warning. Similarly, companies once approached, bargained hard with shop stewards to minimise the effect of the strike on production runs. A smaller number of firms (4) were hostile to the steward's demands. Finally, 10 companies organised by the trade unions were not approached at all. Overall, there was anxiety about what would happen, which was enhanced by unclear media coverage, as claimed by managers.
- c) After the stoppage managerial perceptions varied according to the degree of action on their shop floors. There were three dominant patterns:
 - (i) Some were sympathetic, they claimed, to the circumstances of the unions' discontent; nevertheless expressed anger that they should have their production runs affected by an issue which had nothing to do with them. In some instances where the stoppage exceeded 2 hours the companies complained about losses and, in the food sector about deliveries to the retail sector. In tune with this, anger was also directed at the unions who "thought they now control (led) the country..."
 - (ii) Many were pleasantly surprised at the "reasonableness of workers" who defied FOSATU's call for stoppages (as they understood the issue). They found "their" stewards co-operative and ready to see management's point of view. For example, a manager asserted that:

We had geared ourselves up because we were told that this is going to be a "big thing". But for

our group it was a damp squib. Our workers requested a stoppage between 11 am and 12, but we told them we couldn't stop production. We had a fairly good relationship with our shop stewards and so many decided to mourn during their lunch hour.

Another one stressed that:

They requested a stoppage but we told them it would be very disruptive. There was a nice spirit of understanding between us and they agreed not to. A stoppage would have established a bad precedent. I don't think the stoppage was a strong issue. In my opinion it was a bit removed from the guys here.

- (iii) Some simply expressed hostility to workers' initiations on their shopfloor seeing no legitimate grounds for stoppages. The Daily News asserted that Raditsela "did not work for us and if we had to give workers time off every time there was a death in detention we would be stopping every five minutes...Some used the recession, short-time or hinted at dismissals as a lever to prevent any action.

Trade union response

The scale of positive response to the stoppage call was extensive in the "new federation unions" organised factories of Durban-Pinetown. The one significant independent initiative from outside came from the NFW (National Federation of Workers). Why wasn't it even more overwhelming? Interviews with unionists suggested the following reasons: both related to the delegation of the decision-making process to individual shop stewards to such a significant extent, each operating with a particular set of managerial constraints. For one thing, it proved difficult in some structures to respond with the speed required where the final decision was only arrived at the day before the stoppage was meant to take place. Some unions considered that the general guidance that they received at this point was insufficiently clear. Secondly, response varied, in the end, with the confidence union members felt in challenging management prerogatives. This was striking in the case of the smallest factories and those industries where retrenchments were ongoing. Thus, when management reaction appeared to be quite hostile, many workers felt that they

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could not press the issue. These factors also need to be considered in accounting for the length of the stoppage and whether it occurred during normal production time in particular factories that did come out as well.

Media coverage

Selective monitoring of media aimed at Natal audiences was also undertaken in order to establish whether the extended content of such coverage might have influenced worker action in the province. This would have been the case particularly for those workers outside the unions that organise the action. Media coverage, moreover, has an impact on employer response as well as on the conscious or unconscious reaction of the general public to the entire course of events.

Generally speaking, media coverage of issues relating to the death of Andries Raditsela and events leading up to the work stoppage was remarkably inadequate. In some cases, it was virtually non-existent while in others, it was inaccurate or clearly selective. Confusion marked yet other accounts. The confusion related to where the action was planned, (with reference only to Transvaal activity), what form it was to take (that it was a stay-away rather than a stoppage for those workers who could not attend Raditsela's funeral), and when the action might take place. The one striking exception in Natal lay in the Natal Witness, which provided relatively accurate and well-informed coverage consistently. The example of the Witness indicates that no insurmountable barriers existed to an improved and acceptable coverage. The following table summarises a range of responses:

SABC Radio/SATV: Concerned mainly with employer reaction and police reassurances for those who aimed to go to work; confused in referring only to a stay-away. Coverage on the day emphasised "failure". Referred only to Transvaal; characterised action as a stay-away which was not stopping people from going to work; numbers attending funeral were belittled.

Capital radio: Referred in advance only to a Transvaal action. No reference to stoppage on morning of action. Thereafter, image of failure picked up from SABC was echoed here.

Daily News (Durban, Argus): Reasonable coverage of Raditsela's

death up to May 10, when it was concluded that "major trade union and black community organisations have called for workers throughout the country to down tools for two hours next Tuesday" and information about the funeral. Afterwards, nothing until an article date-lined Johannesburg appeared under the headline "Workers ignore stay-away call" referring to a purported one-day stay-away call. Incongruously, information within the article does refer to thousands of Natal workers downing tools.

Natal Mercury (Durban): Reference to Raditsela's death, mainly in the context of others' deaths under related circumstances, with no discussion of an impending work stoppage at first. The one reference, the day before the stoppage was planned, was to an entirely inaccurate SAPA report of demands for Transvaal workers to be given a day off to attend the funeral. Never referred to possibility of Natal action at all.

Natal Witness (Pietermaritzburg): Coverage included unionist meetings to plan response to Raditsela's death, call for stoppage of 2 hours nationally reported with some assessments, notably one making a comparison with a potential stoppage bigger than that in response to the death in detention of Neil Aggett. After the stoppage, assessment was fairly positive with the ASSOCOM manpower secretary saying that the "call had a fair response - in fact there was a good response to the calls for prayer."

Sunday Tribune (Durban): No reference to an impending stoppage. Article entitled "lobola party called off while young trade unionist lay dying."

Illanga, Leader, Graphic Post: Weeklies and bi-weeklies aimed at African or Indian audiences. The more frequently appearing Post and Ilanga only had articles on Raditsela's death, but not on any planned action. Ilanga, a Zulu language paper, is the only one to come out at the start of the week and its final issue before the stoppage had no relevant article at all.

Shortly after the Raditsela stoppage some, 2,000 supporters of Inkatha participated in a polite protest opposing disinvestment outside the home of the United States consul in Durban. This was given widespread publicity and extensive editorial comment by the Durban dailies. The editor of Natal

Mercury felt confident that they represented "the majority of 6,000,000 Zulus". (May 20) The contrast between this and coverage of the national work stoppage speaks by itself of the extent to which the media can determine the significance of a story. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that most Natal coverage of this story was picked up from Transvaal sources anxious to minimise its impact, pre-judge it as a failure and making little effort to get the facts right.

Management responses

A notable characteristic of managerial response to the death of Raditsela was, apart from the anxiety over what was to take place, that it forced them to think politically: the result was a great amount of confusion. The undoubted sophistication of industrial relations procedures, the directives from the Chamber of Industries gave them a starting point from which to attempt to minimise the effects of stoppages on their production runs. In a number of cases they succeeded. There was consensus that either trade unions should stay out of politics or if they do participate, it should not affect production. But it did, and it is on this terrain that their responses wavered: managements lashed out at the police for damaging the reform process underway; some criticised the trade unions and the state; some were accomodating and others poured out pure hostility over the issue. However, we wish to suggest that the responses encountered here could be situated within the broader inter-management debate in South Africa about their political role.

There seems to be three emerging positions: (a) intolerance to trade union political attitudes and hostility to issues pertaining to opposition to the government's reform programme; (b) economic liberals who eagerly want the withdrawal of the state from industrial involvement; (c) a new position which seems to be that the lack of political rights add to the frustrations of workers' experience. Economic reforms alone cannot depoliticise industrial relations.

There was in short no political consensus. Interestingly hostility was not a feature of the small more vulnerable factories alone, but it carried over into the statements of some of the larger conglomerates noted for their liberal sentiments; it involved both multinational and local giants. Future de-

politicisation of industrial relations seems unlikely.

A new power on the shop floor

Furthermore, the growing unionisation of Pinetown's industrial workers has created a new but fragile balance of forces in the factory through democratic shop steward structures. These structures, the source of much vitality and prowess in trade union affairs, were faced with a significant challenge. The delegation of choice, as concerns the form the commemorative action would take, to the respective factories undoubtedly increased their range of experiences bringing new lessons about factory politics to each one. At the same time, this delegation of choice and responsibility created a patchwork of independent worker initiatives and negotiations. These initiatives add up to the largest worker action in the area since the Durban strikes of 1973. They are more sizeable than the Aggett stoppage here, which involved 12,500 people in Natal - 75% of whom were outside the Durban metropolitan area. Still, with each factory's shop stewards deciding on the cut and thrust of their relationships with their particular managements, the action did not cohere as a demonstration stoppage in the area. What cohered instead was a significant event combining a variety of symbolic actions. Nevertheless, in some of the unions the response was both swift and aggressive. As a trade unionist commented:

We responded because we are in a political crisis. It's in the interests of both the state and capital to separate worker organisation from political organisation. This allows the state the opportunity to smash political organisations then to turn on the trade unions. Their intention is always to depoliticise the working class. This is not momentary in passing, its endemic. We would have been doomed to political irrelevance if we had ignored it. We cannot stand aside from the political issues that affect us. We needed to show the government that we were capable of responding to attack. We are not going to stand by while our comrades are murdered. We can't be treated like this - they are killing us like dogs. It's our people who are being killed. We had to respond, we had to demand that the police and the army be removed from the townships. We had to show solidarity with a comrade who had been murdered.

Trade unionists interviews reflect an ambivalence: they were

both pleased and frustrated by the commemorative actions. Pleased, because a large number of workers showed solidarity and exposed their grief over the event despite difficulties, of time constraints and unclear developments. Frustrated because it did not cohere into a fundamental challenge to authority - a demonstration strike which would have resolutely demonstrated their anger over the death. They pointed to the inevitable tension between demands for swift action on the one hand, and democratic participation of membership in the decision-making process on the other. For some trade unions, this factor proscribed the ability to achieve a coherence. Others felt rapid mobilisation around issues outside the factory is facilitated by developing a certain organisational style. This implies a debate about the relationship between the political and economic struggle in South Africa.

This action nevertheless points to some of the inherent limits and possibilities of demonstration stoppages: firstly, they always have been and will be events that demand mass mobilisation at breakneck speed. The greater the coherence, the greater the impact. Secondly, they are demonstrations: as such, over the above coherence, size and numbers are important. Even if the new federation unions mobilised all their members, there would be at the moment over 60% of the labour force outside their reach. The test in this situation was not carried out: would unions outside the federation bury their differences in situations like these and would they have participated and thus increased its impact? Would community organisations have influenced the participation of unorganised workers?

Finally, the media's role in the stoppage points to very worrying signs on the horizon. Both the space and importance, the press attaches to trade union interests is diminishing as our survey showed and reports from other regions corroborated. The clarity of public information reaching workers has been diminishing too. This is happening in volatile times as both an economic and a political crisis sharpens in South Africa. Simultaneously, it is seizing the unions at a time when their own alternative press cannot substitute the functions of the daily press let alone transform it.

(Labour Monitoring Group, Univ. of Natal, Durban, May 1985)