

## INTERVIEW: Culture and the Workers' Struggle

The SALB interviewed members of the Durban FOSATU Local Cultural Group about their work. Present were Qabula, Ari, Nisa, Matiwane and Hlatshwayo. We began with a history of the Group and the main projects which they have undertaken.

Cultural Group: In the early days of the union at Dunlop Ari said we can make a play. The Dunlop Workers' Stage Play dealt with the way the management was treating us. It was about how MAWU [Metal and Allied Workers Union] organised. It told the story of the old Durban Rubber Union which had been there for whites and "coloureds". Africans were not allowed to join. When MAWU came, then the Rubber Union said the Africans could join.

There was argument. Workers were divided into 2 groups. Some joined the boss's sweetheart union. Others said, where does it come from? It was there since 1947 but we were not allowed to join it.

The play starts with a Bekazela party - a retirement party organised by management. After persevering for 25 years you get a watch, some tripe and beer - 1 dumpy each and you are told not to get drunk; also 1 piece of cake to take home to the "piccanins". This was the entry point: an old man remembers his days with Dunlop.

This was a "hot" time, with canteen boycotts and strikes. Some 15 workers - mostly shop stewards - were involved. The play was first shown at the 1983 MAWU AGM and was then circulated. Some continued with the cultural work and we were joined by Nisa. Some started doing their own writing: Qabula, Nisa, and in this we were encouraged by FOSATU.

In 1983 workers from Frame in the Pinetown Local - together with some MAWU members - workshopped a play called Koze Kophe Nini (How long will we suffer?) written by Phumzile Mabele.

### Why Lord?

In early 1984 we produced a play called "Why Lord?" with

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people from Dunlop, and Nisa and Jabu from Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union. The play was done on a workshop basis. Why Lord? deals with the life of a migrant worker: the difficulties in getting accommodation and jobs; during the drought with nothing to plough and cattle dying. The man is forced to seek work in Durban, although his wife opposes this. He sends back letters - but they do not reach her. After 10 years she sets out to look for him. Her husband is working 6 to 6 at night as a security guard. The wife gets a day job at Frame working long hours. So even though they now live in the same place, they still never see each other.

The husband gets involved with another woman who was a friend of the wife. But even though they discuss their men they do not know it is the same man. The wife always uses his full Xhosa name, whilst the other uses the shortened version he adopted in town (because Xhosa names are difficult to pronounce). Also because of the working hours they never see each other together.

The wife is also having problems with the rent - because she receives peanuts at Frame. She becomes involved with the landlord who wants to marry her. Finally a wedding feast is arranged.

At the same time the husband decides to give up his job in order to deal with the problem of never seeing his wife. He arrives at the wedding feast. There is silence. The landlord and the other woman break the silence. The migrant worker and wife attack each other at first. But when they talk they see that such things are caused "when things are evil around you". It is the system which causes families to break up.

The play was first performed to Dunlop strikers in September-October last year and at the Jacobs Local. Also in 1984 Qabula was giving oral performances from Secunda to Richards Bay, and at the FOSATU Education Workshop. (see SALB 9.8)

The Dunlop strike of 1984 unleashed new energies for stage performance. In the early days only shop stewards were involved. Now other workers came forward. Some had township drama experience. Four had taken part in Gibson Kente's Zulu version of Macbeth in the 1970s. Some had even toured overseas. But that kind of work has no security so they were

working at Dunlop. They helped us develop the technical side of our performance. They had some experience of mime. During the strike we did some mask and mimes. To start with our work was linked to the strike. But we also started work on another play dealing with relations between workers and the boss.

### May Day

In 1985 the expanded group met to plan. The first focus was May Day. Also poems were beginning to accumulate. As well as Qabula, Mi Hlatshwayo of Dunlop Sports had come to the fore during the strike. His work includes "Black Mamba Rising". He was also working with youth groups in Claremont.

For May Day four plays were planned: Why Lord?; a play with Frame workers which Qabula was working on; Usuku (The Day) by Mi; and a play with Port Natal Administration women workers who Nisa was working with. She had met these workers through the FOSATU complaints service. Their conditions and wages were very bad.

On May Day other events included gumboot dancing by school children, directed by Siphos. It is important to feed the children into the trade union network. They first performed for the Dunlop AGM.

There was also a play by CCAWUSA members about their struggle against Spar. It dealt with attempts to mobilise support amongst traders - who said "Yes brother" - and then you caught them in town loading up from Spar.

Also by this time cultural work was beginning in the Pietermaritzburg Local. Some factories have choirs - like Prestige - and plays are starting. In 1984 Mooi River NUTW branch produced a play. In 1984 TGWU members began work on a play. A bus driver had knocked over a white woman. The Director of the company said: "If that was my wife, I would shoot you!". Also there are a lot of musicians coming through.

### Qabula's play about the countryside

Its title means "If you don't want to listen, you'll learn when the blood comes" (or loosely "once bitten, twice shy"). It deals with parent-child relations and "morality" in a mig-

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rant labour environment where parents lose their moral standards and children become anti-social. The play is about a young girl who wants her independence - to leave home for the urban areas in order to earn money for herself. She plays off her mother against her father to get their permission. She threatens her mother that she will run off unless she gets her father to agree. This leads to a fight between her parents. The mother steals her husband's money so that the child can leave for the town.

Once in the urban areas she is stranded. An old woman offers her a room for which she must pay. She uses her money for this and does not find a job. She falls in love with a Tsotsi - who buys her presents when he wins at gambling. He makes her pregnant and then disappears. When he returns he tells her he has many children and girlfriends.

She loses her room. She is desperate - going mad - when she is recognised by a homeboy who tells the family. When she returns home she learns that her mother killed her father because of her. Shortly after her return her mother also dies. The play ends as the girl marries the boyfriend who she left to go to the town - but it is not a happy resolution.

### Usuku (The Day)

The play begins as workers are concluding a meeting. They have decided on "the day" and not even death will come in their way. The boss hears of this and wants to know what this is and when it is to happen. He tries to bribe workers. He tries to put pressure on one older worker who has been helped in the past by the firm. Their daughter is at college and ill, and needs money for an operation. This is a lever for the boss who offers R3,000 if the worker will tell the secrets of "the day". The old worker puts this to his fellow workers. They say no, and hold a collection - but only raise R200. The worker is torn between the struggle and his family. The child dies.

His wife - an educated woman - blames the workers. The funeral is a lower class, Zionist affair - and she refuses to be involved. At the service a letter arrives, via friends, from the daughter. She talks of her pride for her father's stand against the boss and the need for unity in the workers'

struggle. The point is made that the struggle also involves sacrifice.

As the play draws to an end the boss speaks to the old worker. He says, "let us be friends. I behaved like an animal." But despite his remorse he adds, "I behaved like any other employer in my place would - and I still want that day." The worker refuses: "That day belongs to the workers."

There was no time to perform Usuku on May Day. The play was performed later at the Natal Transport and General Workers Union AGM.

### Women street cleaners play

During this time Nisa was working with a group of amapondo women street cleaners from the Transkei. They live in Kwa Mashu and work for Kwa Zulu under the Port Natal Administration. Their contracts specify R52 per month for 20.83 hours work. But in fact they work 7.00 am to 2.00 pm each day. In April they receive a small increase to R65 per month. The workers met with Nisa in the afternoons for work on the play.

As a small group of amapondo they are rejected by many in the township as outsiders. The play says we are also human beings - and are exploited like you: poor wages, no workmans compensation; no sick leave. These workers are so poor they live a life similar to that in the rural areas.

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SALB: How important is cultural work? Why are you involved in the area?

Cultural Group: This question must be asked to people who have been exposed to the work we do. For us it has been important in three ways: (a) it takes a step, a small step towards pushing workers to start controlling their creative power. So far this power has been used by everybody in power and with money, for their own purposes. Brother Mi Hlatshwayo will be talking about this at the July workshop: how we have been culturally exploited and impoverished; (b) it creates a better sense of unity amongst workers: poems, songs, plays etc. and the struggle to make them available to our brothers and sisters, enriches us. We are not united because of need

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or hunger alone; (c) it educates people about our struggle and puts across a true picture of things - our picture. You see we are involved in this, however hard it is for us after work, because we believe that our struggle is not only there to destroy the oppressive powers that control us. It is there to also build a new world. To do this, we must begin now.

SALB: What is the future direction of cultural work to be?

Cultural Group: We cannot predict the direction it will follow. But we would like to see some developments like: (a) the work must be deepened, for the workers to gain more skills in the factory, and at the local and community levels. This is a lot of work for us to do so the work can happen smoothly; (b) we must think seriously of the correct spaces and venues for it to happen; (c) more care should be spent in making the work reflect our moral vision - for example, it should be democratic, it should attack division on lines of colour and rank, it should actively encourage women to come to the fore, it should communicate better...

SALB: Are there any organisational gains from cultural work?

Cultural Group: On this you must ask the Dunlop or the Frame shop stewards. If it awakens the need for unity and the need for justice; if it educates correctly, then it is a help to organisation.

SALB: Do you see your work as having a specifically working class character? How does this contribute to, or conflict with the wider tradition of black cultural resistance and protest?

Cultural Group: There are very strong cultural traditions: we are schooled in them from childhood. But at the same time there is no one tradition, there are many. Of course it has many political elements from the past. But it also has many new ones. Where it gets its character is quite simple: it starts from our experience and our unity. So it has to draw a line against any exploiter in the factory or the townships; against impimpis; against white and black politicians who betray us; against divisions. It also differs from a lot of black creators who have a patronising attitude to us: a lot of people with a ticky's worth of education have a superior

attitude towards us. They speak a language we don't understand. Our task is to take our rich or poor heritage and make it satisfy working people, their families and any other suffering people in South Africa.

SALB: What are the implications of a move from "performance" to written work? Will this make your work less immediately accessible to a broad audience?

Cultural Group: It is not true that our work is mainly becoming pieces of paper. No, there are a small number of us who also write. But there are hundreds performing. At this stage, for every black worker who picks up a pencil and forgets about the bottle, there's a victory. But most of the work is for performance in any place where people and workers meet.

SALB: How does management view these plays - where they are often the subject of attack or ridicule?

Cultural Group: Management has not seen much of the work. There were some tensions about the Dunlop Play. But overall some of them are irritated because they hear they are ridiculed.

SALB: Thus far the plays have clearly acted to reinforce the work of the unions. No union can be perfect - can plays also have a critical role - highlighting problems in order to discuss, and improve the working of the union? Perhaps to confront areas of division or potential division?

cultural Group: Criticism is what happens everyday between workers and shop stewards, shop stewards and trade union officials. Cultural workers as well are involved in criticising conditions - it cannot be otherwise. Either you tell the truth or you might as well become laughable. The difference is that we don't criticise in order to divide workers but rather to do the opposite: to strengthen the unity of workers, and make the leadership accountable to us. The imbongi's role remember was always to praise and criticise.

SALB: Are you aware of the articles written on working class culture in the SALB? What do you feel about them?

Cultural Group: Yes, some of it. The culture issue made us

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think a bit. There are two criticisms: (a) None of the people we know, like in music, was discussed. Also the exploitation of black and worker creators was not discussed. (b) There was no challenge to the work we do so we can sit down and think carefully about mistakes. But overall it was OK because our friends and families now can see as well that we are serious. (laughter)

SALB: How far has this cultural work been taken up by other workers and become generalised?

Cultural Group: A lot of cultural activity is just taking off spontaneously. People see things happening and want to do things themselves. At every union AGM another group springs up. Now we need to give coherence to all this energy. This is not just entertainment, it is a weapon. We have to work collectively, but also allow space for individuals to develop. So with the plays - some have been written by one person - others have been workshopped by all the participants. There has been more emphasis on individual writing recently - as we see in the pages of FOSATU Worker News.

The cultural work is important in breaking down barriers between different unions and groups of workers - and also between workers and their families; and between the factory and the community. Much of the recent work shows a concern with these broader social issues.