

Women to spearhead commuter train project

Contract to bring in R30.9bn

ANNA COX
anna.cox@tnl.co.za

LOCAL women will rule the game in the construction of about 600 new commuter trains over the next 10 years.

This is as they turn South Africa – especially Ekurhuleni – into a major railway manufacturer on the African continent.

All hands are on deck to complete the new factory site and training centre in Dunnotar, Nigel, which has been under construction for the past two years and which is expected to be completed by the end of March.

Construction of the train cars will then start in earnest for the R31 billion contract awarded to Gibela by the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa).

Programme director Vuyiswa Tlomsane is heading the construction of the new facility.

She is a civil engineer who worked for the City of Joburg's Johannesburg Development Agency on the construction of the Rea Vaya bus routes.

She loves her job, but admits to having had a "bit of a struggle" in the male-oriented

environment.

"I had to work twice as hard to prove myself, but people now take me seriously as I have learned to put my foot down," she said.

Tlomsane, who has two daughters, says she has the full support of her husband.

"I sometimes bring my girls to the construction site so they can get used to it," she said, adding that she had to get used to going to work in jeans and T-shirts.

The contract will see new trains which will almost equal the Gautrain with free wi-fi, air conditioning and heating.

According to Pamela Radebe, communications director for Gibela, the good news was that fares would not increase.

The project has seen many of the employees being given crash courses in maths, science and English. Railway introduction courses have also been started at some tertiary education institutions to encourage students to go into the industry, Radebe said.

It is expected that this contract will bring in R30.9 billion into the economy. It has an 88.6% black workforce of which 30% are female.

The first train was handed



FOR TRAINING: One of the first of the 600 commuter trains which will be used for training purposes by Gibela. PICTURES: NOKUTHULA MBATHA/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA)

over to Prasa in December 2016 and the first off-peak service started in February last year between the Pretoria North and Parks station.

"The response from the public has been overwhelmingly positive," said Radebe.

From April when construction is set to be complete, the factory will start operating in earnest.

The contract for the completion of the 600 trains is expected to be completed by 2023. The project is said to have created about 1300 permanent jobs and about 18800 indirect job opportunities.

The new trains are made from 90% reusable components and will therefore use less energy thereby reducing carbon emissions.

Indigenous flora was rescued from the construction site and will be replaced once the building operations area is complete.

The company will have 400 full-time employees at the Dunnotar site.

According to Radebe, more than 200 South African engineers and technicians – most historically disadvantaged who have been specially trained and oriented by Gibela and its majority shareholder, Alstom, will be at the forefront

of the manufacturing process at the latter's train-building centres of excellence around the world.

Fifty skilled and semi-skilled artisans from Ekurhuleni were recruited for the manufacturing process.

The first South African train's car body shell – essentially, its metal panel-clad metal frame – is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

At peak production – planned for the end of 2019 – more than 1000 employees are expected to be turning out an average of seven-and-a-half cars a week and five trains a month – an average of 62 trains a year.

Eighteen of 20 trains built at Alstom's Lapa, Brazil factory – using South African materials and involving South Africans – were in commercial service for the best part of last year.

They are estimated to have already clocked up more than half a million kilometres in total.

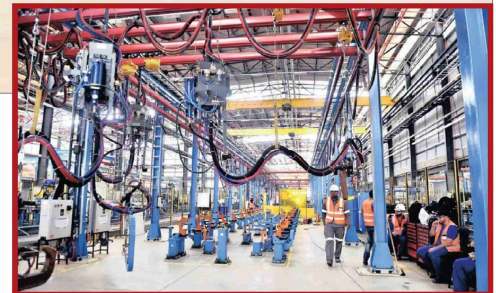
One of the two trains built in Brazil – used initially for testing purposes – will now be based at Gibela's training centre at Dunnotar.

It will be instrumental in the training of about 19500

artisans and technicians for Gibela and for the rejuvenated South African rail sector as a whole over the next 10 years.

To meet its local content commitment of at least 65% of contract value, Gibela has 54 South African suppliers for materials, parts and services. "We plan to play a major role in re-establishing South Africa especially Ekurhuleni as the Africa continent's railway engineering centre of excellence," Radebe added.

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IN PLACE: The complicated electronic system which is being put into place at the new factory in Nigel by Gibela which is constructing the new trains for Prasa.



INDUSTRY EXPERT: Vuyiswa Tlomsane is the programme director heading the construction of the new train manufacturing facility in Dunnotar.



UNDER CONSTRUCTION: A panel of one of the 600 commuter trains being constructed.