

THE MAY 5th-6th WORKER-STAYAWAY IN PIETERMARITZBURG

INTRODUCTION

The United Democratic Front (UDF) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) called for two days of peaceful protest on May 5th and 6th against the White elections, and the killing of six striking railway workers by the police (as well as other issues related to police response to the SATS strike). In effect it was a call for a worker stayaway and a scholars' boycott.

The Labour Monitoring Group (LMG) monitored the extent of the stayaway and boycott nationally. In Pietermaritzburg the Development Studies Research Group (DSRG), based in the Economics Department at the University of Natal undertook the task. The main aspect of the monitoring was an extensive survey of management to establish the extent of the stayaway and the attitudes of management to the stayaway generally. The interviews were conducted by telephone on May 6th.

A team of fieldworkers, all students based in the different townships, also monitored the response to the call for a stayaway and boycott.

MANAGEMENT SURVEY

Sample.

Of the African workforce in industry and commerce the majority (68%) are employed in the industrial sector. The sample was designed to reflect this distribution.

The firms interviewed in the industrial sector were mainly those that employed 75 or more people, while those in the commercial sector employed a minimum of 30 people. There were 70 firms in the sample – 42 from industry and 28 from commerce.

Findings.

The 70 firms interviewed employed 12143 workers representing 28% of the total labour force in industry and commerce.

The validity of the sample is indicated in the table below which records the correlation between the racial breakdown in the sample with the racial breakdown in the actual labour force in Pietermaritzburg.

Labour Force in sampled Firms and Actual Labour Force

| Sector | Racial Group | Actual Labour Force | Sample Labour Force | |
|----------|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | | | Number | % Actual Labour Force |
| Industry | African | 9171 | 5278 | 57.6 |
| | Coloured | 1083 | 456 | 47.4 |
| | Indian | 5960 | 3061 | 51.4 |
| | White | 2160 | 840 | 38.4 |
| Commerce | African | 4226 | 1175 | 27.8 |
| | Coloured | 856 | 213 | 24.9 |
| | Indian | 3693 | 764 | 20.7 |
| | White | 16165 | 356 | 2.2 |

63% of Africans stayed away from work on May 5th and 64% on May 6th.

The response of workers from other racial groups to the stayaway was negligible. (See Table below.)

Table 2. **Worker Stay-Away by Racial Group.**

| Sector | Racial Group | Stayaway as % of Workforce | |
|------------|--------------|----------------------------|---------|
| | | May 5th | May 6th |
| Industry | African | 63.8 | 64.1 |
| | Coloured | 11.6 | 12.0 |
| | Indian | 3.4 | 3.3 |
| | White | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Commercial | African | 62.4 | 62.7 |
| | Coloured | 1.8 | 3.3 |
| | Indian | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| | White | 0.0 | 0.0 |

93% of the firms were affected by the stayaway.

Of these firms 3/5 adopted a "no work, no pay, no penalty" policy.

3% said they would pay workers who stayed away.

6% said they would take some form of disciplinary action.

The rest were undecided or would not offer any comment.

When management was asked what they felt about stayaways being used as a form of political protest, the response was:

*60% said that everybody loses out and the stayaway does not achieve anything.

*5% felt that workers had no option but to use the stayaway for political purposes, and management will have to be understanding about this.

* The remaining 33% would offer no comment.

*40% of the firms were unionised, accounting for 59% of the workforce (55% in industry and 25% in commerce).

*74% of the unionised workers stayed away on May 6th.

This represents 71% of unionised workers in industry and 76.5% of unionised workers in commerce.

81% of Cosatu members took part in the stayaway.

*53% of non-unionised workers stayed away.

SURVEY OF THE COMMUNITY

On May 4th a small number of pamphlets were distributed in some of the African Townships in support of the stayaway and boycott. Some pamphlets were distributed in the Indian business areas calling on shop-keepers to close in support of the call. By word of mouth, however, news of the stayaway spread far and wide in the African community. Press reports also suggested that there would be a stayaway. It would seem too that many companies discussed the possibility of a stayaway with their employees. The SADF distributed leaflets headed "The Security Forces Greet You" encouraging people to go to work, promising them protection against intimidation.

On the two days of the stayaway there was a very limited bus service operating in the townships. None of the KwaZulu Transport Services were operating as none of the drivers turned up to work.

There was no kombi service in the African townships either. However a monitor observed private trucks transporting workers into the city.

Most of the shops in the African areas were closed. In the Indian areas of the city about 60% of the shops were closed on May 5th and about 90% on May 6th.

Almost all the schools in the African areas were shut on both days apart from two schools. Indian and Coloured schools functioned normally.

At the University of Natal some students, mainly black, boycotted lectures on the 5th and especially the 6th of May. On the 6th about 400 students organised an open-air

meeting on the campus but the intervention of police forced them to continue the meeting inside.

CONCLUSION

In view of the State of Emergency and the almost complete lack of pamphlet distribution, the extent of the stayaway was clearly remarkable (supported by the workers and scholars). The high percentage (81) of Cosatu workers who stayed away would suggest that the Union Federation plays a significant role in ensuring the extent of the stayaway. But the fact that one half of the non-unionised workers stayed away is also significant.

The overall conclusion that might be drawn from this survey is that notwithstanding the legal restrictions, the stayaway can and will be used for political purposes, and the state, management and the workers will have to come to terms with this. □

by Richard Steyn, Editor, The Natal Witness.

AN ADDRESS AT THE GRADUATION CEREMONY, UNIVERSITY OF NATAL PIETERMARITZBURG, 1987

Mr Chancellor, Mr Vice-Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to have been invited to address you this evening. The Natal Witness and the University of Natal have had a long and fruitful association and I regard this invitation as an affirmation of our association, and I thank you for it.

Less than a year ago I was present, as a visitor, at Harvard University's graduation (commencement) ceremony. It was a spectacular occasion – a blend of high ceremonial and circus – held in the open air in the picturesque quadrangle adjoining Harvard Yard. Its climax came when the president of Harvard, in ringing tones, formally welcomed the graduands assembled before him "to the fellowship of educated men and women."

The president had a twinkle in his eye, for he knew, as did everyone present, that it was decidedly presumptuous to suppose that three or four years at a university – even one like Harvard – entitled one to enter the fellowship of educated men and women. He was also probably aware of the truth of the old saw that every man has two educations – that which is given to him and that which he gives himself. Of the two kinds the latter is the more valuable; what we are merely taught seldom nourishes the mind as does that which we teach ourselves.

Tonight we are gathered to honour not only those who have distinguished themselves in post-graduate studies, but also those who have spent three or four years at University and have come to the end of their formal education. In

congratulating all on their achievements, I want to suggest to the new graduates that the most important part of their education lies ahead.

Walter Wriston, one of America's leading bankers, made a remark which is relevant to the situation in which we in this country find ourselves today: "Since we are prisoners of what we know, often we are unable to imagine what we don't know. Man, given the proper initiative and freedom to act, has repeatedly found alternatives to ambiguity and doom."

Prisoners of what we know. It is one of the paradoxes of modern society that despite the astonishing advances in information technology – in print, in the electronic media, in home computers and word processors – and despite being virtually drowned in information, we are as lacking in knowledge as ever. We confuse information with knowledge and are so over-burdened with facts that often we fail to reflect upon their meaning. In many Western countries, literacy levels have declined alarmingly as a result of the huge increase in computer-scored, multiple-choice test-papers. These tests require no skills of composition and only moderate reading ability. The British are lamenting a general drop in education standards brought about by experimentation and Treasury cuts. In America, according to social forecaster Jim Naisbitt, high school graduates today are less skilled than their parents were. Despite America's current restructuring from an industrial to an information and services-based society and the excel-