

HOW OUR WORKERS' COMMITTEE HELPED US - by a Worker.

The following is a story told by a worker at a large Company in Cape Town.

The story shows how workers can organise themselves and gain better conditions.

WORKERS' COMMITTEE FORMED

A worker, Mr. X, came to the workers' meeting room at the Company's offices, and told the other workers that he had been insulted by one of our foremen, for no good reason. This situation was intolerable - the workers could lose their patience and this could result in their being discharged. The workers were also put in a difficult position because they have families which they support. So what could they do?

Mr. X. demanded that the incident be reported to higher authorities, and that the workers take action to stop this attitude in the part of the foremen. The issue was put to all the workers who were there. A worker proposed that a committee of five be formed in order to represent the workers. This was done, and it was unanimously elected. The committee was instructed to raise the workers' complaints with their employers.

The Committee drew up a memorandum, listing six complaints, and posted it to the Board of Directors of the Company.

Workers' Met the Manager.

About a week later, Mr. Z (another worker on the Committee) was called by the Branch Manager and asked if he knew about the letter. Mr. Z told the Manager that he did, and explained the grievances to the Manager, who told Mr Z to let the workers know that their letter was under consideration and that a reply would come soon. Mr Z refused to convey the message and suggested that the Manager should meet the workers personally as it was desired by the workers. This was agreed.

He came to see the workers accompanied by two other white office workers, finding all the workers already waiting. He introduced himself as Mr. A, the Branch Manager of the Company.

He said: "You have written a letter and sent it to the Board of Directors".

The reply was yes.

He mentioned that the letter contained 6 points of complaint of the workers.

The reply was yes.

He said that the letter had been referred to him for consideration. He told the workers that the company was a business concern and

that it was not easy to make a demand about money and have it granted at once - higher authorities meet and consider the effect of the demand on all the workers employed by the Company. He asked the workers to wait with patience. He also told the workers that he had investigated other workers' conditions and that these workers worked harder than they did, were paid less and yet were not complaining.

I then stood up and said to Mr A:-

"Mr. A., I find it surprising that you should make comparisons between us and those other workers. We have made demands for reasons which are known to you.

"The cost of living has increased and we find that we cannot meet all the necessities of a family. I feel I must put the position of your workers to you truthfully.

"As workers we have no other means of making a living except by working. We work to support our families, to educate our children and to look after their health - that is the basic necessity of every head of a family. If one fails to fulfil one of these necessities, then the family loses one of its basic needs, and that breeds delinquency, which tends to affect the community as the society as a whole.

"We are not asking for privileges, but we are demanding our rights. If you would permit me, Mr A, to go further, I would tell you why you compare us with other workers - you wanted to draw the attention of the workers away from what they deserve.

"You think our wages are sufficient - but they are not. This wage is not worth your weekly pocket-money to you, yet we are expected to support families.

"If you were a good South African, you would be concerned that African children do not get education because their father's wages are miserable. The cost of living is very high - and we pay the same prices for food stuffs, buy at the same stores, and on education we spend more than the White and Coloured spends.

"I know that it is a duty of the State to pay for the education of its citizens without discrimination - but they don't. You have chosen to elect people to Parliament whose doctrine is to discriminate, so that your business will be protected and so that you can make more money, while the value of pay given to the Black becomes less.

"As a good South African, Mr A, increase the wages of your member so that we can send our children to universities with full stomachs. We want equal pay for equal work."

Mr. A asked: "What is your name, gentleman?" I told him who I am.

Mr. A replied: "Firstly in reply to you, I see that you are a spokesman for these fellows. I want to tell you that I belong to no political party, but you have stated the case clearly and I do realise now that these wages are low. I will therefore throw my weight behind your demand for increases.

"I am sympathetic to you people, but the Board that decides on money matters is composed of members with different views. I do not promise you that the Board will grant you any increase, but I promise that I will fight for these increases to the best of my ability."

### We Get Our Increases.

Three weeks later, I was called to the Manager's office and was told that the Board has granted a 20% increase and that the gap between the skilled and unskilled workers is going to be closed. The Board has decided to look after the interests of all its workers, irrespective of colour.

The Board is also considering opportunities for educated Africans, as we will soon need educated Africans in our business.

On the other points we raised in our memorandum:-

- the working hours cannot be changed as they are laid down by the Industrial Council
- Coats will be provided to those working with water
- the White staff has been told to address us as "Mister"

The following week, the Manager asked the workers to assemble in the Meeting room, and confirmed all his talks.

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### TRADE UNIONS

Black workers can legally form trade-unions - there is no law banning workers from forming or joining trade unions. The law states that African workers cannot form officially registered trade unions which can take part in official negotiations on behalf of the workers.

But workers must not be disillusioned by this. The history of trade unions around the world is one of beginning without any official recognition and of having to strive against the opposition of governments and employers. But once the start has been made, and once trade unions have become strong among the workers, governments and employers have been forced to grant them legal recognition. The strength of a trade union lies in the unity and determination of the workers.