

Workers, from October to November last year (1974) the stevedores of Cape Town organised a very effective ban on overtime work that you may not have heard of. It would not be surprising if news of the ban on overtime never reached you because the press kept very quiet about it. The first time they wrote about it was when the ban on overtime was already two weeks old. There are also many important things that the white press never told you about. We shall now tell you what these are.

What caused the ban on overtime?

The ban on overtime work was really started by the managers of a shipping agent. They insisted that the stevedores should work overtime until 9 o'clock and not knock off at 7.30 p.m. (half past seven) as the stevedores were doing. Why did the management insist on this? They were paying overtime rates until 9 o'clock and therefore believed they had the right to make stevedores work until then. By making the stevedores work until 9 o'clock the managers can increase their profits. The stevedores would not earn cent more, but the profits of the capitalists would increase as a result of the work done by stevedores.

Why had the stevedores been working overtime until then? They worked overtime because they were earning so little money from their full day's work that they had to put in extra work to be able to provide for them and their families. The demand by management that they must work longer overtime hours made the stevedores angry. They said that overtime work was already killing them. There were also old people amongst them who were not able to do more overtime work. They said that the employers were exploiting them because they had to rely on overtime work to make enough money.

For these reasons the stevedores demanded higher wages. They insisted that the wages should be high enough so that they, the stevedores, would not have to do any overtime work at all. At that time the basic wage of stevedores varied between R17 to R19 per week. Long service workers earned from R22 to R25 per week basic. With overtime work the lower paid stevedores took home up to R25 per week and the long service workers took home about R35 per week.

Management offered the stevedores an increase of twenty per cent. This amounts to R3,40 to R5 per week. But they also insisted that the stevedores should still work overtime. The stevedores replied that the increase was too small and that they wanted an end put to overtime work. Management refused these demands. As a result 2000 (two thousand) stevedores decided to ban all work on overtime until management decided to give in to their demands. An important point to note is that all the stevedores took part in the ban on overtime. The Coloured and the African stevedores stood together against management and as a result they were much stronger than they would have been if, say, only the African stevedores banned overtime work.

How was the ban on overtime organised?

For the whole month 2000 Coloured and African stevedores banned all overtime work. How did the stevedores manage to organise a complete ban on overtime work for the month without one worker breaking the ban? From our conversations with some stevedores the first thing

to emerge was that they all felt strongly about their grievances. They all agreed that their wages were too low and that they did not want to have to work overtime. But things did not stop at their grievances. They met at lunchtimes to express their grievances and they elected a committee to lead and organise them. The committee had fourteen members and included both Coloured and African stevedores. We do not know who these fourteen committee members are because the stevedores we spoke to would not tell us their names. In this way the stevedores protected their leaders from victimisation on the part of the management and the police. Therefore the committee members could also carry on with their work on behalf of the stevedores.

How was the ban on overtime settled?

The ban on overtime work by the stevedores lasted for a whole month. Why did it come to an end? The white press reported that the stevedores wanted the money from overtime work because they needed it for Christmas presents! But the white press knew little about the ban on overtime and even less about the stevedores!

The ban on overtime work by the stevedores caused a congestion of ships at the Cape Town harbour. There were many ships, up to twenty, waiting to be unloaded. What is more, the shipping agents had said they were going to charge money if they had to wait before their ships got offloaded. It was therefore important to the management and the government that a settlement should be reached. It was the government who made the first move. Instructions came from Pretoria that the shift hours of the South African Railway and Harbours at the docks must be changed in order to do away with overtime work. They suggested two shifts per day: the first shift from six in the morning until five in the afternoon and the second shift from two in the afternoon to ten o'clock at night. Now the stevedores can only work when the railway workers are also there and the stevedores have therefore to work the same shift hours as the railway workers. This suggestion from Pretoria therefore meant that overtime work for the stevedores was being abolished. The bosses in the stevedore companies had no option but to agree to the new shift times without overtime work.

The final outcome of the ban on overtime work by the stevedores was therefore the abolition of overtime work for the stevedores. In addition to that they also accepted the twenty per cent increase in wages that was offered to them by management. This means that their wages are still low, but their work hours have improved immensely. This indicates the strength of workers when they stand together.