

WORKERS' CONTROL

ABASEBENZI normally deals with the workers struggle in South Africa. But in this issue we look at some of the demands being made by workers in Europe. These workers have a long history of organised opposition to bosses, and are finding new ways to oppose bosses. For nearly 100 years workers in Europe have had a strong trade union movement. This movement grew out of the realisation by workers that without organised, united action, they would be at the mercy of the exploitation of the bosses. Because the early movements arose directly from workers' experiences of life and could only be effective with the active support of all workers, the movements represented all the problems that faced workers.

Their demands did not stop at asking for better wages and shorter working hours. Workers demanded to be treated like people and not simply be dictated to like animals. They said: "We are no less clever than bosses. Why should we spend our lives just being told what to do? Often we can see a better way of doing a job. Why can we not use our skills to find better ways of working? Must we do the work while bosses take all the decisions that affect OUR lives?"

Now bosses were not going to accept this. They knew that if workers questioned bosses' control over work they would end up by getting rid of bosses altogether. But the bosses were clever. They realised they could not fight all the demands of workers. So they gave in in certain areas. They accepted the trade unions' right to bargain for higher wages and better conditions on behalf of the workers. In return bosses demanded that the trade unions act in a way that they called 'responsible'. Bosses insisted that trade unions negotiate only on certain issues but that the control of work was not to be discussed.

But the old demands for workers' control were not forgotten. In a few factories workers have actually managed to gain control. Usually this took place when bosses felt they were not getting enough profits from the factories and wanted to close them down. Workers were not prepared to accept this and used various ways to take over the factories. Sometimes workers forced the government to lend them the money to buy the factory. Sometimes they just took it over and told the old bosses they would be paid out from future profits. Sometimes workers got together and used their savings to start new industries. Let us look at one example of this in Spain.

Workers' Control in Spain

In 1943 a Catholic priest, Father Maria, set up a technical training school. By 1955 it had 200 pupils and they felt that what was needed was an industry they could run themselves. At first five students of the school got together and began making cooking equipment. It was not easy, but they continued. Today this has grown to a huge co-operative made up of 35 factories. These are run by the 10 000 workers who work in them.

How is it organised? To become a worker at the co-operative you have to pay money to join. This is used to expand the factories to make more jobs. The factories are run by directors elected from the workers themselves. Each worker has an equal vote and all main decisions are referred back to workers when they meet in a general assembly.

Who get the profits? Well, some of the profits are kept by the firm so as to expand production and to buy newer, better machinery. The rest is paid out to the workers. So workers not only control their jobs, but no money goes to anyone who has not worked in the factory.

Why is Workers' Control so important in Europe today?

There are many reasons:

1. To prevent bosses from cheating workers. Often bosses give complicated answers to try and prove that they can not give workers better wages and conditions. They "prove" this by using figures from the company's records. But the workers do not know if the figures are accurate or if bosses are just making them up. So workers now demand to see the company's records. But these are often difficult to understand, so they demand the right to bring in their own experts to see what is really going on!
2. To get a greater share in the wealth workers have created. Workers no longer accept that profits must simply go to bosses. They use control over the company to decide for themselves what is to be done with the profits.
3. To organise their work more efficiently. Workers also have brains and they demand to use them! Workers are the ones that actually work with the machinery. Often they know how best to organise their jobs. They use control to make sure that jobs are not dangerous to the health of workers. To make sure that workers are properly trained for the job. To fight these problems workers demand control over the way they work.
4. To stop bosses using workers as machines. Often bosses break jobs into so many parts that they have no meaning to workers. Workers are just expected to do one very simple job, such as tightening one screw all day long. If they complain that their work is too dull, bosses may answer by putting a machine in their place. Then workers lose their jobs. With workers' control there can be new machines and new jobs created for workers.

Workers spend most of their time working. This time should not simply be spent acting out the wishes of bosses. Every human being is entitled to make decisions about their lives. To remain treated like a child at the place at which workers spend most of their lives and time is intolerable. Therefore workers demand the right to control this vital area of their lives.

WHAT DO WORKERS THINK?

This month ABSEBENZI spoke to a group of workers at the Advice Bureau's office. There were three who work for King's Transport, and they had a sad story to tell.

They had come into the Advice Bureau to get legal help. They said that while they were delivering goods, the driver of the truck stole something. When the bosses found out that something was missing, they said that it must have been stolen by the workers. The bosses refused to listen to the workers story that the driver had stolen the missing goods. The 3 workers were told that they had to pay R50 each.

The workers said it was bad enough paying for something they did not steal. But usually they earn only R16 a week - no the bosses decided to take off R10 a week for 5 weeks until each worker had paid off R50. This meant that for 5 weeks the workers earn only R6!

The workers were dissatisfied with this. They had heard about the Advice Bureau, so decided to come in to see if the Advice Bureau could help. They were told that it is illegal for bosses to deduct money unless a COURT has proved that the workers actually stole something. So the Advice Bureau would write to the bosses to give the money back to the workers.

This pleased the workers very much. They had not known about the Advice Bureau before. Now they saw how a workers' organisation would help them. While at the Advice Bureau, they had also learnt about the happenings among other workers. They had learnt a number of useful and interesting things about workers in other factories. They felt that many of these ideas would be useful at their own work. Most important, they said, they now felt part of the Advice Bureau and of the workers' struggle in Cape Town.