

THE STRIKES IN DURBAN

We believe that Cape Town workers should know that they are not alone in their struggle for higher wages and better working conditions. Since the earliest years workers have been struggling to improve their pay and conditions. Sometimes the workers were successful and made much progress, but sometimes the workers were not strong enough and were not successful. In this article ABASEBENZI looks at the strikes in Durban in 1973. It is essential that all workers know about these strikes, because it is part of the history of the workers' struggle in South Africa. Workers must know how other workers tried to improve their wages and working conditions.

First ABASEBENZI will look at what happened in Durban and then we will look at the reason for the successes and failures of the workers.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The first factory to come out on strike was Coronation Brick and Tile. The 2 000 workers were dissatisfied with their wages and after much discussion amongst themselves, they decided that the only thing to do was to go on strike. One morning all the workers went to a nearby stadium and demanded to speak to the bosses. The workers also demanded that the minimum wage be increased from R9 to R20. They rejected the bosses' first offer of R10, but four days later the workers accepted an offer of R11 per week.

The success of the Coronation Brick workers soon led to many other strikes. More than 6 000 African and Indian workers at the Frame factories went on strike and a few days later 16 000 municipal workers struck. By this time there were about 50 strikes in Durban and more than 50 000 workers were demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

Nearly all the workers forced the bosses to give them higher wages, but the bosses were able to resist some of the workers' demands. ABASEBENZI now looks at the reasons why the workers were able to achieve the gains they did.

UNITY OF ALL WORKERS

The first thing that one notices is the unity of all the workers. For example, when a strike was called at the Frame factories, all 6 000 workers refused to work. Through their unified action they were in a stronger position to force bosses to give in to their demands.

How did the workers achieve their unity? There are several ways in which the workers preserved and increased their unity.

The first way was through discussion. The workers had much discussion amongst themselves before the strikes and in this way all the workers were convinced that it was the only thing to do. This meant that the bosses could not simply end the strike by putting a few of the leaders in prison. The bosses could see that the leaders were expressing the will of all the workers. Taking away the leaders would not break the unity of the workers and it would only make the workers angry.

Secondly, the workers increased their unity and strength by always coming to the factory while they were striking, instead of staying at home. In this way they preserved their unity by discussion about what their next action should be. Workers from other factories saw the strikers and discussed the strikes with them. After they decided to join the strikers and so whole industrial areas went on strike together. In this way the workers increased their unity with other workers. The workers also increased their strength. When there are many workers on strike bosses find it much more difficult to replace the strikers with unemployed workers.

Another way in which the workers preserved their unity was by rejecting all efforts by the bosses to divide them along apartheid lines. At the Frame factories, at the Durban municipality and many other factories, the bosses pleaded with Indian and Coloured unskilled workers to keep on working. They even offered them higher wages if they did not go on strike. But the Indian and Coloured workers did not fall into this Apartheid trap! They knew that the bosses would again reduce their wages as soon as the unity of the workers had been broken. All over Durban African, Indian and Coloured workers went on strike together. Through their unity they forced the bosses to give them wage increases. The workers of Durban realised that the unity of workers did not mean that only African workers must be united. It meant that all African, Indian and Coloured workers must be united.

PROBLEMS

Because of the unity and strength of the workers they often rejected the first wage increases offered by management. But the workers of Durban were very poor and could not strike for very long. Eventually they had to accept management's second offer, even though this might be less than they demanded.

A second problem was that although the workers in different factories all went on strike together, they all made different demands. Often some workers accepted a relatively small wage increase and this weakened the position of the other striking workers.

The workers in Durban soon realised that only worker organisations could overcome these problems. After a strike ends, the worker organisation can preserve the unity of the workers and continue to press the demands of the workers. Worker organisations can also ensure that the workers in all the different factories make the same demands and accept the same offers. In this way the unity of the workers will not be broken.

So we find that soon after the strikes ended, the Durban workers began to organise themselves into unions to overcome the problems of poverty and lack of cooperation between factories.

We have seen that the Durban strikes were quite successful and the workers made many gains through their unified action. The workers would have made even greater gains, but they were faced with the problem of poverty and too little cooperation between factories. After the strikes the workers tried to overcome these problems by forming unions.

But the lesson from Durban is surely that only when all workers, African, Indian and Coloureds cooperate, can the workers improve their wages and conditions.

WHAT DO WORKERS THINK?

This month ABASEBENZI spoke to three railway workers. They had come to the Advice Office after reading about it in ABASEBENZI and were looking for assistance.

The main reason that these workers came in was because they had a serious grievance - they could not get any response from workers or the bosses with regard to this grievance.

One of them, whom they had chosen to discuss this grievance at the Advice Office, James Radebe, had 15 years service with the railways. He told us that every year workers who lived in the Transkei and Ciskei had been given six months' leave to look after their interests at home. And now they are to be given only three months. This is a very serious problem for someone who is forced to live in two worlds. The workers were not given any reasons why their leave had been cut.

There is a Staff Association where all the workers, "Coloured", Black and White