

THE WORKERS AT UNION WHALING COMPANY STAND TOGETHER

On Monday 21st April about 300 workers at the Union Whaling Company went on strike. They returned to work when Management promised to answer their demand for higher wages on Friday 25th. On that day a rise of R5 a month was offered, plus another R3 in July. "Abasebenzi" interviews the workers, and this is what they said.

THE STRIKE

Abasebenzi : When did you decide to ask for better wages?

Workers : We had been talking in the compound about this. Then at the beginning of April we asked the Liaison Committee to bring us a reply from management. There was no reply, so we sent them back. Management said that an increase would be given in July, not now. They also said that it was the Liaison Committee members who wanted an increase, and not the workers. We talked about this thing, and decided that we would show management who the workers are here. So on Monday morning everyone sat down.

NEGOTIATIONS

Abasebenzi : Tell us about the negotiations.

Workers : From the office they sent clerks, the factory manager, the compound manager, and so on. But we insisted that we must talk to the Managing Director. When the compound manager came he said they would fire some of us and give the rest of the workers their money. We all got up and said "If one goes we all go."

Abasebenzi : Were you happy with the increase you got on Friday?

Workers : No. Only ten of us accepted the offer. The rest of us still want R20 a month more for everyone. Some workers here have been getting only R58 a month.

THE UNION

Abasebenzi : How many of you are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union ?

Workers : Many of us, and more are joining since our struggle began. When management asks us if we are members of the Union we tell them : we are all members now, because we are standing together for our rights as workers.

E D I T O R I A L

WAGE INCREASES

It is important for all workers in the METAL INDUSTRY to note that : because of the Consumer Price Index rise, while the current agreement is in force a substantial compensation of 15% wage increment has been made. (This means 6c above the hourly rate to the majority of Black workers). Make a special note too that this increment will be in effect from the 2nd of June, 1975 until 30th June, 1976.

Needless to say that this is mockery of wage increment, when judging the inflatory cost of living. All that it does is to keep one's head above the water. Is there anyone who can say this is enough? The obvious fact is that whenever the cost of living rate increases the employers fool workers by giving them something to keep them quiet.

Is it not true that wages for many Black workers do not cover the standard of P.D.L. - it's peanuts. But maybe we are responsible for all this exploitation we endure. When will the Black man stand up and fight against unjust exploitation of this labour? When will they unite and speak with one voice? The UNION, brothers. What do you think it is there for?

FACTORIES

The struggle of South Africa's workers reached a high point during the strikes of 1973. The strikes are over but the struggle continues. What can we do now to strengthen ourselves?

The first step is to organise ourselves in each factory. We must form groups to talk about problems in the factory and to organise other workers.

Leaders must be chosen to go and speak to the Union. But we must remember that the Unions cannot solve all our problems. They can help us and give us advice, as well as negotiate with management. The bosses will only listen to us when we, the workers are strong and united. Unity in each factory - that is what we must work for now.

WORKERS' POLICY

What happened at Romatex is not new. Moving us around to different departments or "retrenching" us is an old employer game. So is reduction of wages, and the employment of new workers at lower wages. Management can do these things when we are not organised.

But workers at Romatex acted well on another issue. When threatened with retrenchment, some workers demanded that management reinstate them in their original jobs. They won this demand. This is good worker management!

We know that Works Committees are useless. Abasebenzi believes that we can have some control over conditions of work and wages only if we are all members of Unions with Shop Stewards in all factories. Then we can all negotiate effectively.

HOW WE ARE FIGHTING TODAY- Different Tactics, one struggle

None of us will forget the Durban strikes of 1973. They will be written down in history books, but more important is the memory we carry forward in our struggle.

The bosses gave us better wages and works committees. They also fired some of our leaders. In some factories they made the jobs harder and the workers fewer. Using informers, they kept a closer watch on us than before. And all the time, prices kept rising.

For our part, we decided to strengthen and preserve our unity in trade unions: Textile, Metal and Allied, Furniture and Timber, Chemical and now Transport and General. We called on all workers to join and make the unions strong. We also tried to build good foundations in each factory and also in each department. We 'hastened slowly' when we had to.

Some factories have built up strength quickly. Others, where conditions have been more difficult, have been slower. For this issue of Abasebenzi we interviewed workers in four different factories, and asked them to tell our readers about their struggle.

THE FIRST WORKER JOINS

Abasebenzi : Could you please tell us something about your work?

Worker : I work at a Sugar Company. My job is to push sugar cane into machines.

Abasebenzi : How many people are there in your factory?

Worker : There are many, but I am the first one to join the Union.

Abasebenzi : How well do the workers and the management get on with each other?

Worker : Not well. We are not satisfied.

Abasebenzi : What are your complaints?

Worker : The first is the pay. We are paid only R1,25 a day. This is not enough for the hours we work. We work from 5 in the morning to 3 or 4 in the afternoon.

Then there is the work itself. It is very long and very hard and boring. At times the work makes we ill.

Abasebenzi : What has happened when you have been ill?

Worker : I was treated in the firm's hospital. But I was not paid when I was ill. You are only paid when you have been hurt (Workmen's Compensation).

Abasebenzi : What holidays or leave do you get?

Worker : We are given only one day holiday a year. That is Christmas Day. In January we may go home to the Transkei, but we are not paid for that holiday.

LIFE IN THE COMPOUND

Abasebenzi : Are you happy with the compound you live in?

Worker : No. First, we do not have our wives and children with us. We are given food by the company, but it is very dull. Potatoes, boiled mealies, porridge and samp and meat only on Saturdays. On Sundays, which is our day off, we have samp and beans.

Abasebenzi : What are your rooms like? Do you have a place where you can meet and talk?

Worker : In each room there are 20 workers. We sleep on bunk beds. If we want to talk we must sit on our beds. There is no other place for us.

Abasebenzi : Have the workers tried to do anything about their complaints?

Worker : No.

Abasebenzi : What happens when workers want to complain?

Worker : There is a white man and an African man who work in the office. They are meant to deal with complaints.

Abasebenzi :

Abasebenzi : Are there any workers' committees set up by the management?

Worker : No.

Abasebenzi : You have just joined up with the Union. Why have you done this? How do you think it can help you?

Worker : If I am fired, the Union will help me if I am not paid properly. It will also work for better conditions in our work and better pay. But first more workers will have to join the Union so that it can act for them.

FROM A STRIKE TO A UNION

Abasebenzi : You say that workers in your factory are about to make a big advance in the struggle with management. Tell us about this.

Ndaba D. : Yes, we hope to break through soon. More than half of us are now members of the Union. The Union is pressing hard for recognition by management. We think there is now a good chance that management will be forced to recognise us.

Abasebenzi : When did your struggle begin?

Ndaba D. : You mustn't ask me that. Haven't we workers always been struggling - right since the early days? But I suppose you could say the present struggle in the factory began with our strike in January 1973.

AFTER THE STRIKE

Abasebenzi : What happened after that?

Ndaba D. : Wages went up. And I mustn't forget to tell you that a small room was built for us to use at lunch time.

Abasebenzi : What else has changed?

Ndaba D : Nothing much! In our factory the bosses seem to think that more pay means more work, even though most of us are still getting under R25 a week.

Abasebenzi : It seems that work conditions in your factory are not too good. Tell us more about this.

Ndaba D : One of our big complaints is the way we are treated when we are late for work. You know that many of us are forced to live a great distance from our work places and have a big problem getting to work on time. Every time a man is even five minutes late, money is deducted from his annual bonus. Workers have also been fired for lateness.

WE JOINED THE UNION

Abasebenzi : What have you been doing about your problems since the strike?

Ndaba D : Well, realising that our problems were not over, a small group of us got together and joined the Union. We approached others, but at first very few were prepared to join.

Abasebenzi : Why?

Ndaba D : For one thing they knew that informers were telling management who the Union members were. Shortly after we joined management told the workers that it was no use joining the Union because management would have nothing to do with it.

Abasebenzi : And then what happened?

Ndaba D : Shortly after this management suddenly introduced a night shift allowance, which we had been asking for for some time. Also, we noticed that they were being more careful about which workers they fired and for what reasons.

Abasebenzi : What effect did this have on workers?

THE WORKERS ARE THE UNION

Ndaba D : They saw that management made changes when workers began to organise. Union membership began to go up, slowly.

Abasebenzi : Your problems were over?

Ndaba D : It wasn't that easy! The big change came when we realised that we were the union - not just the people in the union office. We formed a committee and set ourselves a target. Now that more than half the workers are members, we have completed the first task. There's a lot of work still to be done.

THE UNION IS RECOGNISED

Abasebenzi : Are you a member of a Union?

Irene S. : In my department we are all Union members.

Abasebenzi : How did the Union come to your factory?

Irene S. : It was like this. In our factory we were dissatisfied with conditions. We tried many times to get workers together but failed till the Union was formed.

Abasebenzi : Was the Union formed in your factory?

Irene S. : No, but some of us learnt about it. Then when the organizer came to our factory we asked to join. He told us to organise ourselves. He said the Union was not something we joined but something we built. At that time we were having trouble with the piece-rate system. We got workers together on that issue, and after a struggle that was led by the Union, we won. The piece-rate was changed and the Union was recognised.

Abasebenzi : What do you mean by 'recognised'?

- Irene S. : I'm sorry, I thought you knew about that. We demanded that the company speak with our Union representatives which they did. Our Union then asked the management to sign an agreement which covers everything in our factory from wages and working conditions to how and when a worker can be dismissed.
- Abasebenzi : That was a victory.
- Irene S. : Let me tell you more about this agreement. We get an automatic rise when the cost of living goes up. But as well as that the Union can negotiate every year for better wages.
- Abasebenzi : Did you get an increase this year?
- Irene S. : We got one of 17% but we feel that this is not enough and are going to fight harder in the coming months.
- Abasebenzi : What does the agreement say about the dismissal of workers?
- Irene S. : You know how in the past workers got fired for any little thing. Now he must be warned, at least. The fact is that the company must produce real evidence before they fire a worker. So its not easy for them to fire long-service workers or our worker leaders.
- Abasebenzi : What happens when there is a dispute in the factory?
- Irene S. : We approach the Shop Steward first of all. If he can't get the supervisor to listen to reason, he can approach the manager. If that doesn't solve anything, we call the Union secretary in. The big thing is : we've got a spokesman we can trust all the way. If it's necessary, the Union ends up taking the company to court.
- Abasebenzi : Irene, you seem to know all about the agreement.
- Irene S. : Why shouldn't I? You see, when our Union negotiated with the company they consulted us at every stage. We had many meetings at which this thing was discussed. It was all in the open. Not like Works Committees

MIGRATORY LABOUR ON THE GOLD MINES

THE FIRST WORKERS

The first workers were men from the land who came for a short time only. Most came because they wanted to earn only enough money to buy guns, which they needed to defend the land. The mine owners complained that there were not enough workers in the mines. We have seen how the government passed a law which said that all men had to pay taxes. This was a way to force people to work on the mines.

LOW WAGES

Wages were low. The mine owners said that these men were farmers, not miners. They supported their families from the land, so they only needed a little money for the taxes. The men worked four or five months then went back home.

It was also at this time that the mine owners began building compounds for the workers. They crowded men together in rooms where there was enough space for beds. The food was bad. They were not allowed to leave the compound. In this way management controlled the workers.

MANAGERS' UNIONS

Workers were not allowed to form unions but the mine owners formed an association. They all agreed to pay the workers the same wage. In this way they kept the workers' wages down.

In 1897 the mine owners were strong enough to reduce wages from 21c to 13c. Extra police surrounded the compounds in case of trouble. It is interesting that white miners' wages were also reduced but they went on strike and got back their old rates of pay.

CONDITIONS TODAY

We still have this compound system today. We see it in the mines, in the sugar mills and in some factories. Men leave their wives and children for a long time. The land is often neglected because there are not enough people to farm it properly. There is less food and cattle.

BROKEN PROMISES CAUSE STRIKES

At the beginning of 1973 the management of Ropes and Mattings in Jacobs (which is part of the Frame Group) promised workers a 50c increase. This same promise has been the cause of a strike which took place in March this year.

INCREASES

Near the end of 1973 and again in 1974 workers received increases. At the same time a new factory was under construction. Later when workers were moved to this new factory their wages were reduced. Management said that the machines in the old factory vacated by workers would not be restored. But a short while later new workers were employed to work these machines also at a lower rate than before. The management had reduced wages to cover the cost of the new plant and at the same time to keep their profits the same.

BROKEN PROMISES

Again management were using their power to regulate workers' jobs and pay. So workers in Romatix demanded that management give them the 50 cents promised a long time ago, because their wages were worth less. Management rejected this demand. They had decided to cut off negotiations. So workers went on strike.

Once again it was a strike which shook management into negotiations. When will they learn? Management agreed to give the 50 cents increase. But, as usual, they set conditions to this increase. They changed the number of shifts from three to two and said they would retrench 66 workers in exchange.

One of our leaders was on the list for retrenchment. When he asked workers to help him they said "Leaders are always fired after a strike". He was not fired but shifted to another department as were the others threatened with entrenchment.

ARE LEADERS WORTH 50 CENTS?

Some workers and Union organisers think that this is not good policy for workers. They agree that workers were right to make their demands for an increase but the 50 cents would quickly be lost to deductions and by price rises. Also no one would act as a spokesman for workers demands if there is a chance they can be fired. What do workers think about this? What policy should workers adopt in a situation such as this?

POSTSCRIPT

Members of the National Textile Workers Union have rejected the Frame Groups' conditions for workers and have voted to send their officials back to try and negotiate again.