

JOHANNESBURG: AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

JANET LEVINE

CITY COUNCILLOR (PFP)

In this article Janet Levine, a PFP City Councillor, analyses the recent re-structuring of salary-scales at the Johannesburg City Council.

THAT there has been a staff crisis in the service of the Johannesburg City Council is patently obvious to all who follow the fortunes of the large administration that runs our city. Not only is there palpable and on-going discontent among the Black labourers at the lower end of the scale, discontent which manifested itself in a serious outbreak of labour unrest in August 1980, but there is also dissatisfaction at the top of the ladder, dissatisfaction which has caused a severe crisis in manpower shortages at middle managerial level, as well as several recent set-backs in the loss of two heads of departments.

At one of the most recent month-end meetings of the Council in March this year, recommendations for a new wage dispensation and salary structure for the Council's 22 321 workers were approved. The programme is designed to avert any further staff crises and therein lies the seeds of several disturbing features which bear further examination.

That they are sweeping recommendations and usher in a new era in determining salaries for local government employees is gratifying. But that being said, it must be made explicit that even with this programme the Council, as a public sector body, still lags far behind private sector enterprises both in the salaries it offers and in the type of personnel administration and labour relations it practises. Although the City Council's 13 907 Black workers are directly involved in the changes that are envisaged, neither the Black Municipal Workers' Union, which represents over ten thousand of the Council's Black workers, nor the Management Committee's own 'puppet Black union' were consulted. The changes were negotiated with and bargained for by the Industrial Council, which consists of only the White trade unions of the Council. Indeed, part of the motivation for the Council's acceptance of the proposals was to elicit its 'approval of the changes proposed as far as staff who are not represented on the Industrial Council are concerned.'

That is the entire Black labour force.

This type of labour practice is reactionary, anachronistic and downright dangerous.

What are the changes?

There are three central principles to the new dispensation.

- (i) Firstly, the Council has now adopted a unitary grading system for all its employees. This system replaces the old two-part system of 'graded' and 'non-graded' workers. Graded workers were monthly-paid workers, whose salary automatically advanced a notch on the key-scale every year, or one or two notches, if this increase was negotiated by the White municipal trade unions. The Black workers were left out in the cold on every occasion because they were not 'graded' workers. Graded workers numbered seven thousand five hundred people, all of them White except for a handful of Black clerical staff. The remaining fourteen thousand eight hundred workers were Black (13 907) and 'Coloured' and Asian (915). In the main these workers are male migrant labourers. This system had the effect of ensuring that the majority of the Council employees were never able to qualify for an increment, because each time they returned to the Council on their annual contract, they started again on the minimum level, that of non-graded worker. This fact emerged as one of the most startling disclosures of the Council's discriminatory wage-practices during the labour unrest in July last year.

Men with ten, fifteen and even twenty-five years' service to the Council were still on the bottom rung of the salary-scale. They had never received an in-built increment. Salary increases, such as they were, raised the minimum level by a paltry few cents and particularly since 1975 the basic minimum wage which has been paid (in 1980 it was R1 680 p.a.—R32,30 a week), had fallen dramatically behind the CoL index. Now the entire staff complement is to be graded in a unitary system and any worker on any grade may be advanced by merit recognition, one or more notches along the key scale, on the recommendation of the departmental head.

This is a major breakthrough for the Black labourers, as well as the White staff. It gives the heads of departments real authority in that they may advance their key workers, without having to wait for their recommendations to be ratified as in the previous cumbersome bureaucratic system of management.

- (ii) The second major principle again affects the Council's Black employees. It flows out of the first principle in that it introduces an annual built-in increment for all workers. A Black labourer may now advance eight notches along his grade over a period of eight years. The absence of this built-in increment was articulated as one of the most bitter grievances of the Black workers in July last year. The Management Committee's response in this instance is to be commended.
- (iii) The third principle is to be found in the streamlining and rationalisation of the entire wage structure. Over six hundred job titles were paid on a basis of more than three hundred different remuneration scales. This was an unwieldy system which resulted in complicated and lengthy procedures in personnel administration. It was the cause of major staff discontent.

The rationalisation programme envisages six key divisions: (a) Executive, (b) Managerial, (c) Supervisory, (d) Skilled, (e) Semi-skilled and (f) Unskilled. Within these six divisions the grades will be reduced from the previous 300-odd to a basic twenty-three. This provides for an easily understood framework for municipal pay.

These innovations certainly encompass a feeling of urgency about the overall ability of the Council to maintain and develop a reliable, contented work-force. There is a fly in the ointment, however. Lest anyone assume that the new structure also heralds a massive pay-rise let us examine the real situation. In actual terms those workers who are already graded will receive a three-notch increase and those who now become graded will move onto the bottom rung of the lowest grade. Therefore, the 13 907 Black labourers move to R1 764 p.a. (R33,92 a week) from R1 680 p.a. (R32,30 a week). The ceiling of this grade is R2 268 p.a. (R43,61 a week) and it will take the average worker eight years to reach this ceiling. **These salaries are totally inadequate. They fall below every accepted Poverty Datum Line in the country and should be a source of grave concern for every rate-payer in this city.**

Salaries for Whites in the top grade by comparison, by way of the three-notch increase, move from R33 720 p.a. to R38 184 p.a. Therefore, those at the bottom have a rise of 5 percent or R84 and those at the top 13,2 percent or R4 464.

As has been already stated these innovations were approved by the Industrial Council for the Johannesburg Municipal Undertaking, a body of White-only trade unions representing only the White workers in the Council. These workers constitute only one-third of the Council's total staff complement. This type of arrogant acceptance that the

Industrial Council can presume to speak for all the Council's workers is short-sighted and ill-judged at best, and reprehensible at worst.

I find it inexplicable that the Management Committee have missed a golden opportunity for redressing some of the ill-will it generated by its abusive mishandling of the labour unrest last year, by not holding even informal talks with the Black Municipal Workers' Union and even its own 'sweet-heart' Black union.

An awareness of this and other shortcomings leave me with only a qualified and somewhat sceptical welcome of these new innovations. Until meaningful communication is structured into the Management Committee's dealings with the Black labour-force, I feel uneasy and concerned about our whole labour relations situation.

I do not believe that we have heard the end of the story.



'Coloured' schoolgirl overcome by teargas.

● Acknowledgements to The Star. Picture by Alf Kumalo.