WORKERS MARCH ON

The main gain so far of COSATU's living wage campaign is the co-operation that is developing between NUM and NUMSA on the wage struggle front. Both NUM and NUMSA have declared disputes with the bosses in negotiations that affect over a million workers nationally.

It is likely that these disputes will come to a head during July. In the meantime, the unions are sharing information and planning joint campaigns to mobilise mine and metal workers in the living wage struggle.

Disputes in a number of food, chemical, retail, hotel, municipal, transport and [illegible] workplaces are also likely to reach a peak during July. If these unions co-ordinate their struggles with NUM and NUMSA, well over a million workers could strike for a living wage at the same time.

In the meantime workers in all sectors have taken action around most COSATU demands as this brief overview of struggle this year shows:

Living wage OK?

This year began with over 10,000 OK Bazaars workers already in the third week of a national strike for a living wage. After 11 weeks of struggle, confrontation, arrests and intimidation OK workers went back as one united force with R100 across the board pay increase.

The OK strike set the pace for living wage struggles this year. And the SATS strike, which also ended in victory for 18,000 SARHWU workers, took the struggle to even greater heights. The dismissal of one worker led to the biggest and longest ever strike in the public sector in SA.

In the Transvaal, OFS and Eastern Cape railway workers came out on solidarity strike. Other workers clashed [illegible] coming from SATS and thousands of commuters took free rides. Workers responded with a massive nation-wide stayaway on May 5 and 6 to calls for protest action in solidarity with the SATS strikers. After 3 months of bitter struggle, the SATS workers went back united and victorious.

CCAWUSA has won other good increases at Pick 'n Pay (R100 across the board), [illegible] (R120) over 1 year and Allied Publishing (R112).

While the OK strike was happening, 1700 Metal Box workers at 7 plants went on a national 9-day strike. Workers, members of PWAWU, won a 50c per hour increase. Later 3 Sappi plants came out around demands for a living wage and national negotiations. And Kohler in Brakpan had a six-week strike for a better wages.

CWIU workers are amongst the highest paid in the country. Workers at Ciba Geigy, Reckitt and Coleman and Chesebrough Ponds are earning over R4 an hour. Working hours are mainly below 45 hours a week with Reckitt and Coleman working 40 hours a week.

At SKB 700 workers at 4 plants went on a national strike for 3 weeks in March before winning a 33% increase in the lowest grade, while minimum wages for women workers increased by 54%. And at Shell, Mobile and Caltex OK workers won R150 per month increase, bringing minimum wage to R735 per month. Workers will also receive 100% increase on shift allowances.

In the metal industry NUMSA is demanding R4 an hour at the Industrial Council and is in dispute with the bosses organisation Seifsa. There have already been a number of strikes in metal factories around wages and conditions of work and NUMSA has also just won the right to negotiate wages for its members at Iscor where there are 11,000 workers.

The NUM has demanded a 55% across the board increase for mineworkers. NUM is already in dispute with the Chamber of Mines. The struggle continues – strikes are breaking out on the mines every week around wages and conditions.

In the food industry, FAWU workers at Rowntree Sugus, Dairymaid, African Products, Clover, SAB and Coca Cola amongst others have taken strike action around issues of wages and solidarity. SAB workers are demanding a living wage of R5 an hour. Food workers have been rallying around the slogan "The factory is ours" and have backed up strikes with solidarity action, pickets and blacking action.

Municipal, health, hotel and transport are also presently mobilising for a living wage.

Women worker rights

NUMSA and other food unions have recently won a big victory on the Industrial Council. All women workers in the metal industry have 6 months maternity leave at about 50% of normal wages.

Maternity rights for women workers have been won at over 30 CWIU factories in the Transvaal and sex discrimination has been ended on the SAREK plants and mines – where many women get wage increases from R200 to R478 per month.

CCAWUSA is now beginning extensive negotiations for paternity rights which will ensure that men and women workers play an equal role in family life.

Worker holidays

May Day is no longer an issue. Workers have the won the day in 100's of factories in every sector. June 16th has also been won in a number of factories – particularly in the food and chemical industries. This year workers once again demonstrated that, like May Day, June 16 is ours. CWIU has won Sharpeville Day and FAWU is demanding a COSATU Day.

- Every worker must be paid enough to live decently – a living wage & jobs for all.
- If the bosses say they can't pay they must open their books for inspection by workers.
- Wages should go up automatically with price increases.
- Workers should not pay GST or income tax.
- Workers should control UIF and pension funds.
- Workers should not work longer than 40 hours a week and overtime should be banned.
- There should be decent education and training for all.
- Working women should get at least 6 months paid maternity leave.
- May Day, June 16th and Sharpeville Day should be paid holidays.
- Migrant labour and hostels should be abolished – workers want decent houses near work.

Detentions

The continued detention and imprisonment of worker leaders is causing great anger among workers and massive protest strikes have already taken place – for example in the chemical industry.

On 14th April the entire Transvaal branch of Ponsi went on strike against the continued detention of union leaders. About 43,000 workers took action demanding their immediate release.

At the same time, MAWU workers nationally struck for one hour every Monday for a month to protest against the detention of NUMSA General Secretary Moses Mayekiso before the unions began [illegible] stopped the action with a court interdict.

Tens of thousands of workers protested, struck and demonstrated on National Detainees day.

Decent housing for workers

The struggle against the migrant labour and hostel system is growing with NUM's commitment to take control of the hostels this year. Already mine workers in the Witbank area have turned or evict their families into the hostels and this is spreading to other areas.

SARHWU is also busy running a campaign against the hostel system and has already won important concessions on food and conditions in some hostels after lengthy canteen boycotts. SATS has agreed to spend R30 million upgrading 17 hostels as part of the settlement of the strike.

The massive rent boycotts in over 50 townships country-wide have been actively supported by many COSATU workers. We want decent housing at rents we can afford near our place of work.

Job security

The struggle against retrenchments and for job security is one facing all unions all the time. Many retrenchments planned by the bosses have been prevented through strike action and demands to share work, fair conditions and reduce the working week.

And in an important struggle, CWIU's MBOK workers have been in constant and heroic struggle – involving overtime boycotts, protests and strikes – to prevent the company closing up in Wadeville and transferring to Bophuthatswana.

Democratic society

Politics is, whether Botha and the bosses like it or not, a bread and butter issue for South African workers.

And COSATU unions speak with one voice on the immediate need for a non-racial democratic South Africa with one person one vote. But more and more, as the political crisis deepens, workers are discussing what the content of such a society should be.

Unions like NUM, CAWU, CCAWUSA and NUMSA have come out clearly in favour of a socialist society and the question of socialism is being seriously discussed in many other COSATU affiliates.

The NUM, FAWU and NUMSA, which represent well over half COSATU's membership, have also adopted the Freedom Charter as a guiding programme in the struggle for socialism. This position has a lot of support among many affiliates in COSATU.

COSATU's National Congress in July is certain to be looking at the questions of the political direction, programme and goals of organised workers more seriously than ever before.

Massive strike wave

The workers struggle also demands that COSATU seriously discuss the question of political direction. Because more than ever before, organised workers are leading the mass struggle in action.

The strikes, occupations, boycotts, blacking actions, solidarity strikes, victories and ongoing struggles so far this year, are just a small part of the hundreds of struggles affecting thousands of workers going on every single day.

There seems to be a massive strike wave developing. It has been spontaneously building up this year as more and more workers take action around their demands.

In the past 2 months, in addition to countless workplace-based strikes, hundreds and thousands of workers from Soweto and the East Rand supported a three-day stay-away.

On May Day about 1 million workers stayed away.

On May 5 and 6, the biggest national stayaway actions ever took place to protest against the white elections and in solidarity with the SATS strike.

Then we have 10s millions of workers demonstrated that the day is truly ours by taking it as a public holiday.

It is from, in these struggles and actions that workers are taking every day, that COSATU's living wage campaign must be rooted.