

Unrest in Mandini: Workers spell out their grievances

RIOT police used tear gas, dogs and batons to disperse about 3 000 workers who went on strike in the Mandini area at the end of March.

The unrest ended after a meeting at which representatives of many workers in the area outlined their demands, and negotiations with numerous employers and the local administration board were put into motion to resolve their grievances.

About 1 000 striking workers were from the SAPPI factory in Mandini and about 2 000 more were from factories in the neighbouring KwaZulu industrial area Isithebe.

Most workers live in the township Sundumbili, between Mandini and Isithebe.

BOYCOTT

Before the strike, workers at SAPPI had been boycotting canteen food for about ten days. They said the food was appalling and wanted to be paid out in cash instead.

One worker who broke the boycott was allegedly dragged out of the compound by three other workers and assaulted. Two of them, Theminkosi Mgwaba and Mbongeni Zulu, were later arrested.

SAPPI workers were furious about this. They felt management had called in the police and demanded that the company should have them released – especially since the alleged victim had declined to lay charges of assault.

The police would not release the men and SAPPI management left the whole matter in their hands.

FURIOUS

However, other residents of Sundumbili were also furious about the arrest. Both men were members of a vigilante group which was set up last year to curb the high crime rate in the township – which the police seemed unable to do.

For six months, the group had kept the peace and the crime rate had dropped drastically. The group enjoys tremendous support.

Therefore, when 1 000 SAPPI workers stayed away from work in protests against the arrests, other residents of Sundumbili, including workers at Isithebe and domestic servants in the areas, also stayed away.

TEAR GAS

The strike led to violence as riot police dispersed strikers with tear gas and chased them into the township where they used dogs, batons and arrested people. In response, people threw stones at the police but were forced to disperse.

The Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union, to which most workers at SAPPI belong, tried to organise bail for the arrested men, but both management and the police were unco-operative.

The police said they were looking for a third man, Bhekifa Mabaso, and would not release the other two until he had been arrested. Bhekifa then gave himself up to help the release of the other two.

RELEASED

The three men finally appeared in court on March 30, their case was remanded and they were released. The police then made a great show of giving the men a lift back to Sundumbili and presenting them to the people, who welcomed them back.

Then came the question of workers returning to work. The police would not allow any meetings and even SAPPI management refused to ask the police to allow meetings – despite the fact that the union organiser pointed out that workers could only decide democratically to go back at a general meeting.

Eventually the mayor of Sundumbili, Mr Caleka, called a meeting of shop stewards from SAPPI, representatives from the Isithebe factories and the domestic workers, union officials and one of his councillors.

GRIEVANCES

The following grievances were outlined:

- SAPPI workers wanted to resolve the dispute over bad canteen food
- Isithebe workers – who are very badly paid – demanded a minimum wage of R2,50 an hour, an increase of more than R2 an hour for most
- domestic workers demanded a minimum wage of R60 per month.

SAPPI management agreed to take back striking workers without victimisation provided they came back the next day. Mr Caleka met with Isithebe employers and worker representatives and promised to speak to the Port Natal Administration Board about the demands of the domestic servants.

REPORT BACK

Shop stewards and other representatives then reported back to strikers. All workers agreed to return since their arrested brothers had been released and to continue negotiating about their grievances once they were back at work.

Workers were only victimised at one factory in Isithebe, which was unfortunately an unorganised factory.



WORKERS at the KwaZulu Shoe Company during their recent strike over union recognition.

KwaZulu's man fails to settle dispute

THE struggle for union recognition at the Loskop subsidiary of the giant Canadian-based Bata Shoe Company has taken a new turn.

Workers at the subsidiary, the KwaZulu Shoe Company, struck for over a month on this issue but decided to return to work at a strike meeting held last month.

Their decision came after Mr Khanyile, appointed by the KwaZulu government to mediate in the dispute, failed completely to do so.

FRUSTRATION

Bitter frustration and disappointment with Mr Khanyile reached a climax

when it became known that he had been to the factory secretly and appointed his own committee among strikebreakers.

Mr Khanyile has claimed to have "mediated" between that committee and the company and thereby fully satisfied himself that the workers' claims were unfounded, their grievances false and the union completely unrepresentative.

Workers resolved that the union should write a formal letter to the KwaZulu Minister who appointed Mr Khanyile for clarity as to whether the government is satisfied that he properly represented the intentions of the KwaZulu Executive.

And if so, whether they are satisfied that the company is complying with their labour policy.

COMPLAINT

Workers further resolved that the union pursue their demand for recognition and wage grievances internationally.

Accordingly, an official complaint will be lodged with the ILO in connection with the company's anti-union practices and its policy of paying wages approximately 20 percent of that recommended by all international bodies concerned, including the Canadian Government and the ILO itself.

Major new role for shop stewards' councils

SHOP stewards' councils are playing an increasingly important role within FOSATU. In many areas, they are taking the lead in organisational drives and are the main forums for discussing important policy issues.

They are likely to play an even more important role in future after FOSATU changed its constitution at its recent second national congress to give formal recognition to such councils.

Shop stewards' councils are active in Pietermaritzburg, Springs, Uitenhage, Richards' Bay, Katshehong and Elandsfontein.

In Richards' Bay, the council carried out most of the organisation in the area before branches of individual FOSATU unions were formed.

KATLEHONG

In Katshehong, the council was formed with the specific intention of pushing organisation in the Wadeville area.

According to Richard Ntuli, council chairman and a shop steward at Lite-master, there were only two FOSATU factories in the entire Wadeville area at the end of 1980.

Workers therefore decided at the beginning of 1981 to form a shop ste-

wards council which would plan organisational drives.

Initially, it met every month as well as when crises occurred. By the end of last year, shop stewards from 23 factories were attending council meetings, of which 13 were well organised. Over 7 000 workers were represented at the meetings.

Since the beginning of this year, the council has met every two weeks and a planning committee has met every week in between. Monthly educational meetings are also being planned.

Richard Ntuli has said: "We recommend this way of building up democracy and union strength to all other locals."

SPRINGS

In Springs, the council has become such an important part of FOSATU organisation that a set of rules and objectives has been drafted to guide its operations.

These include:

- *to counteract sectional union interests among workers and their representatives
- *to organise a recruitment campaign to organise all workers into FOSATU unions
- *to assist workers and unions in their struggle by solidarity actions, publicity and financial support
- *to forge links with community organisations to encourage solidarity between the community and the workers' struggle.

MARITZBURG

Pietermaritzburg has one of the longest standing councils within FOSATU. It has discussed all major policy issues in the area for some time and has been responsible for much of FOSATU's growth.

According to Joku Makatini, MAWU organiser in Maritzburg, it has been meeting less often than before because of the rapid growth of membership in the area, but the intention is that it should play a major role in consolidating organisation in the new factories.

Democractic and effective, says Northern Natal

THE shop stewards' council in Northern Natal is the main decision-making body for all FOSATU unions operating in the area.

The council consists of all shop stewards from all factories organised by five unions – Metal and Allied Workers' Union, Chemical Workers' Industrial Union, Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union and Transport and General Workers' Union and Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union.

SUB-COMMITTEES

There have never been many organisers in the area so the council took responsibility for developing the unions. Four sub-committees have been elected to perform certain functions.

They are an organising committee, an administration committee, an education committee and a planning committee.

The organising committee went round to new factories organising workers into the unions. If a particular union was not already active in the area it was invited to establish a branch in Northern Natal. This included PWAU.

The administration committee had to organise people to do the administrative

work to time to plan the next council meeting.

GROWTH

As a result, FOSATU unions grew at a tremendous rate during the past two years, and the whole area suddenly became alive through the new presence of the unions.

The council could mobilise new members and help organise new factories – but it clearly couldn't take the place of organisers. They could not regularly attend negotiations – which are mostly during working hours – and could not drop everything to be on the scene during an emergency such as a strike.

ORGANISERS NEEDED

For these things, and for follow-up work, organisers become essential. The ideal situation would be to have organisers working closely together with the council and its committees.

The shop stewards' council is no longer the main organising force in the area because most of the unions now have organisers there. But it remains the work for the unions. Each committee

met every two weeks and met from time main decision-making body, instead of the regional councils which have operated in other FOSATU regions up to now.

It is a bigger body than the councils have been because it consists of all shop stewards and is therefore also more democratic.

CONGRESS

At FOSATU's recent national congress, the constitution was amended to change regional councils into more democratic regional congresses.

In Northern Natal, the shop stewards' council has enabled the five FOSATU unions in the area to develop a very good working relationship. Organisers are responsible to the branch executive committees of their unions – but also to the council. Whenever possible, organisers from the different unions help each other to spread resources more evenly among the unions.

If problems crop up in any particular union, the council tries to resolve them.