

ditorial Note

Paul Stewart and Ian Macun have resigned from the Editorial Board of the South African Labour Bulletin, both having moved out of the areas covered by their respective local committees. Our thanks go to both for their past work.

Below we publish a reply to a previous article on the Cape Underwear Strike (SALB 10.2). This contribution is by way of a critique of the strategy adopted hitherto by the Clothing Workers Union (CLOWU). In fairness to the author of the original article, it should be pointed out that his brief was a limited one - to record the strike as the workers themselves saw it - and he did not directly address questions of union strategy in the Cape clothing industry.

Capital restructuring and management responses to the recession

For workers the immediate results of capitalist crisis mean falling living standards, short-time working and above all retrenchments (see SALB 10.2). The hardships expressed by unemployed workers interviewed in this edition represent the harsh reality for 2-3 million people in South Africa.

For capital the recession represents a period of falling profits; a failure of the mechanisms of accumulation. Beyond this it is also a period of restructuring - in part spontaneous, as weak firms go to the wall, leading to concentration and increasing domination by those remaining. But it is also a period of intense, and conscious, class conflict as employers struggle to push back the frontiers of control in the factories - taking advantage of the weakened position of labour organisation - and capital attempts to restructure on its own terms the "social structures of accumulation" (ie. the totality of systems of control - legal, political, economic, technological, within the labour process and the division of labour, the system of industrial relations, within education and culture - all of which reflect and make possible the continued dominance of

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capital; see D M Gordon, R Edwards, M Reich, Segmented work, divided workers, Cambridge University Press, 1982).

During the current global crisis of capitalism, since the early 1970s, restructuring is being attempted on a number of different levels - some of which have been mentioned in recent editions of the SALB; others we will return to in the future:

- (i) Technology: most dramatic has been the widespread introduction of micro-electronic technology. In its wake comes the threat of mass unemployment, deskilling for the majority of those left in work and increased managerial control over the work process (see SALB 9.7). Already by the beginning of 1984 in South Africa approximately 56 robots were either working about to be installed, with another 15-20 by the end of the year.
- (ii) Relocation: of industry to low wage, non-union areas, leading to a changing international division of labour (see Frobels, Heinrich and Kreye, "New international division of labour", SALB 5.8). This development rests upon 3 preconditions: (a) the existence of a world-wide reserve of potential labour, cheap and non-unionised (and here the use of ultraexploitable female labour should be mentioned); (b) technological developments - eg. in transport, containerisation etc - have made the location of industrial sites less dependent on geographical position and distance, and (c) new technology makes it possible to decompose complex production processes and utilise unskilled labour to perform fragmented, routine jobs.

There are still wider implications. In some cases employers have been able to break down the production cycle to produce in smaller units, with significant advantages in terms of labour control. For example, in a study in the UK it was found that factories with over 2000 workers are 50 times more strike-prone than those with 100 workers (F Murray, "The decentralisation of production", Capital and Class, 19, 1983).

The most dramatic examples of industrial relocation

are the so-called Free Trade Zones such as exist in the Philipines (see SALB 10.3). The decentralisation policy in South Africa is in some ways a local variant of this trend.

(iii) Union-bashing: in the present period this takes two forms; direct (repressive) and indirect (ideological).

(a) The present attack on trade unions in Europe, USA, and the Third World are a response to economic crisis. Falling profits make it imperative for capital to push down wages and defeat organised labour; mass unemployment, objectively undermining union strength, makes such a strategy thinkable. Repressive measures include - wholesale dismissals (Reagan's response to the air traffic controllers' strike, 1980; Sasol); increased use of police and legal controls (eg. against solidarity action in the UK); increased state control over collective bargaining (in Germany since the 35-hour strike); withdrawal of state benefits to strikers (Germany and UK); enforcement of company unionism; no-strike clauses and concessionary bargaining (ie. wage cuts). In Third World countries state repression of labour organisations has been more brutal, in an attempt to encourage foreign investment.

(b) On the ideological plane there has, in recent years, been a resurgence of free market philosophy, arguing that independent trade unionism is incompatible with the "free" enterprise system. If there must be trade unions, they must be tightly controlled. Allied to this has been the growth of corporatism and the notion of an essential harmony on the shopfloor. The clearest example of this is the so-called "Japanese system" and the introduction of Quality Control Circles

In South Africa this ideological component has assumed greater significance recently because of the depth of the crisis of legitimacy for racial capitalism. This has led at one level to expensive academic studies such as "Project Free Enterprise" which call on management to educate

their workers towards the free enterprise system - summarised in the Star: "Bosses of South Africa unite and educate or your workers will rush into the arms of socialism".

At the factory floor level management faces the task of establishing new forms of bureaucratic control. The rise of black worker power on the shopfloor since the 1970s has broken the power of the white supervisor and with it the arbitrary and unilateral control of management. In its wake employers have had to establish new "rules of the game", agreed with workers representatives - such as grievance procedures, disciplinary procedures, collective bargaining machinery as well as attempts to demarcate areas of "management prerogative" and indeed to define the boundaries between workers and management (we are referring here to the position of black supervisors - see this edition).

The expanded use of job evaluation and work study techniques in South Africa represents an extension of this strategy - to introduce new and bureaucratic rules into the arena of wage negotiations. These techniques tend to individualise wage bargaining and to draw a veil of "scientific management" across the relations of exploitation. The recession, and the urgent need to improve productivity in order to maintain profits, has encouraged these trends. Job evaluation is also concerned with systematising and maintaining hierarchical divisions in the workplace - a theme also explored in the article on supervisors.

In the long-term South African employers would probably like to emulate the more sophisticated corporatist strategies of their overseas colleagues - to get workers to identify with the value and goals of the firm. Quality Control Circles play an obvious role here, whilst non-racial work practices, and genuine Black advancement and occ-

upational mobility remain essential preconditions for the success of such a project.

However, the present economic crisis has also led to the intensification of class struggles generating new forms of worker organisation. Between capital's aims and the final outcome lies a shadow - the worker's struggle. In countries such as Chile, Brazil, the Philipines and South Africa workers have responded to the crisis with new forms of organisation - labelled "social movement unionism" - concerned not simply with the narrow wage contract but also articulating the demands of the wider community. In South Africa dramatic example of this was the November stay-away which brought together the youth, unemployed and working class communities with the union movement playing a leading role.

Even in the older industrial centres struggles against job loss have taken new forms - both in terms of militancy and new strategies (eg. Lucas Plan; see SALB 10.3). In South Africa worker militancy has grown even in the face of recession. Workers have continued to push back the frontiers of management control, whilst attempts to co-opt and divide workers - still embryonic - have so far been resisted.

(Jon Lewis & Eddie Webster)