

## Dairy Maid Boycott

The Dairy Maid Workers Committee (DMWC) has called on all trade unions and community organisations to support their boycott in solidarity with some 200 workers dismissed by the firm in February 1984. This call follows the successful Simba Quix boycott (SALB 10.2). As in the case of Simba chips, Dairy Maid products (Choc Stick, Orange Maid, Superstar, Screwball) are not essentials and alternatives exist.

The Dairy Maid plant at Olifantsfontein employs about 400 workers. The company is a subsidiary of Imperial Cold Storage Ltd which in turn is a subsidiary of C G Smith Ltd which in turn is part of the Barlow Rand group. Workers believe that the "liberal" parent company is more sympathetic to their case, with Dairy Maid and ICS management resisting reinstatement. The DMWC is currently investigating other ICS subsidiaries to determine the nature of their products and to see which other unions are directly involved.

The sacked workers are all members of the Food Beverage Workers Union of South Africa, a CUSA affiliate. The union began organising at Dairy Maid in 1983 and soon signed up all 400 workers. In September 1983 the company began negotiations with the union towards signing a recognition agreement. Prior to this, "industrial relations" at the company had been based on management dictate. In the event negotiations were deferred and no agreement was ever signed.

The events leading up to the mass dismissals of Dairy Maid workers began on February 1, 1984 when union member Mr Frans Mokwalakwala was assaulted by a white supervisor, K Zastron. Workers allege that this was the thirteenth assault on them by a managerial employee. Workers in the cold room where Zastron worked walked out at 5.30 pm in protest - although their shift was only due to finish at midnight.

The next day management agreed to replace Zastron with a supervisor approved by workers, one "Albert". On February 3, Zastron was back again and it was clear that Dairy Maid

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had broken the agreement. The union demanded that the company dismiss or transfer Zastron. The company's only action was to issue a final written warning to Zastron despite his record of previous assaults. No formal disciplinary enquiry was held, nor was the complainant, Mr Mokwalakwala asked by the company to make a statement.

On 13 February, in the face of management's refusal to take action against Zastron, workers in the cold room stopped work to voice their protest. By this time management had taken on several new employees anticipating trouble in the cold room. On 13 February workers in all departments stopped work in sympathy with the workers in the cold storage.

On February 15 all workers were locked out. They were then invited to re-apply for their jobs and to sign documents acknowledging the lawfulness of the dismissals. The company began to selectively re-employ. The workers alleged that management victimised active trade unionists by not employing them, and to date some 107 who were not reengaged, remain unemployed. They have been replaced by unemployed workers from local labour recruiting offices. The company has now terminated its relationship with the union on the basis that it is no longer representative.

Zastron's assault was not an isolated incident. Workers allege that white supervisors Espach, Wilhelm and Zastron used insulting language and physically assaulted workers over the period 1983-4. This included three separate assaults by Zastron on one Sage Thathane - including once with a whip(sjambok) and once with a broomstick.

Since February the union has filed representations with the Industrial Council for the Dairy Industry, alleging some 70 unfair labour practices on the part of the company. These include: inadequate rest and meal intervals and poor eating facilities; deductions from workers wages in respect of alleged stock shortages; workers denied annual leave; forced overtime working; non-payment of overtime worked; failure to provide special clothing for workers in the cold room; and intimidation of union members. The Industrial Council after four meetings has been

unable to settle the dispute. The matter will now proceed to the Industrial Court for determination.

This list of practices indicates that responsibility for Dairy Maid's problems lies with higher management. They failed to take immediate effective steps against racist attacks by white supervisors and were insensitive to workers legitimate grievances on this point. Beyond this the union argues that the company failed to maintain standard disciplinary and grievance procedures and had an inadequate system of communication with its own employees. Lacking established "industrial relations" machinery, petty tyranny was allowed to flourish. Although Espach and Zastron have now left the firm, there is no evidence of a more "enlightened" approach on the part of management. Zastron left in somewhat mysterious circumstances; Dairy Maid informed the union that he left because he was "unable to maintain discipline." Former union members still employed at Dairy Maid now feel too intimidated to openly support the union. There is also evidence that dismissed workers are being black-listed by local firms. One worker who applied for a driving job claims he was refused the job only after the firm had made a telephone call to Dairy Maid.

Financial hardship means that many of the dismissed workers are unable to attend union meetings. Nonetheless regular contact is maintained by the union organiser and one of the shop stewards who visit workers in their homes to keep them informed and keep up morale. In planning the boycott campaign the principle has been established that control must remain with the workers themselves and the DMWC. A trade union support committee has now been established with delegates drawn from other trade union bodies. The boycott has the full support of the workers' own union - Food, Beverage - and of CUSA and other federations, unions and community organisations. The union's lawyers have now been threatened with a court interdict to prevent the boycott from taking place, in addition to proceedings also having been threatened against CUSA, Food Beverage Workers Union and the DMWC. Further details and campaign material are available from the DMWC office (Pretoria 3236709).

(SALB Correspondent January 1985)