

SAAWU: Dispute at Metal Box

On November 15 1984, Metal box management at the Rosslyn plant dismissed its 500 strong black workforce. According to dismissed workers, Metal Box is not the worst company around; by South African standards wages and conditions were described as "moderately good". Rather, the causes of the dispute are to be found in the failure of management to honour its agreements, and in the fact that, according to workers, the company's training and promotions policy was racially discriminatory.



The South African Allied Workers Union began organising at the plant in late 1984. SAAWU organisers began by recruiting workers outside the factory, who then went on to organise inside. As workers began to join, structures were created inside the plant, with shop stewards elected for each crew (shift). The stewards, together with elected office bearers, formed a Workers Committee. In April 1985, with over 75% of the workers signed up, the Workers Committee successfully approached management for a recognition agreement. Thereafter, monthly meetings were held, a number of grievances were addressed (eg. regarding overalls), and workers noted an improved attitude on the part of lower management.

The company even negotiated prior to retrenching 22 workers in September 1985. It was agreed with the Workers Committee that these retrenched workers would be considered first for any vacancies which arose. However, in October, without explanation, 3 new (white) faces appeared on the shopfloor. When management was questioned they replied that the retrenched workers were not suitable for the skilled position of production mechanic for which the whites had been recruited. But, the workers could not see how the 3 whites could be so skilled, since the company intended to send them on a training course! Management having failed to provide an acceptable explanation, the workers downed tools on October 23.

Discrimination in training

It was not simply that management had broken the retrenchment agreement. In the view of the workers this was just the most recent case where black workers had been overlooked in favour of whites. Significantly, there had been a number of blacks working

as production mechanics for a considerable period of time until 1984, when they were demoted. Workers said that before that time opportunities existed for blacks and whites in the company's training centre, which had provided a basic course in engineering. Everyone had a chance to go on the course, and then receive further training on the job. Workers say that training opportunities for blacks were reduced when the present Plant Manager, Alexander McLeish replaced the previous manager, McGregor, in 1984. Now most on the job training goes to whites. The same trend is evident, they believe, in respect of apprenticeship training. In 1981 there were 8 black apprentices, and 4 white. In 1985, there were 10 white apprentices, and only 2 black.

Management has since protested that black workers who applied for the position of production mechanic were set an aptitude test which only 4 out of 30 managed to pass. Workers point out that even these 4 were not accepted. Also, the results of the test are universally rejected by the workers. The fact that management refused to allow them to scrutinise the marked papers has fuelled suspicions that irregularities surrounded these tests.

It may be that Metal Box, in the midst of recession, is being forced to cut back expenditure on training. But black workers will not accept economies which are implemented on a racial basis.

Mass dismissals

On October 23 workers began a 2-week sit-in, clocking in every day and then sitting in the canteen. Negotiations over the position of the 3 new workers were fruitless. McLeish was not going to let anybody tell him what to do, especially blacks. On November 8, the workers were locked out. On the 15th, they were dismissed when they ignored a management ultimatum to return to work.

From the first, the union put forward only two demands: that the 3 workers leave the premises; and that workers should be paid for the time they were on strike. The union was willing to compromise to the extent that the 3 new workers might be suspended or sent on leave pending the outcome of negotiations. Management refused to address this central issue, although they came up with their own proposals, such as an undertaking to employ 3 blacks in addition to the 3 whites. They also attempted to bribe workers with a promise of bonuses if they returned to work. Only a handful accepted the bait and approximately 420 are still on strike.

Having dismissed the workforce management started recruiting amongst retrenched workers and people who had previously worked for Metal Box. Approximately 60 came forward and together with the white staff they have kept the plant running. The workers say that efficiency has been affected and shifts have been reduced, due to a combination of strain and long hours.

Boycott

SAAWU has taken the workers case to the Industrial Court (The case is due to be heard on January 31). In the meantime, and immediately after their dismissal in November, workers launched a boycott of canned drinks in the Pretoria area. The campaign was vigorously taken up by the local communities, and canned drinks disappeared from the shelves. (Metal Box produces all cans containing beers; wines and cold drinks). Management's response was to obtain an interdict restraining SAAWU, and certain of its members and officials from organising or encouraging the boycott. The boycott continues in Pretoria and there are signs that it will spread.

As far as the dismissed workers are concerned, they continue to meet to discuss strategy and they remain confident. Some have withdrawn their money from the pension fund in order to buy food; many have no money and are experiencing extreme hardship. They believe that, to win, the campaign against Metal Box must intensify.

Indeed, it would seem that the company is particularly vulnerable to boycotts and local and international pressure. SAAWU is investigating all the possibilities. It is relatively easy to boycott drinks in cans, as such drinks come in bottles as well. Moreover, Metal Box South Africa Ltd is part of a much larger corporate network. It is ultimately controlled by S A Mutual via the supposedly "liberal" Barlow group which controls C G Smith which owns most of Nampak which in turn has a 51% holding in Metal Box. (In fact Nampak and Metal Box are closely inter-related). In addition, Metal Box Overseas Ltd retains a sizeable holding. Independent trade union organisation spans many of the companies associated with Metal Box. Most significant for trade union solidarity is the fact that many of these unions have, since the strike began, come together to form COSATU. (SALB correspondent, January 1986)

Offers of help or messages of support should be sent: care of SAAWU, 3rd Floor, Tudor Mansions, 78 Troye Street, Johannesburg.