

SFAWU: Brewery Workers Victory



The eighteen month wage dispute between Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union and the Natalia Development Board in respect of its business undertakings ended with the Industrial Court making an arbitration award which accorded substantial increases to the workers. The dispute started in January 1984 when the Board granted a 12% increase which had been negotiated through the Industrial Council on which SFAWU is not represented. SFAWU members at the breweries effected rejected the increases and demanded that the Board negotiate with the union. The Board refused and claimed that conditions were regulated by the Department of Co-operation and Development. In May 1985, workers at the brewery and its outlets stopped work and demanded to see the Minister of Co-operation and Development to explain why he was not prepared to meet their demands.

The Board, under pressure, granted substantial increases which were vetoed by the Minister. SFAWU then declared a dispute against the board on behalf of approximately 1,000 workers in the Board's breweries and liquor outlets in Durban, Pietermaritzburg and coastal area from Port Shepstone to Empangeni.

The dispute was dealt with in the Industrial Court where SFAWU failed to reach any agreement. The workers at the breweries then, in a series of mass meetings, resolved that they would strike if their demands were not met. The Natalia Board, under united pressure from the workers, was prepared to grant the increases but was hamstrung by the Department of Co-operation and Development. For this reason the Industrial Court delayed in making an award.

The final award granted increased wages of workers on the lower scales by up to 55%, raising minimum wages from R215 per month to R333 per month. These increases were backdated to 1st March 1985. In addition the Board granted a further 5.5% increase on the existing salaries, which was backdated to 1st January 1985.

According to the shop stewards, "the increase represents a major victory for workers. SFAWU had consistently fought for a living wage for all workers and the outcome of this struggle was an important step forward in that struggle. The bosses in South Africa must recognise that workers are no longer prepared to work for starvation wages." (SFAWU communique, November 1985)