

TGWU cleaning workers fight for industrial council

The struggle for an industrial council for the contract cleaning sector reflects some apparently contradictory trends in the labour field. It also shows surprising determination in what is usually regarded as a 'weak' sector of workers. DOT KEET examines the implications.

The singing and chanting of some three thousand, mainly women workers echoed down the glass and concrete canyons of central Johannesburg on 25 October last year. They marched on the government's Department of Manpower (DOM), and then to the head office of Supercare, one of the largest contract cleaning companies in South Africa. For these workers were the 'cleaners' organised by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). And they were marching to protest at the refusal of Transvaal members of the National Contract Cleaners' Association (NCCA) to support their Natal members' agreement to proceed with wage negotiations pending the registration of a national industrial council for the contract cleaning sector.

The workers' anger, and the TGWU's frustration, re-

flected the fact that the constitution and composition of such an industrial council had been fully negotiated during the second half of 1990. It had, in fact, actually been initiated by the NCCA, itself, following strike action by 7 000 cleaning workers in Natal in May 1990.

With the constitution agreed between the unions and the NCCA in November 1990, an application was then sent to the DOM to register a national industrial council for the contract cleaning sector.

The DOM had to verify that the employers' association was representative of this sector nation-wide, and that the unions involved - the TGWU cleaners' section (with about 14 000 members) and NACTU's Brushes and Cleaners' Union (with about 4 000) - represented more than half of the estimated

35 000 cleaning workers nation-wide.

With wage negotiations paralysed because a national industrial council was still not in place by the middle of 1991, 8 000 Natal cleaning workers went on another more prolonged, six week strike in September-October 1991, seriously affecting schools, hospitals and other work places across the province.

In this situation, the Natal employers agreed to start negotiations in anticipation of the formal registration of the industrial council. Similarly, TGWU agreed to proceed, confident that the IC would soon be in place to finalise the negotiations.

The TGWU had already convened a national shop stewards' meeting in October to go ahead with the negotiations with the NCCA, when the employers' organisation

declared that they had no mandate to proceed without the agreement of their Transvaal region.

Then, at the NCCA national executive meeting on 12 December, the Transvaal branch reversed their position altogether on the registration of the national industrial council that they had already participated in negotiating.

At the same time, some of the major contract cleaning companies withdrew their membership of the NCCA - which promptly lost its national representativity. This is a tactic often used by employers when they want to scuttle an industrial council. In this case, however, two companies concerned, Prestige and Supercare, declare themselves still in favour of an industrial council for the sector.

What seems to have happened is that there was some sort of a 'coup' from within the Transvaal region of the NCCA, and the leadership was taken over by smaller cleaning companies. They were reportedly led by John Borritt, of SA Cleaning Services, who has something of a union-bashing reputation as the boss of SA Security Services. What is clear, however, is that there are differences of interest and approach between the *smaller and the bigger* companies in this sector of the South African economy, with larger companies seemingly in favour of industrial regulation through a national industrial council.

Bigger companies departing from dominant trends?

From a high of more than 100 regional and national industrial councils covering more than one million workers, during the 1980s, industrial councils have actually been closing down in recent years, and no new national industrial councils have been set up recently.

Most South African employers are now more wary of entering into industrial councils with the trade



unions. They have had a decade's experience of the success with which unions have used industrial councils to negotiate both national and regional collective wage agreements.

There are continuing debates amongst unionists about the problems of entering industrial councils, especially in removing negotiations, and initiative and control from the shop floor into the hands of central union officials.

But such national agreements can benefit both their own members and other organised workers, and have been used to extend their gains to weaker sectors of

workers in non-unionised or smaller and remoter work places around the country.

The unions themselves are better able to apply their limited resources in centralised bargaining. Although negotiating skills then tend to be concentrated at the centre, the unions as a whole gain in credibility, workers' confidence in their ability to deliver - and hence in membership.

Yet some bigger employers in the growing and highly competitive commercial cleaning sector seem to favour such national collective bargaining. Jane Barrett, National Co-ordinator of the TWGU's cleaners, points out that it is precisely because of the intense struggle for survival amongst contract cleaning companies that some are moving in this direction.

These cleaning operations are highly labour intensive - with wages making up about 89% of costs. Strikes over wages and different company wage agreements could make some companies uncompetitive with their rivals. In the South African context it is more likely to be in the bigger companies - where the unions can get organised - that higher wages and better conditions are gradually being achieved.

By contrast, the smaller mushrooming cleaning companies are more difficult to unionise and can maintain lower wages and actually undercut their bigger competitors. Hence the latter are in

favour of the industrial regulation for the whole sector.

Furthermore, unrestrained competition amongst them could be very damaging to them all in relation to the contractor companies hiring their services. In this situation, a national agreement imposing the same wage rates on all companies in the sector would make them all more secure.

Thus it would seem that this is a sector in which some employers are seeing their own interests as going against the government's drive - and the general trend in business - for industrial deregulation. It may also be another example where the strategic approach of big(ger) business management is apparently pointing towards the national centralised bargaining being demanded by COSATU.

TGWU going against COSATU policy?

From another angle, however, by entering into such an agreement with contract cleaning companies, the TGWU itself may be going against another official position of their own national trade union federation.

COSATU is explicitly against the process of "contracting out" being used by employers to divide their work forces and undermine the gains made by the unions on behalf of directly employed workers. Whole sections of plant operations - particularly canteens, security and cleaning

operations - are now being contracted out by large manufacturing and other companies.

This may be just the beginning in South Africa of a process that has gone much further in other countries, especially in Asia, where various aspects of the production process itself are sub-contracted out. This is often to smaller, scattered companies - sometimes not even in the same country - thus seriously affecting the organisational capacity and influence of the unions concerned in the main plant.

In the South African context, sub-contracting sections of plant operations is also going hand-in-hand with a process of "casualisation" which involves employers bringing in casual temporary or part-time workers. This is both through direct employment but also through sub-contracting companies.

Whether they are 'delivering' full-time and permanent, or part-time and temporary workers, sub-contractors are becoming an increasing and problematic feature of labour employment patterns in South Africa. And it is precisely in these areas that the TGWU has most of its members.

With regard to sub-contracting, it is also worth noting that one of the demands of the striking Natal cleaners employed by Sneller Services was precisely for an end to contract cleaning. They argued for direct employment by the entities

where they work as cleaners.

By entering into an industrial council with such contract cleaning companies, could the TGWU be helping to entrench them as a 'legitimate' part of the employment scene in South Africa? TGWU's Jane Barrett replies that just getting such employers to agree to negotiate collectively over wages is a victory for the workers concerned.

Furthermore, it could actually have the long-term effect of 'pricing' them out of existence. Sub-contracting is convenient for large manufacturing companies and the like, mainly because it takes the bother of defined sections of their work force off their hands and they are delivered back at extremely cheap rates. If the unions manage to get an industrial council to push the wages of such sub-contracted workers upwards, it could eventually become more cost-effective for large employers to integrate them back into their own directly employed work forces - for example by setting up their own 'in house' cleaning departments.

In this way, the division and danger of weakening workers' organisation could be overcome. Workers in the same work place could be integrated into the same industrial unions.

Separation strengthening to women workers?

There is, however, a further paradox to which Jane Bar-



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Photo: William Mottala/COSATU

rett calls attention. She points out that, to some degree, the separate employment and organisation of cleaners has actually served to strengthen them in many ways.

Cleaning workers are overwhelmingly women and many of them work night shifts or have hours of work that separate them from much direct workplace contact with other workers. Even where they work during the day, they are a tiny "service" minority amongst the rest of the "productive" workers. Furthermore, they are unskilled, extremely low paid and are often not seen as "key" "production" workers, even by trade union organisers. For all these reasons, the interests and

needs of these workers tend to be overlooked or given low priority by the largely male union organisers and shop stewards in factories and other work places.

Employed separately by the same contract cleaning boss - who is slightly less removed from them than would be the top management of a large company - cleaners are given a stronger sense of collective identity vis-a-vis their employers and each other.

More importantly, organised as cleaners in their own section of the TGWU, these workers have been better able to articulate and fight for their specific needs as workers *and* as women. This is evident in the demands being put forward to em-

ployers by the union. It is not certain that they would have had the same opportunity to further their needs as women workers had they simply been integrated as insignificant minorities in the large industrial unions operating in their workplaces.

Finally, it was certainly noticeable from the faces, dancing and chants of the thousands of women cleaners taking over the streets of central Johannesburg, in October last year, that these usually 'invisible' 'servers' were feeling and expressing their strength as women as well as workers.

The unusual determination and effectiveness of the recent strikes and marches by this section of workers must serve to strengthen their case

and status within the TGWU and other unions in South Africa. It can, however, also strengthen the case and argument of the TGWU itself in the rather bedevilled unification process between themselves and the South African Railways and Harbour Workers Union (SARHWU).

Strengthening TGWU with SARHWU

COSATU's recent Fourth Congress issued a strong instruction to these two unions to merge into a single union for their sector in keeping with COSATU's policy of "one industry, one union".

Whatever the other reasons for their long delay in getting together, one complication that SARHWU raises is the fact that the TGWU also organises security guards and cleaners. SARHWU argues that their merger should produce a national union of transport workers alone.

The current organisational and leadership crisis in SARHWU [see page 8] does not bode well for their role in the unification process. By contrast, TGWU cleaners' recent actions - and its potential to pull off industrial action over an industrial council - could have a positive effect.

The TGWU's first line of action will probably be to declare a dispute with the NCCA and take them to the Industrial Court for unfair practice in not sticking to their earlier agreement. Failing that, the TGWU will discuss the option of calling

for national strike action at its national shop stewards' meeting in mid-February.

The capacity of cleaners to paralyse the commercial and manufacturing life of complex industrial centres has been proven elsewhere, and may yet be felt in South Africa. And the joint marches and demonstrations of 1990 by the TGWU's cleaners and security guards might be seen again.

If they are successful, there may yet be an industrial council for this sector. Either way, it will certainly strengthen the TGWU's arguments that both cleaners and security guards - as service workers with transport workers - should be included in the new union to be created with SARHWU.

Another area of union unity and co-operation that can be strengthened through the recent struggles and achievements on the cleaners front has been the participation of NACTU's Brushes and Cleaners behind the TGWU in the industrial council negotiations. As with broader national co-operation between COSATU and NACTU, such co-operation on practical workers issues can help build mutual confidence amongst unions and contribute towards workers' organised unity.

Workers' unity and strength in action

Possibly the most marked way in which the recent cleaners' strikes and marches run counter to common perceptions lies in the very fact

of such actions having taken place and at this time.

In the depths of a severe recession with unemployment reaching an all-time high of some 50% of the working-age population, it could be expected that South African workers would adopt a more cautious stance and avoid taking actions that could threaten their jobs.

Even more so could such caution be expected of low paid unskilled women workers - often with many dependents and often the only bread-winners in their families. Such workers are usually perceived as being extremely dependent and vulnerable, and all too easily replaceable from the mass of unskilled unemployed. The cleaners have gone against these stereotypes and taken to action with notable determination.

Finally, although TGWU workers have taken action in both Cape Town and Johannesburg recently, the prolonged Natal strike is particularly noteworthy. This is because it took place in the province where Inkhatha's UWUSA made the most concerted efforts to prevent COSATU unions from organising workers, and where violence has been most severely felt by working people. State-financed intimidation has not stopped these workers. ☆