



Workers forum in Alrode

Three to four thousand workers gathered on a field in Alrode Industrial area on the East Rand to put questions to their leaders who are going to parliament, and to hear their answers.

They come in blue factory overalls, in union T-shirts, a sprinkling of older men in jackets shiny with long use. Some factories sent a delegation of shop stewards, others sent their night-shift - but in many the whole workforce walked out to participate in the workers forum. Since in most cases management had refused COSATU's request for paid time off, this meant forfeiting an afternoon's pay and risking disciplinary action. But the expected appearance of a national

figure from COSATU failed to materialise.

About half of NUMSA's 6000 members in the Alrode local attended. Few workers from the other affiliates with large membership in Alrode - CWU and FAWU - participated. "They did no spadework," said one shopsteward - possibly because unlike NUMSA they do not have local offices.

Three delegates from the ANC's regional parliamentary list did pitch up - Mohammed Dangor, Maggie Magubane and Andries Skosana (the latter two formerly of COSATU). The lively gathering posed them tough questions, ranging from political bombshells like, "Are we not voting to simply restructure

capitalism by voting for the ANC?", to complaints about poor service from NUMSA organisers.

Political questions including criticism of the ANC's record of compromise without consulting its base, demands for clarity whether the ANC would give workers the right to strike without dismissal and whether it had abandoned nationalisation as a policy, and doubts about the ANC's ability to deliver change when it had agreed to being locked into a government of national unity for five years.

Workers also wanted to know whether the ANC would close the wage gap between black and white workers. One elderly man

told the meeting that he earned only R200 per week, and had to support four children. What did COSATU think of that? Another feared that if he went to claim UIF or pension money after April, he would be told to ask the government of De Klerk about it. A third complained that provident funds only provide loans for members wishing to buy houses, not for members from the countryside, such as himself, who might want to purchase some cows. Several workers raised criticisms of union service, and asked COSATU to do something.

The answers given by the ANC representatives were often not very illuminating. Dangor turned the question about restructuring capitalism into an answer about reconstructing the economy. Some time later a burly worker in blue overalls pointed this out and demanded an answer. Fortunately for Dangor, his bleeper beeped and he could rush off to his office without answering the question.

All three of the ANC representatives also responded to difficult questions by saying that if ANC won 70% of the vote it could put in place any policy, including extensive nationalisation. This is simply untrue and most worker leaders know it. The dangers with this kind of public rhetoric is that it generates cynicism and disillusionment, and could undermine the prospects for

mass participation in development which the RDP calls for.

Despite the disappointment, the event provided a boost for spirits and organisation in the local and the factories. As organiser Suzanna Harvey pointed out, workers had

successfully defied management's threats. It had been a rainy week, but the sun shone on union banners and floral umbrellas. It was certainly more fun debating politics than operating the noisy machines of the bosses. ☆
(Karl von Holdt)

Shopstewards question ANC leaders

In November last year the ANC leadership - including Nelson Mandela - addressed a series of People's Forums on the Witwatersrand, including railway workers at Kaserne, mineworkers in Carltonville, and a gathering of shopstewards from across the region. Close on a thousand shopstewards packed the hall at Shaft 17, Crown Mines, to fire their questions at Nelson Mandela, Jay Naidoo, Tokyo Sexwale, Charles Ngqakula, Susan Shabangu and others. Some questions were:

- The workers have been liberated by COSATU. Now Jay Naidoo has moved to the ANC. What will be the relation between the ANC and COSATU after 27 April?
- How will the ANC handle the issue of starvation wages?
- What is the ANC position on nationalisation?
- Will the ANC guarantee an 8 hour working day?
- Has the ANC agreed to wage restraint in

negotiations with the IMF?

- Will the ANC send police to arrest workers who are striking for a living wage?
- How will a government of national unity be able to implement the Reconstruction and Development Programme?
- Will the ANC government screen top white officials in the civil service, and replace them with blacks if they are found to be unqualified?
- Will the ANC establish an Equal Opportunities Commission to redress imbalances caused by apartheid?
- Will the poor man who has devoted his life to the ANC struggle, but who has no education have an opportunity to get training?
- Many workers have been unfairly dismissed from companies - will the new government charge those employers as criminals?

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Lengthy wage strikes

There have been a spate of strikes over the first two months of the year, in the health, chemical, paper, textile and mining sectors.

Incredible bungling by the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) sparked a series of strikes in hospitals in the Transvaal, which later spread to the Eastern Cape. The strike started after the TPA awarded R500 each to Baragwanath nurses 'for working under difficult conditions' during last year's hospital strikes. Scabs employed during the strike also demanded – and got – the R500 bonus.

In January NEHAWU members at Baragwanath went on strike, demanding that they also be paid. The strike spread.

Vusi Nhlapo, president of NEHAWU, says the union did not call for the strike. "We warned the TPA before it paid the nurses that it was making a terrible mistake".

Nhlapo says the union's only intervention was to negotiate for skeleton staff to maintain essential services in ICUs and children's wards.

The union and the TPA have referred the issue to arbitration.

Most of the strikes have centred on wage demands, and reveal deep conflict over the way management is responding to increasing competitive pressures. Strikes have been long, many lasting three weeks or more. **At Carlton Paper** about 1 000 PPWAWU members downed tools in five plants on the East Rand, PE and Cape Town in response to the company's attempt to combine a low basic wage increase with a profit-sharing component, as exists in the gold mining industry. Negotiations deadlocked with a union demand for 14%, against a company offer of 5% plus profit sharing. Carlton MD, Keith Partridge has expressed the view that worker participation could render unions redundant. The strike started on 1 February, and three weeks later was continuing.

One thousand CWIU members at **three Unilever companies** in Durban downed tools on 31 January. The union was demanding a R55 per week increase or 13%, whichever was greater, and management was offering 6-8%. There is no centralised bargaining in Unilever, although this has long been a union demand. Despite revised management offers and union demands, three weeks later the strike continues. A three-week wage strike at **three Johnson and Johnson plants** also continues. The

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Unlike the ANC representatives at the Alrode forum, the leadership at Shaft 17 sought to explain that it would take time to right apartheid's wrongs. As Susan Shabangu said "It will not be an easy road". Kgosisile Baleka warned that the ANC could not be "reckless" in changing the public sector. Jay Naidoo stressed that the ANC government could not be a magician - people would still have to struggle. An ANC government would expand workers organisational and bargaining rights.

Mandela summed up by saying that the "enthusiasm and clear thinking I have witnessed here shows that the

people have already taken over the affairs of the country." It is inspiring to feel the connection between this youthful old man, sparkling and warm, who has struggled so resolutely and for so long, and the workers who fill the hall, who have struggled for so long too, and have endured so much. Now they are talking together about liberation and democracy.

Mandela advised them: "The ANC has worked with the trade unions right through, and we thank you for your solidarity. The first thing necessary for solidarity is to strengthen your own organisation - so you can defend democracy." ☆ (Karl von Holdt)

400 striking members of CWIU are demanding 13,5%, against management's offer of 9%.

Four hundred SACTWU members were locked out of **Crossley Carpet Manufacturers** in Durban at the beginning of the year. The dispute arose when management refused to guarantee a wage increase, and said various bonuses and allowances should be terminated. The strike was settled. SACTWU members have also engaged in wage

strikes at **SBH cotton mills**, **Netted curtain factory** and **SA Nylon Spinners**, all in Cape Town.

The NUM has staged wage strikes at Foskor (900 workers, settled after more than three weeks), Kinross and Primrose Mine. Its campaign to organise **Goldfields Mines** is gathering steam.

Twenty four thousand **public servants in Venda** have staged stoppages for three weeks, over demands that senior civil servants pay

back huge pension payouts. Strikes have recently hit the **Boputhatswana civil service** over demands that pensions be paid out, for fear that the money will be lost if the bantustan is reincorporated.

POPCRU has been recognised by the police. This will enable it to organise and negotiate for its members, and is bound to boost membership. ☆
(Zolile Mtshelwane and Karl von Holdt)

SARHWU gains white members

The South African Railways and Harbours Workers Union (SARHWU) boosted its membership when 700 white flight attendants from the SA Airways joined the union last month.

Flight attendants initially belonged to the SAA Engineering Association (SAAEA). The association, which was meant for engineers, never catered nor defended the interests of flight attendants. Last August the association split and the Independent Cabin Crew of SA (ICUSA) was formed.

ICUSA tried to organise cabin crew workers, but could not take off. The SAA management used the space that was there and restructured the industry unilaterally. Management:



- lowered grades
- employed contract workers
- increased flying hours
- demanded greater productivity.

Union member Johann Ronnebeck says the changes worsened their working conditions. "Management introduced a police type evaluation. We felt insecure at work. This is what made us fight back."

Lynnette Hugo, member of the ANC, says workers looked for a union that was going to fight and not submit to managements unilateral restructuring. "SARHWU became the

alternative union. These days one cannot stay without belonging to a strong union. It is no longer a question of colour, it is who is going to defend your job."

SARHWU moved in and started to organise. In no time, seven hundred workers signed the joining forms.

Ronnebeck and Hugo said that they are not afraid of a racial backlash. "Initially we thought that we were going to get a rebuff from our white colleagues, but it did not happen. Workers come to us everyday saying that they want to join SARHWU. They are aware that it is a black dominated union affiliated to COSATU. What they want is a militant union that will defend their interests." ☆
(Snuki Zikalala)