

## **B & S Struggles**

*FOSATU WORKER NEWS interviews the workers' committee from B & S Engineering and Steelbright in Brits in the Transvaal. From FOSATU WORKER NEWS No 21, May 1983.*

### **How did you first begin uniting the workers?**

In the beginning workers began going back to the factory to be re-employed and some of them just went back to their homes. We decided to organise them together and we felt that if people could report daily we could discuss with them their decisions.

### **How many people did go back in the end?**

Up to now about 600 went back and about 400 of those were actually not taken back at the factory, the 300 here never returned to the factory to seek re-employment - in fact we only collected our wages in December.

### **How did you survive from September to December?**

At the time some of us had savings and we lived on these and also shared them out. Also people in the community were initially willing to help us out, as well as some of the other workers in the area.

### **How did you plan all this?**

Well we decided that people should report every day and in fact they began coming from September 8 as this was the place where we normally held meetings.

### **What was discussed and planned in the first few weeks?**

We began discussing how we were harassed by management and how workers in other factories were also harassed such as FEMCO where they retrenched also to break the union. We would take examples of people's experiences and get workers to talk and comment. We discovered that if we want to survive here we will have to stick together as this will be the only way to keep the organisation strong. If we depart then it would all break up

and people would be weak if they were alone. Actually we spent a lot of time asking people how they felt about the dismissal — whether they thought it was unfair or fair — finally we all agreed it was unfair and we all decided to stick together.

**What were the problems you encountered?**

After the first meetings we discovered it was possible to motivate the people and not to separate ourselves from one another by being Xhosas or Tswanas — finding that each and everyone of us is useful to the others. On the other hand by doing so we discovered by sharing the information and our feeling about the situation in the factory — the bad conditions — people shared their experiences and exposed the way in which they were treated. This type of discussion helped a lot because it showed people that if they went to another factory the situation would be exactly the same and we thought we should rather stick together and fight the situation at B & S.

**How did you begin dealing with problems of survival?**

The committee planned that we should begin asking for help from the local churches and we got all the people involved in this by asking each and every one of them to take a letter to the church in their particular area. We also planned to get some help from other workers in the area. At that time we had no idea we would be out for so long and we also depended on our savings.

**Have there been any problems between the workers and the committee?**

No never. In fact when the entire committee was dismissed in July, management forced workers to vote for a new committee after we were re-instated but the same people were voted in. So all we did was bring in some new people. There were a few problems when we started getting money from outside as some of the workers did not trust that they were going to benefit — they thought that the money would just go to the committee. This led to a lot of discussions where we explained exactly how the money was going to be used. We explained that we were all in the struggle.

**What was the money spent on?**

Well to get to the place where we met. Some of us had real problems with transport and some of the money first went into making sure that those who wanted to come to the hall could. In fact what we used to do was share tickets. One day I would come and the next my neighbour would.

**Was the committee under a lot of pressure — did the situation become very demanding?**

Yes there were some problems, especially emergencies — people who could not pay for treatment, kids who were sick. The way we would deal with this was to all come together and make a contribution from our savings and then if we got money in from the churches these people would be paid back.

Also the committee found that people were complaining that their families were putting them under a lot of pressure, telling them to go back to work. The problem is that some of us are the only member of the family with a full time job and consequently the families had to make sacrifices for this struggle. This is why we are so close now. Anyway when there were problems in the families we would send a few of the committee members to talk to the whole family and explain the struggle and what it was all about.

**So the group has got stronger?**

Yes, we started quite strong and now we are even stronger.

**What else have you done all this time — nine months is a long time to meet every day?**

Each day we would report what we had heard about the factory — you see many friends working there and they tell us exactly what is going on. We would get stories from our brothers on the production problems — the amount of rejects that have been sent back, who they have hired, whether the factory is losing or not. For the first few months we knew that the trucks delivering were only half full. Production is still low — they are not producing the same number of units and they still want some of the skilled workers back.

**All of you here are from different positions in the factory — did you always trust each other?**

It is true, some of the supervisors were not trusted because they used to work very closely with the white foremen and management. But they have shown that there is no difference — they are not brothers of the foremen but workers like all others. We have begun to discuss this question of how management tried to divide us.

**What has been the role of the union in all of this?**

Sometimes the workers would ask where the organisers were and whether they had forgotten us as they did not come here very often. We had to explain that they were very busy and that they were proceeding with the discussions with the Industrial Council and the Court case. When two committee members were arrested under the Intimidation Act and the charges later withdrawn — this gave us faith in the union that something could be done for us.

**What have been the main sacrifices?**

Well some of us do not eat properly and cannot feed our children like we used to — some of us have sent our children away to our parents. Many of us have had to sell our belongings such as clothes and bicycles and watches and some of us have had goods repossessed. We also now have spent all our savings some of which we had saved for many years and were hoping to buy better things for our children. Some of us have had to sell our goats and cattle and this was very difficult as we sold them for very little.

**Do you think the workers have changed over the nine months?**

Yes people have changed through all the discussions. We have come to realise what it is to sacrifice and stick together and to trust one another — that an injury to one is an injury to all. Most of us only knew in the beginning that we were employed and that we should accept our situation and what they give us. Most of us were not aware of our rights. We learnt that by being alone nothing could happen and that the only way was to stick together. We are all suffering and sacrificing.