

# Dismissed workers take dispute to giant new shop stewards' council

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A dispute over unfair dismissal of four workers at Star Furnishers results in the dismissal of the entire workforce. Six other Afcol plants come out on a legal solidarity strike, and shop stewards take the issue to the first meeting of the giant new S.A. Breweries Shop Steward Council. SAB are the owners of Afcol. Report by KARL VON HOLDT.

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The floor of Khotso House shakes as several hundred dancing workers chant freedom songs. Faces of young workers, old workers, men and women are lit up with energy. Warm bodies are crammed together in the small hall. People laugh and sing at the top of their voices, enjoying their collective unity and strength.

"Amandla! Amandla!" The chair calls the meeting to order. The workers are from six Afcol companies in Johannesburg. Three hundred and forty workers from Star Furnishers were dismissed when they

struck in support of four colleagues who, they alleged, were dismissed unfairly. The next day, 21 April, five other Afcol companies came out on strike in solidarity. A seventh Afcol company, in Pietersburg, is also striking.

Today, 22 April, workers are meeting to discuss the next step. The meeting opens with an older worker giving a brief history of how the Printing, Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PPWAWU) succeeded in organising Afcol furniture factories. Then national organiser Ernest Masala reports on

the previous day's meeting with Afcol management. Management refused to discuss the dismissals until all plants were back at work, he reports. Moreover, management stated clearly that it "had been patient with the union, but now it was tired of the union and wanted to bring it to a halt. It stated it would use the **iron fist** to do this." Management gave an ultimatum for workers to be back at work at 7 am today, a Friday, but shop stewards persuaded them to extend the deadline till Monday. Shop stewards are due to meet management again today at

2 pm to report the outcome of the general meeting.

Masala explains that the strikers have two choices: to remain on strike, face dismissal, and continue the struggle from outside the factories; or go back and fight from within for the reinstatement of Star workers.

After some discussion the meeting resolves to stay out. As one speaker put it, "If we reverse the decision to support Star the union will be destroyed. They will use the same tactics on the other companies and break the union. We must not



*Furniture workers - enjoying the power of collective action*

*Photo: Tsuks Mokolobate/Learn and Teach*

retreat."

### **Company applies for interdict**

At this stage in the proceedings someone came in with a document and handed it to Masala. Masala glanced at it and then stood on a chair to address the meeting. "Afcoll management know you, they know PPWAWU, they have been studying you for some time. They know you are firm. So now they are applying to court for an interdict this afternoon to force you back to work."

Masala then put the views of the union officials to the workers for consideration. "It is clear from management's words and behavior that they want to take this opportunity to smash the union. Management strategy is to invest for the future by dismissing workers today. This would cause them short-term losses now, but they believe that in future they will be able to do what they want. The interdict could also make it more difficult for us. Our opinion, as officials, is that workers should go back to work and fight from within the company, so as to build the union. We should explore every means to resolve the dispute before going on strike. We are putting this opinion to you as workers, because you have to make the decision."

The dilemma provoked great discussion in the hall. Many workers were all for rushing into the strike. As one put it: "This is part of the

Bill. We've been talking and talking about the Bill - now we must show that we reject it."

### **"You cannot lightly go on strike"**

Others however felt it was important to maintain their strength in the factories, and use various other tactics to pressurise management. One worker from Star, an elderly man with few teeth left, argued that the other companies should return to work: "We who are dismissed have got no bread. You cannot lightly go out on strike - you too will have no bread. Try all other methods. We will know you are not abandoning us, you will carry on the fight to get us back."

Then a young and fiery shop steward spoke. "We always say we are strong. Yes we are strong - for one day. But we also complain when we have no money. If we ignore the ultimatum and the interdict we must know it will be a long and bitter fight. You are going to have no money. You are going to suffer. We must be really strong to embark on such a thing, not just say we are strong. We must prepare and plan. We cannot just rush in." These were powerful points. There was a hubbub as workers turned to their neighbors to discuss them.

Eventually the meeting resolved unanimously to return to work on the following Monday. Before the meeting closed, the chairperson

stressed that the decision did not mean a retreat. It meant that they were using a variety of weapons. They were ready for more action if necessary. They were going back with all their weapons intact.

### How the dispute started

The dispute at Star Furnishers started on Thursday 14 April, a week before the strike meeting described above. Shop stewards say there was a worker at the factory who was recruiting for the National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers (NUFAW), a former TUCSA union. NUFAW has a closed shop agreement with the Industrial Council for Furniture and Bedding Manufacturers, and has recently affiliated to the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). At a general meeting at lunchtime that Thursday, workers decided to ask him to clarify his position in front of all the workers.

According to Farouk Jardine, furniture organiser for PPWAWU, a fight broke out between the worker and those sent to call him. Management then convened a disciplinary hearing on Friday 15th, which workers refused to attend on the grounds that shop stewards had been denied the right to investigate the case. The hearing found four workers guilty of assault and dismissed them.

On the following Monday workers refused to work. Shop stewards

met management, who said that they should appeal against the finding if they were unhappy. They did, and the appeal was scheduled for Tuesday 19 April. During this period workers continued the stoppage.

Shop stewards were present at the appeal hearing, and say that no evidence of assault was presented. The following day management announced the result to the shop stewards - "The workers remain dismissed, and there is no reason to overturn the decision. Even if they did not actively take part in the assault they were part of the motivating crowd." The shop stewards reported this to the assembled workers, who were now entering the third day of their work stoppage. At 11.30, while they were reporting back, management issued an ultimatum that workers return to work by 1 pm.

### Mass dismissals

Workers refused. However, shop stewards and organisers, believing the situation serious, tried to extract a written undertaking from management that all workers would be allowed back to work, intending that this would also cover the four dismissed workers. A verbal undertaking was given, and workers decided to return to work.

At this stage events became confused. According to Jardine, "We were in the office telexing the union so that we had some record of man-

agement's undertaking. Suddenly management announced over the intercom that all workers had to clock-in before starting to work. This created confusion. Workers came into the office saying there were problems. I went out, and saw security guards everywhere. The guards and supervisors were pushing workers around. I rushed in and phoned one of the managers. He promised to come down. As I put the phone down another manager picked up the intercom and announced that all workers were dismissed.

"The next day workers gathered at the gates, which were manned by security guards and management. Management read out one by one the names of workers who would get a "second chance". They entered the gates as their names were read out. But as soon as they realised how few they were, they came out again."

As soon as they heard what had taken place, workers at the 6 other Afcol companies organised by PPWAWU in the Transvaal came out on solidarity strike. The next day the strikers held the meeting at Khotso House in Johannesburg to decide on their strategy.

### **The union declares a dispute**

After the Khotso House meeting shop stewards met with management. Management agreed to withdraw the interdict application,

since workers had accepted the ultimatum to go back to work, but flatly refused to discuss the Star dismissals. Shop stewards felt that the fact that management only sent two representatives - one from Afcol and one from Star - showed that they were not serious about negotiating. Generally Afcol is represented at negotiations by one manager from each of the seven companies as well as management from Head Office.

After this the union declared a dispute with Afcol. Further meetings continued to deadlock. Workers settled in for the statutory 30 days wait while the Industrial Council tried to resolve the dispute. If that failed, the union could launch a legal strike.

Meanwhile, the Star workers met every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in a hall downstairs from the union offices in Johannesburg. According to shop stewards, "All are coming, they are eager to know what's happening." Workers have organised themselves into four committees concerned with finance, publicity, solidarity and discipline.

The finance committee is responsible for collecting funds from other companies and distributing them to the strikers; the solidarity committee is responsible for contacting other organisations for support; publicity maintains links with the press; and the disciplinary committee sees to it that workers are disciplined, attend meetings and do not just "roam about town".

Workers were also planning a cultural committee to consider various ways of "recording evils in the company, and also in the government".

Shop stewards were trying various ways of increasing pressure on management. CCAWUSA structures had been informed, and

workers had also made direct contact with

CCAWUSA members at various shops selling the furniture made at Star. Shop stewards had heard that Star trucks were being turned away from some shops. The Unemployed Workers' Co-ordinating Committee had also been contacted to help organise against scabbing.

Meanwhile, PPWAWU members at other Afcol factories were launching overtime bans. PPWAWU was also making contact with ACTWUSA and NUMSA which are organised in various Afcol owned factories.

## Legal strike

The Industrial Council failed to

resolve the dispute, and after holding a strike ballot, PPWAWU launched a legal strike at the six other Afcol plants where it is organised in the Transvaal. The strike started on Monday 30 May, and involved over 1100 workers. By Wednesday Afcol had instituted a lock-out against the striking wor-

kers, and tried to seek an interdict against the union on the grounds that the strike was illegal.

Apart from Star Furnishers, the six companies on strike are Transvaal Mattress, Parker Knoll, Edblo, Highpoint, Powercraft, and Sealy in Pietersberg. Shop stewards say that workers at three other Afcol

plants organised by PPWAWU in Natal and the Western Cape are "ready and waiting to provide solidarity action", but are waiting to see whether the dispute can be resolved in the Transvaal. NUMSA, ACTWUSA and CCAWUSA have also promised to inform and mobilise the support of their members in Afcol owned plants or shops that sell Afcol furniture.

As workers enter the third week



*"PPWAWU came to our factory...."*

of their strike, management and the union are locked in a protracted trial of strength.

## **Organising the furniture sector**

The Afcol strike raises some important points. One is the question of organising the furniture sector, which employs about 35000 people.

PPWAWU began seriously directing attention to the furniture sector in 1987. In February of that year a group of workers who had been in touch with PPWAWU attended the NUFAW AGM with the intention of raising questions about the low wage increases negotiated by NUFAW; about the lack of democratic worker participation in NUFAW structures; and about the racial lines along which NUFAW was constituted. They were prevented from raising these points, but interested workers gathered around to discuss a PPWAWU pamphlet, and the organising drive was born.

PPWAWU set up a furniture organising committee, consisting of workers from various plants. Research showed that the Afcol group of companies, owned by SA Breweries, dominated the furniture industry nationally, and the union decided to target this group of companies.

Afcol owns furniture companies as well as a number of companies producing components used in the

manufacture of furniture - springs, foam and textiles for example. The 29 furniture companies owned by Afcol fall within PPWAWU's industrial sector. Other companies fall within the chemical (CWIU as well as the NACTU-affiliated SACWU), textile (ACTWUSA) and metal (NUMSA) sectors.

PPWAWU's strategy was to organise all 7 Afcol furniture plants in the Transvaal, and push for bargaining at company level with Afcol as a group, rather than aim for recognition at each individual company. After two months the union had a majority in five plants, and by September 1987 an agreement had been signed with Afcol. The agreement established a regional bargaining forum to which management and workers in each company sent representatives.

The agreement had a national scope in that it committed Afcol to bargaining with the union in each province as soon as it achieved a majority in one company in that province. PPWAWU has also organised Afcol plants in Natal and the Western Cape.

Thus, by the end of 1987 PPWAWU had succeeded in establishing a strong presence in the furniture sector, based in the biggest group of companies in the sector as well as other furniture factories. They had succeeded in negotiating increased pay and overtime pay, maternity benefits, as well as paid holidays on May 1 and June 16.

However, these advances were to be challenged in 1988 during the dispute at Star Furnishers.

### Management resorts to 'iron fist'

Shop stewards and union organisers are convinced that the attitude of Afcot management had changed substantially by the time of the Star dispute. In the words of Ernest Masala, national organiser: "In the past they would listen, consider and discuss reasonable points. Now they say, 'We hear what you say, but we are not prepared to consider these points.' We have placed various alternatives before them. For example, we altered our demand from reinstatement of all workers at Star, to reinstatement of all except the original four dismissed. We proposed that their case be taken to arbitration.

"If they were serious, one would expect them to leave the room and caucus once we have suggested an alternative, so that they can look into it. But if the company spokesperson just says, "You can forget about that" without consulting his colleagues, then you will believe they have come with a preplanned position and they are not going to deviate.

"At our meeting they said they have been very co-operative, but the actions of our members are unacceptable. They said they are going to respond with an iron fist. That

showed they wanted to crush the union.

"We explained that if you have a Recognition Agreement, it does not mean that there are no issues to be resolved. There will still be issues and tough bargaining. You have to be prepared to negotiate seriously. But they seem to believe there should be no problems."

The view of the workers that management wants to smash the union is supported by a memo that was leaked to the workers. The memo is from Afcot head office to the manager of Star Furnishers and runs thus:

*In reviewing the problems that you are presently facing, and taking into account the action already taken by you and your Management, we must be sure that we do not re-employ any of the workers who have now been discharged for taking part in the illegal strike.*

*By re-employing, even selectively which is not permissible, we will be breaking down the advantage we now hold and I believe cause more difficulties at a later stage.*

*I am certainly conscious that this will cause difficulties for you in having to re-train staff, but I think that the benefits that we will have gained from the rather traumatic experiences of last week will be worth it in the medium to long term.*

*(signed) Jack Chaskelson*

The cynicism of management could hardly be clearer. But this is not an isolated instance.

Over the past two years there has been an increasingly hardline approach to unions on the part of management, characterised by inflexible bargaining positions, mass dismissals, lockouts, the use of court interdicts, a willingness to endure long strikes, and the more frequent intervention of police in industrial disputes. The increasing bitterness of shopfloor struggles was evident in the high-profile OK, SATS and mines strikes - as well as a host of less publicised strikes - in 1987, and is coming to a head at the moment in the massive confrontation between capital and labour over the the Labour Relations Amendment Bill and the three days of "peaceful national protest" called by COSATU and NACTU.

The Afcol strike is one of the many bitter struggles that have been fought and will be fought between employers and the state on the one side, determined to roll back and break the strength of the unions, and on the other, the unions fighting to maintain their organised bases and extend their gains. It is difficult not to predict a period of increasingly fierce class struggle ahead.

Apart from mass dismissal, management has used court interdicts and, allege shop stewards, encouraged police to detain 12 Star shop stewards at home in Soweto.

It is worth pointing out that, if

the new Labour Bill had already been passed into law, management would have had even more weapons at its disposal. They could have sued the union for production losses caused by the initial strike at Star as well as the first solidarity strike, since they were both "illegal"; and prevented the legal strike on the grounds that it was an issue workers had already struck over - although illegally - in the previous 12 months, as well as (possibly) on the grounds that it is a secondary solidarity strike.

At any rate, the strike shows the complexity of the management tactics and legal restraints that unions have to deal with in South Africa.

### **Workers take dispute to giant SAB shop stewards' council**

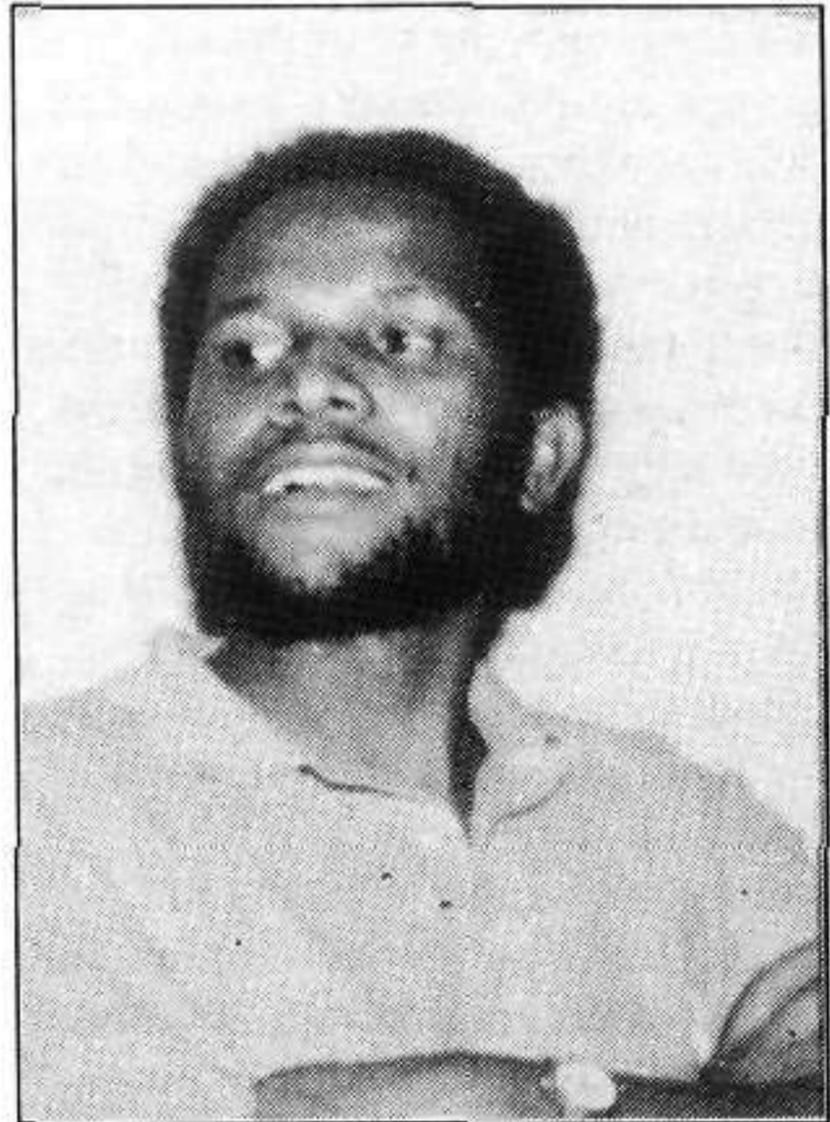
But if management is becoming increasingly sophisticated in its strategies, so are the unions. On the last weekend of May delegates from three COSATU affiliates and two NACTU affiliates met under the auspices of the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) to discuss forming a giant shop stewards' council (SSC) for the SA Breweries group of companies. Afcol workers took their dispute to this meeting, as did dismissed workers from OK's Roodepoort Hyperama and Southern Suns' Newlands Sun and

President Hotel.

Delegates discussed the disputes, and decided as a first step to go back to their various managements in each of their workplaces, and inform them as well as SAB Head Office that they are aware of the disputes and demand the immediate reinstatement of all workers.

SAB owns companies that operate in the retail, hotel, brewing, spirits, beverage, match manufacturing, and furniture sectors, and employ about 80 000 workers. About half of these workers, according to IUF local secretary Alan Horwitz, were represented at the meeting. Delegates came from PPWAWU, FAWU and CCAWUSA - all affiliated to COSATU - and the Food and Beverage Workers Union (FBWU) and National Union of Spirits and Allied Workers (NUSAW) affiliated to NACTU. They represented the beer division, Amalgamated Beverage Industries (Coke), Cape Wine, Lion Matches, OK, Southern Sun, Holiday Inn and Afcol. Workers from the Amrel group of retail stores, and from Johannesburg OK (organised by the Johannesburg branch of CCAWUSA) were absent. "That is a problem," says Horwitz. "We will try to get them in for the next meeting."

There were some tensions between affiliates of the two federations; as Horwitz says, "People do not just forget their his-



*Listening intently to a fellow-worker*

tory." But at the same time "there is a new feeling about the two federations working together, and that is what we are working towards." The IUF plans to meet with the International Metalworkers Federation in the metal sector, which already brings together affiliates of both NACTU and COSATU, in order to share experiences.

The aim for the SAB SSC is for delegates to represent companies that are part of the SAB group, rather than representing unions. Alan Horwitz says that "the first stage is to mobilise workers around the concept of a company council, to overcome company, sectoral and union divisions, because we all belong to one group." The council should be able to mobilise around

solidarity with the struggles of groups of SAB workers, such as the Afcoll strikers, as well as around an understanding of the economics and structure of the SAB group. This would facilitate developing common demands or group-wide campaigns over wages and conditions. The next meeting of the council, scheduled for 18 June, will discuss the setting up of permanent national and regional structures.

By organising a shop steward council in a group such as SAB, unions are hoping to pitch their strength more effectively against the power of the vast monopolies that dominate the South African economy. They hope to be able to co-ordinate their struggles with as

much sophistication as the monopolies employ. National company level bargaining allows for a more effective use of limited union resources, allows workers to challenge company policy at the level that it is formulated, and increases union bargaining muscle. SAB is ultimately owned by Anglo American. "It is no secret that our end goal is an Anglo American shop steward council," says Horwitz.

It will be a long hard battle. SAB will resist group level bargaining, claiming it has a "decentralised management" policy. The Afcoll strike, though, may just prove to be a powerful mobilising factor for building the unity in action of SAB workers.