

Workers shot, intimidated in Plascon strike

by KARL VON HOLDT

A wave of industrial action has hit six Plascon plants organised by SA Chemical Workers Union. About 1,500 workers have been on strike/locked out for over a month. Management has made use of the lock-out, a tactic which has become increasingly popular with employers over the last 18 months. Workers at all six plants were locked out either just after embarking on strike action over their wage demands, or before they could do so. Plascon is clearly hoping to go on the offensive with this tactic, and force the workers into submission.

Workers from all plants are meeting regularly at the union offices in Lekton House. They have started a number of singing, drumming and poetry groups. Recently they held a fundraising concert. First on the programme were the "SACWU Black Mambazo", followed by a beauty contest where male workers dressed up as women competed with each other - there is still room for jokes and laughter in the middle of a bitter strike.

For the union, after the newly-laun-

ched MEWUSA, the second biggest affiliate of NACTU, the central issues are winning a living wage and establishing the right to national company bargaining. Workers are also angry about the violent harassment they are facing.

Plascon has refused to negotiate at company level, and the union has had to negotiate separately at each plant. The fact that at each negotiation the union meets the same Plascon personnel officer shows that this is unreasonable. There can be no reason to insist on plant-level bargaining other than to weaken the union's position and preserve wage differences between plants. In an effort to unify workers, SACWU tabled the same demands in all Plascon plants where it is organised. The main demands were for a R300 per month across the board increase, a 40 hour week, 21 March and 16 June as paid public holidays, and four months maternity leave.

Strike

The dispute centres on wages. The company offered increases according to grades, R115 at the bottom and R148 at the top. Deadlock was reached in different plants. In accordance with the recognition agreements, this was followed by mediation - which failed to resolve the dispute.

The union then applied for Conciliation Boards in each plant. During meetings of the boards, the union reduced its demand to R200. The company accepted the idea of an across-the-board increase, and added



Plascon workers from different plants meet to discuss strike

Photo: Labour Bulletin

service allowances which took its final offer to R130 across the board, R135 for those with over 5 years, and R140 for those with over 15 years service. The union rejected this, but said that its demand of R200 was still negotiable. The last conciliation meeting was held on 5 May. After this various plants balloted, and the results were in favour of industrial action.

Workers at the Tarranova plant in Alberton staged a sit-in strike on 8 May. The next day they found the gates locked, and sat in the road outside. On the 10th they were dispersed by police.

At the Luipardsvlei plant workers started a go-slow on 10 May. On the 12th they were locked out. Inmont staged a strike on 9 May, and was locked out on the 10th. Doornfontein

launched a sit-in on 15 May, and were locked out the following day. At the Polycell plant in Aldrode workers were locked out on 28 April, even before they had balloted.

All in all some 1,500 workers are locked out, including those at a plant in Durban. They regard themselves as being on strike. According to SACWU'S Humphrey Ndaba, the strike/lockout "is now a trial of strength. He who backs down will be forced to give up his position. Management is trying to force workers to accept their offer."

When *Labour Bulletin* visited the striking workers at Lekton House, we found a mood of power and unity. Workers were *toyi-toying* and enjoying poetry, drumming and singing performances. Speaker after speaker

stressed that everyone should be involved in culture, that it is something belonging to the people. The union has placed great emphasis on developing and training cultural groups from amongst the strikers, as it expects the strike to be a long one. Through this workers can strengthen their resolve, communicate to other workers, and also raise funds.

Workers shot at

Shopstewards told us of the following experiences of harassment:

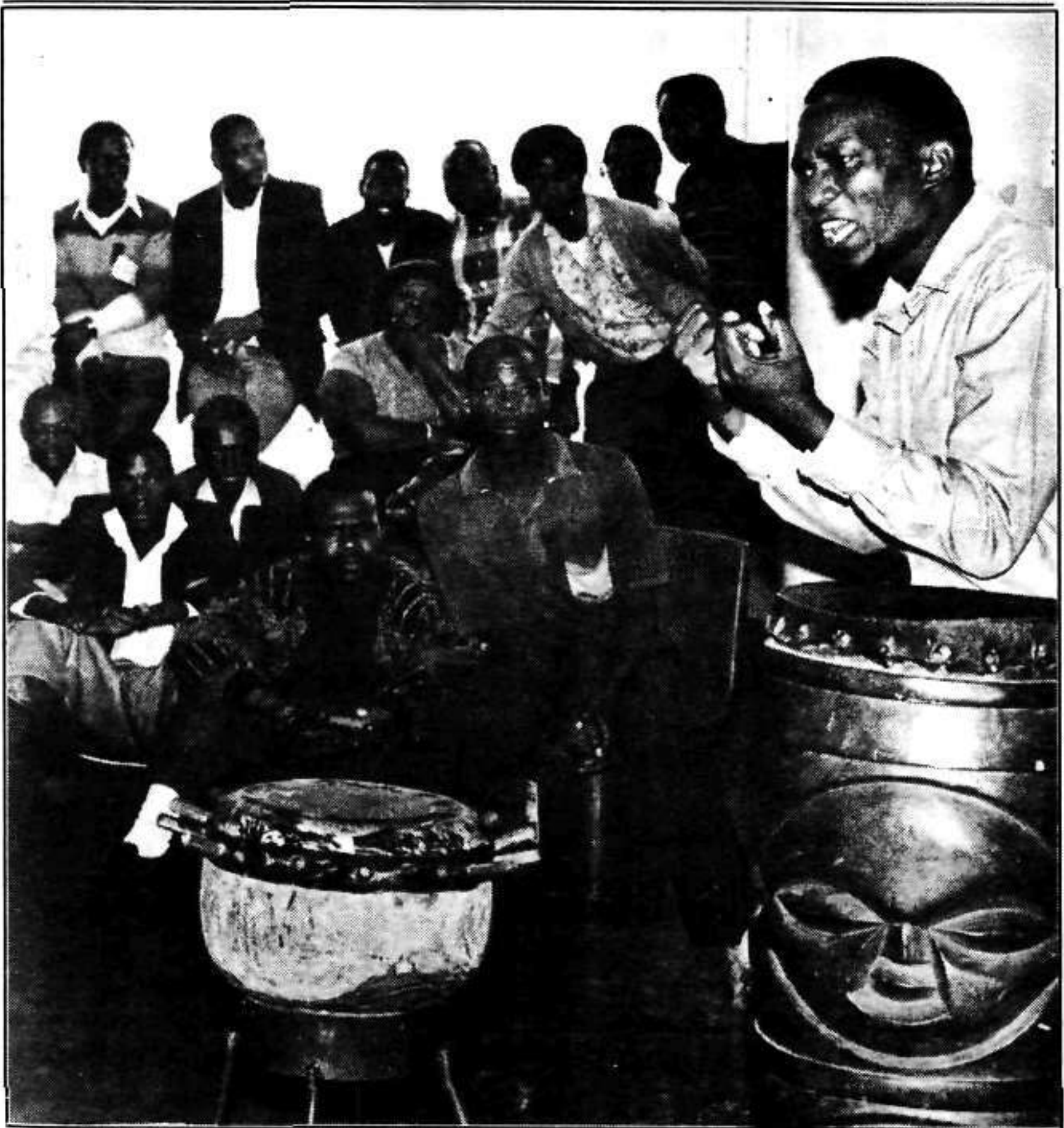
- Tarranova workers allege that they have been visited at their homes by the black personnel manager together with police, to pressurise them into returning to work. They were promised protection against "intimidators"
- Workers at Tarranova also allege that the company is telling doctors not to treat workers as Plascon's medical aid will not accept responsibility.
- Another worker was woken at 1 am and taken to a place "near John Vorster Square". There he was told by his abductors that he was known to be an "intimidator", and if any scab was hit or harmed he would be held responsible. "Your family will wait for you for 10 years, but they won't find you," he was told before being released. Two days later a neighbor told the same worker that six men had been searching for him, one armed with a gun.
- More recently, three workers who

live in Thokoza were shot at by unknown gunmen. One, Themba Kubheka, was wounded. He had earlier been charged by the police with intimidation. When the union contacted the company about this, the response was that "it must be vigilantes retaliating against Khubeka, because it is believed that he threw a petrol bomb at the house of a scab. Scabs are being intimidated, and what does the union say about that?" according to Ndaba. The two others had shots fired into their houses. Ndaba alleges that one of them was arrested for intimidation when he reported the shooting to the police.

If these allegations are true, they show a shockingly high level of violence directed against workers who are engaged in a legal strike for higher wages.

National bargaining

The fact that the wage negotiations started separately, but have now culminated in national industrial action over the same demands at six plants, may well force Plascon to accept national bargaining. Ndaba points out that if management settles at one plant, it will be very difficult to avoid extending the agreement to others. Workers are now striking together and will probably support each other. "As far as we are concerned," says Ndaba, "we are negotiating nationally. Plascon might realise that they cannot divide the workers, and reconsider."



Cultural workers perform for strikers - the union plans to use cultural events to conscientise people about the strike and to raise money

Photo: Labour Bulletin

He says that before the last mediation, at Luipardsvlei, Plascon's negotiator said that if they reached settlement there, the company would be prepared to extend it to the other plants.

Meanwhile, workers' determination has been strengthened by Plascon's response to a telex asking for information on its financial posi-

tion. The company answered that it had the money to meet the workers' demand, but that that was not the issue - the company was not prepared to pay wages above market rates.

Workers resolved that they must continue the struggle, as market rates have got nothing to do with a living wage. ☆