

EDITORIAL COMMENT – Vol 6 No. 6

This, the second in our 1980 strike series, examines three important strikes which took place in Johannesburg last year.* Two of the disputes, involving the vast majority of workers at the Johannesburg-based PUTCO depots and at the Allied Publishing Company depots, arose directly out of grievances concerning the extent of managerial control over workers.

In both the Allied and PUTCO cases we can locate the immediate confrontation at the point at which middle management and workers interact. It is at this level that the Company actively implements its power to control workers. The grievances that result are therefore rooted in the concrete daily experiences of the body of workers. Often middle management is perceived to be exercising its authority in an unfair and random manner. Arbitrary dismissals and the ill treatment of workers have evoked angry responses, and it is this mood of discontent that permeates the whole workforce, simmering to a point where antagonisms become explosive.

In some instances grievances of this kind are brought to the surface in the course of struggles around other issues. This was the case with the PUTCO strike where workers, resisting the erosion of their real wages, came up against the repressive action of middle management in the latter's attempts to crush the growing wage demand. Other disputes, like that at Allied have been ignited directly by the unacceptable imposition by management of both formal and informal disciplinary action. Resistance has, in such instances emerged out of an increasing level of awareness amongst workers, facilitated by their participation in trade union and shop floor-based organisation.

Both the majority of Allied and PUTCO workers were, moreover, sufficiently angered by the actions of middle management to have pursued the issue by demanding the removal of managers alleged to be behaving in an abusive manner. In both cases, worker resistance was marked by a high level of unity, demonstrated by the mass turnouts at meetings and the degree of discipline and planning related to worker action. The significance of this for the PUTCO and Allied strikes is that considerable numbers of workers, through organisation, were able to articulate their immediately felt grievance and take united action in support of their demands.

How did the state and employers respond to workers' action? Here the PUTCO strikes illustrate a response which is characteristic of the pattern of labour disputes in 1980: After the first strike of July 3rd, management attempted to bypass elected worker leaders and hustle the matter through the established bureaucratic structures which deal with the settlement of disputes. After deadlock in the Central Black Labour Board and the Regional Black Labour Committee, the dispute was finally referred to the Minister of Manpower Utilisation for submission to the Wage Board.

* Of course, the Mwasia solidarity strike was not confined to Johannesburg, although it had its roots there.

On the 19th December — five and a half months after the initial strike — new wage minima were gazetted. During this period, management refused on all but one occasion to deal with the drivers' Action Committee, and insisted that workers channel their grievances through the already discredited Liaison Committee.

Thus, PUTCO management and the state have treated the wage demand as *separate from* the totality of expressed grievances of workers. In so doing they have attempted to isolate those issues which are immediately resolvable from the more fundamental and deeply felt issues. The results are clearly illustrated in the PUTCO case. The real issues and grievances did not simply dissolve; workers were increasingly frustrated by the tardiness of the negotiating procedure and by the fact that negotiations took place beyond their reach. Because there has been a high degree of participation of workers in fighting for their demands management's strategy merely exacerbated the existing tensions which eventually culminated in a second strike in December. Workers were finally driven to stepping outside the official channels by opting for a more direct and immediate form of action.

Both the Allied and PUTCO strikes can be contrasted with the third strike dealt with in this edition: that of the media workers. The workers at the Cape Herald struck for higher pay and achieved their major objectives. Mwasa's national leadership however extended the strike to include a demand for strike pay for all strikers, including solidarity strikers. This was a tactic aimed at forging national unity amongst media workers as a means of winning recognition of Mwasa. However, because as the authors show, the tactic involved a demand which they regarded as *non-negotiable*, it was transformed into a principle.

And because the newspaper bosses were not prepared to concede this point, the whole strike remained deadlocked. Mwasa then attempted to force negotiation on the issue through the newspaper boycott/news blackout. The authors point to two problems which emerged around this tactic: firstly, the issues involved were not 'clearly defined and rooted in the daily realities of the communities'. This is reflected in Mwasa's mistaken assumption that there is a homogeneity of interests in the black community. Secondly, the boycott would have meant community organisations suspending their own struggles which were reliant on the media. For these reasons, confusion and indeed opposition emerged within the ranks of those who were called upon to support the journalists' struggles.

In addition, the authors argue, that a further reason for the failure of the strike was Mwasa's rejection of the support of their fellow journalists in the SASJ — the grouping which constituted its natural allies.

The three disputes covered in this Bulletin clearly show that the level of participation reached in the course of a strike, or in fact any other form of resistance, is not only a reflection of the importance of the particular issues to the bulk of the workforce involved, but is also a prerequisite for the achievement of concessions and short term victories, on the basis of which further organisational gains can be made.