

Bakers Biscuit Strike

During February, 1000 Bakers Biscuit Company workers at the Isando plant in Transvaal and Pinetown plant in Natal conducted a strike which lasted 12 days and 14 days respectively; the first national legal strike of its kind in the biscuit industry. In Natal this number included 200 Indian workers, the result of a 2-year struggle by shop stewards to unite all sections of the workforce. The majority of workers were members of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU), a FOSATU affiliate.

The strike was the outcome of a long and bitter wage dispute with Bakers Biscuit Company, a subsidiary of Anglo-Vaal Industries and owned by Anglo-Vaal Ltd, which is part of Anglo-Vaal Holdings, in turn part of the Hersor and Menell families. Bakers Biscuit Company is the largest biscuit producer in the country and controls a number of smaller biscuit producers, and has, consequently enormous clout among producers. Its attitude to unionisation is "liberal", believing that workers should join unions of their choice, even have the right to strike, and is favourably disposed to majority unionism.

Organising the biscuit industry has been characterised, initially, by intense competition, especially in Natal, between the National Biscuit Operative and Packers Union (NBOPU), a TUCSA affiliate and SFAWU; the Food Beverage Workers Union, a CUSA affiliate, also has a small presence in the industry. SFAWU began organising Bakers workers as early as 1981 and took nearly 3 years to achieve majority membership and recognition. Many of the workers left the NBOPU because of the absence of democracy and worker control in the union, and because of its failure to secure significant wage increases, despite its participation in the Industrial Council (IC).

By early 1984, SFAWU had gained not only a majority in Bakers, but also in the biscuit industry in Transvaal and Natal. From this position the union applied to join the IC for wage negotiations in July. However its application was blocked by NBOPU, a common problem facing the emerging unions. Whilst the biscuit employers favoured negotiation within the IC, the block on SFAWU's application increased the pressure to neg-

- Bakers strike -

otiate outside, and consequently the employers withdrew, causing the collapse of the IC. An informal negotiating forum was set up with SFAWU, and which also included the minority unions.

SFAWU's demand, supported by the other unions, was for a 32% increase on the present minimum wage of R82 per week (ie. to R110 per week) as well as for other non-wage benefits of increased public holidays and annual leave. The employers' final offer was 12,5%, which meant to most workers a R10 per week increase, a real drop in wages given the inflation rate of 14-15%. SFAWU demanded mediation.

During mediation the employers offered a 12.5% increase from November 1984 to January 1985, and an additional increase of 3% for February 1985 to February 1986. SFAWU rejected the offer. An application was made to the Minister of Manpower to appoint a conciliation board in order to settle the dispute because of the collapse of the Industrial Council. When no conciliation board was set up, after 30 days, SFAWU held a strike ballot, on January 31, at the Isando and Pinetown plants. The majority of workers voted for legal strike action.

The strike commenced on 8 February in Pinetown and 11 February in Isando bringing both plants to a standstill. Bakers' response was most interesting. There were no mass dismissals nor any attempt to employ scab labour. Instead Bakers embarked upon a "trial of strength" in an effort to starve workers into submission. Although workers were financially hard pressed and needed an early settlement, they nevertheless held out. Unity in the face of employer intransigence was imperative not only for Bakers' workers but the entire industry. While the Bakers workers were on strike for a 32% increase, NBOPU members in Cape Town, employed by Baumans Biscuit, and in Port Elizabeth, employed by Pyotts (both owned by Bakers) - were preparing to settle for 10%, below even the mediation offer of 12.5% in the Transvaal and Natal. The final settlement for these workers was a 10% rise for November 1984 to January 1985, and a further 2,5% for February 1985 to February 1986.

During the strike SFAWU also appealed to the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) for aid. A significant feature of the strike was the mass meeting arranged by SFAWU with Bakers workers and their families, where

the reason for the strike was explained. This was done to prevent family friction and well over 1000 people attended. Throughout the strike, morale remained high and in the Isando plant NBOPU workers supported the strike. If anything it meant the deathknell of the NBOPU there and its last outpost, in Cape Town, is likely to come under attack as workers realise the wage discrepancies in the industry.

During the strike the most pressing concern for SEAWU was to maintain organisation and secure close links between all striking workers. According to Transvaal SEAWU officials, it was important, given the recession, not to keep workers out on strike for too long. Also a national strike requires much more co-ordination if it is to be successful.

After 14 days a settlement was reached which included a 12,5% increase (R92 per week) for November 1984 to January 1985, plus an additional 5% for the period February 1985 to February 1986, part of which was an incorporated attendance bonus, giving a new basic wage of R98 per week. While this was well short of the original demand, it represented a relatively good advance, whilst leaving the organisation still intact. From this strengthened position the union can move to organise the rest of the biscuit industry.

(SALB Correspondent, February 1985)