

# PWAWU victory at Mondi

The Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAWU) has completed their first battle to establish national company level negotiations, and is due to take on Sappi and Nampak in the near future. The nine day strike by 1,700 Mondi Board workers ended in victory for the union. Wage increases went up above the inflation rate and rural-urban parity in wages was achieved for the first time. National pressure, a well co-ordinated and unified response on the part of Mondi Board workers at all five plants played a major role in the final outcome. Equally important however, the strike and similar struggles at Nampak and Sappi will be an indicator of future success around attempts to reconstitute a national industry wide negotiating forum.

PWAWU says that they will push for national company level negotiations before wage talks begin towards the end of 1987. Now that the dispute with Mondi has ended the union faces an even tougher battle with Gencor-owned Sappi. The Sappi group has historically proved to be a major stumbling block, as their low wage rates tended to depress wage levels across the entire industry. PWAWU will have to struggle to push Sappi to pay the same wages as other companies within the industry. Co-ordinating committees have been established to ensure that similar demands are made at each company. The union has also stated that in future it will not accept a wage offer at any factory without all plants in the same company agreeing to that settlement. Mondi workers initially demanded 70c across the board increase, May Day and June 16th as paid holidays, an increase in shift allowance and increased holiday bonuses.

Worker organisation and solidarity during the Mondi strike holds important lessons for future struggles at Nampak, Carlton and Sappi. At each plant workers adopted the strategy which would best suit them. At the same time no move on any issue relating to negotiations was made without consultations and agreement at all the other plants. In some areas workers resolved the problem of scabs by conducting sleep-in strikes, whilst at others workers would gather at the factory premises each day. Solidarity action also depended on the location of the factory and the nature of the strike at the factory. At Springs the COSATU local provided resources, whilst Western Cape strikers received support from workers in other paper factories.

Managements attempts to break the strike by bringing in scabs generally proved to be a failure. At Springs machines had to be shut down after two scabs were seriously injured. The Umgeni plant, where one machine was started towards the end of the strike succeeded in producing mainly waste. Management also tried to bring in the police and army, however this had limited success. Workers responded by warning that they could not guarantee the safety of machinery if they were forcibly removed. A number of workers at Piet Retief were detained and questioned. At Empangeni the company employed ex-conscripts to try and keep machines running.

Nevertheless worker unity and national co-ordination eventually succeeded in getting Mondi management to give in to many of the unions demands. The final settlement includes:

- \* a 50c per hour increase in the lower grades, with a further 5c per hour increase in July. Minimum hourly wage rates will therefore increase to R3,15. Skilled workers will receive a 65c per hour increase with a further 5c in July.
- \* a 40% increase in shift allowance
- \* holiday bonus increases of R130
- \* June 16 as paid holiday

A significant victory for the union was also managements agreement to discuss the grading scheme, long regarded by workers as an artificial means of dividing them, and to discuss a reduction of working hours to a 40 hour week.

PWAWU's long term objective, to reconstitute a national bargaining forum stems from the union's long battle with the undemocratic Paper, Pulp Industrial Council. In 1985 the NEC decided to enter the Industrial Council in an attempt to consolidate national industry wide bargaining. A few months later however PWAWU walked out of the Council, arguing that it was not a successful national bargaining forum, and questioning the undemocratic system of representation within that body. Small unions, organising mainly white workers, had equal voting rights with PWAWU thereby dominating the Council. As a result PWAWU walked out of the Industrial Council effectively destroying it. (see SALB 11.1)

PWAWU argued that the Council united employers as a class against the union, whilst any attempts to challenge that were hampered by the bureaucratic and wholly unrepresentative craft unions. The Industrial Council would normally simply take the lowest wages in the industry and then declare that the national legal minimum,

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whilst the Council's existence was also used to deny the union the right to plant level negotiations. PWAU's battle to reconstitute a national bargaining forum on terms set by the union; viz majority unionism, minimum national negotiating rights, as well as plant level bargaining, holds important implications for unions struggling against bargaining forums set up by employers and the state.

(Coletane Markham, March 1987)



photo: Mondri workers strike for higher pay (New Nation)