

SWEEPING THE STRA

In October 1984 the women street sweepers of Kwa Mashu decided that it was time that they did something about their low wages and bad working conditions.

They had been working for Port Natal Administration Board since 1981. They had spoken to their induna about their low wages. All they heard from him was "A letter has been sent to Port Natal". Nothing happened.



The women decided to go to the union. They were not union members but one of them remembered going to the union when her husband and her 16 year old working daughter died.

She talked to the other women about going to the union. She said: "I went to the other women. I met them at the station, on the streets - I had to walk and take the taxi to meet all of them. Most were afraid. They said they had no money to go to town. So seven of us went to the union office. We came to the office on that Thursday afternoon and we found the organiser. We told her our story. She was glad to see us.

She said that she was proud to see women coming together with one problem. She said she would take our case with care as it was the first time she saw women in the office in the way we came. She said even domestic workers don't earn R52.00 a month, although they also have problems.

OUR PROBLEMS

There are altogether 200 to 300 of us who work sweeping streets. 28 of us work in the hostels and clean public toilets. Before 1981 men did this work. They were paid R200.00 a month. Women were started at R43.00 a month - and now it is only women who sweep the streets. The only man now working is the induna. When we took these jobs they told us that the job was for one to two hours

WOMEN'S STREETS OF KWAZULU-NATAL



in one street. We thought we could do washing or other jobs for extra money when the two hours were over. But the job is now from 9am to 2pm. We work 5 days a week. We get no sick leave, no holiday leave. When we are sick the induna says we must sleep on the road. We get no Workman's Compensation. We don't get adequate protective clothing.

Our job is to pile rubbish up for the trucks to pick up - juba boxes, old cars, bottles, tins - all these things. We work in two's and two of us have to clean two streets. We have to burn some of this rubbish. It is almost always windy and this makes it dangerous. We have to duck the flames. One woman was badly burnt when her dress caught alight. Her underclothes stuck to her and she had to be rushed to the polyclinic and from there to the hospital.

Sometimes we have to carry pieces of scrap cars

and furniture. One woman broke her teeth when a studio couch she and her partner were carrying slipped from their hands. Another woman lost her sight in one eye through an accident while working.

They give us gum boots, gloves and a little bib-like a baby's. They don't give us overalls. We are given a rake to rake up the rubbish and then we pick these up with our hands.



After we went to the union the union wrote to Port Natal and wages were put us for the first time in November 1984.

When the other women saw the 7 women who went to the union still had their jobs they were no longer afraid.



We are still fighting for higher wages, overalls, holidays and sick leave. We meet every Saturday about 40 to 50 of us to discuss and also to sing and dance traditional Zulu and Pondo dances. We have acted out a play and we took part in the May Day meeting, where we danced.

Most of us are elderly. We are widows or our husbands have left us. We are the sole supporters of our families, often we care for our grandchildren as well. We have to work to get food to eat. And so that our children don't get Kwashiokor. Some of us worked in factories before but lost our jobs, mostly through retrenchments. When we went looking for work at factories they said: "We don't want old ladies and fat women - we want young ones - those who are fat can't run".

It is worse for us because we are women. But we are determined to fight our problems. Now all the women are in the union - WE ARE NOT AFRAID!

