

In the six-week period under review, WIP monitored 116 strikes and lock-outs involving over 71 787 workers. The level of industrial action, which escalated dramatically in February and March along with heightened political mobilisation and conflict, remained high although there are signs that this is tailing-off. The decrease is reflected in the fact that over 50% of the strikes monitored began before the 15 March, the start of this review period. The stabilising of the political climate and the response of bosses to increased militancy might account, in part, for the reduction in industrial action. The number of lock-outs increased and there was an attempt to regain lost control over the factory floor. Lock-outs were used most frequently in the Eastern Cape and Border regions where the workforce has been particularly militant. In some cases lock-outs were intended to pre-empt collective industrial action (as at Renown in Port Elizabeth) or they constituted a response to absenteeism, unprocedural stoppages and political demonstrations (as at Mercedes, Volkswagen and Furniture Industries). A third reason for the tailing-off of wilcat industrial action is the start of national wage negotiations in many sectors and the possibility that workers may have to save their energy to take action over wages in the near future.

Nevertheless, the level of strike action for this period is still comparatively high particularly since national wage negotiations have not reached an advanced point. In addition to strikes there were a number of regional



## Unions braced for national wage talks

stayaways aimed at influencing local political issues. These occurred at Uitenhage, Maritzburg and Durban, Bushbuckridge and in Gazankulu. They are not reflected in the strike tables. Increased expectations and militancy among workers were expressed mainly through wage demands, which triggered 42% of strikes. This represents an increase on the overall proportion of wage-related strikes for 1990, which

stands at 37,5%. Disciplinary procedures and dismissals remained the second most frequent 'cause' of action - together accounting for 19% of strikes. In strikes of this sort over half were related to discrimination and racism. Protest against racial discrimination continued to generate action in the mining and public sectors. The third most frequent trigger of strikes was the struggle for recognition

(15%). In addition to the pre-emptive and disciplinary use of the lock-out, management responded primarily through mass dismissals, using this in 23% of cases. However, in strikes where all channels to resolve the dispute had been exhausted, unions won the reinstatement of workers in almost all cases. In a number of strikes, management used racial and ethnic differences to

divide workers. Coloured and Indian scabs have been used to replace striking Africans. In other cases where the workforce was dismissed, hostels were used as recruiting bases for replacement labour. This recruitment often took place along ethnic lines. Repression of union activities in the form of detention of union members, security force action against marches and pickets and attacks by vigilantes has also increased over the last two months. While a repressive approach to industrial relations by the state and employers has been the norm for several years, both these parties are currently considering changes to labour law which do grant some rights and protection for workers. The agreement between Cosatu-Nactu and Saccola which will recommend changes to the Labour Relations Amendment Act is significant in that it marks the first time workers and employers have jointly proposed labour legislation. It is also significant because the proposals begin to limit the ability of the state and employers to use the law as a weapon against workers. The proposal entrenches the right of all workers to collective bargaining and to take strike action. It recommends new dismissal and retrenchment procedures in line with International Labour Organisation convention and recommends that the definition of unfair labour practices revert to the form it took before the LRA was amended in 1988. It also recommends that unions will no longer be liable for damages in wildcat strikes. The National Manpower Commission proposals which, according to the NMC acting chairman Frans Barker, are designed to bring about 'less

governmental involvement in labour affairs' suggest the extension of worker and trade union rights. Strikes will be decriminalised but still regulated under unfair labour practice definitions and the main legislation extended to cover civil servants (excluding police and security services) and municipal workers not involved in maintaining essential services. But the NMC does not recommend that all workers be covered by the main legislation. It is noteworthy that farm and domestic workers remain excluded, although the NMC says these sectors could be included by proclamation. Extending the main legislation to cover civil servants could help regulate the volatile relationship between the state and its employees but the militance in the public sector is unlikely to be tempered unless major adjustments in conditions of service are made. In the period under review, action in the public sector was second only to that in the metal/motor/engineering sector. Since the beginning of the year public sector workers have been responding to extremely low wage levels, the threat of privatisation which will result in further retrenchment, and poor and discriminatory conditions of service. In the six-week period under review:

- \* Ten municipal strikes were recorded.
- \* 1 000 teachers in the Border region held sit-in strikes.
- \* 1 000 teachers marched through Durban during working hours.
- \* Hospital workers at 11 TPA hospitals went on strike.
- \* Hospital strikes also occurred at Ngwelezane (Empangeni) and Garankuwa.
- \* Civil servants in

Gazankulu and KwaZulu stayed away from work.

- \* Rand Water Board employees went on strike.
- \* There were at least five strikes by postal workers. Activity in the postal sector is likely to continue. Potwa tabled a demand for a living wage of R1 100 in October last year. The Post Office has offered R670. An additional factor is privatisation which is likely to result in the loss of thousands of jobs. Particularly vulnerable are temporary workers - who make up more than 80% of the coloured and African workforce. The important process of annual wage negotiations has just begun. Mostly it is too early to tell whether workers will resort to industrial action. But Numsa has warned employers that, in a context where workers' expectations are high, it would not be surprising if members were to lose faith in the bargaining process if their demands were not 'treated with seriousness'. The NUM has also warned the Chamber of Mines that if tangible and positive moves are not taken on the issue of racial discrimination, more protest action can be expected. Talks in the mining industry are about to begin - the NUM will table a demand of an average 35% wage increase and new minima of R543 for surface workers and R600 for underground workers. Metal talks are entering the fourth round. Numsa - which formulated *comprehensive bargaining* demands at its national bargaining conference - has demanded a R2-an-hour across-the-board increase. The last Seifsa offer of an average 11% increase on the minimum rates was rejected by all unions in the talks. Numsa points out that

the Seifsa offer does not include a guaranteed personal increase - so workers earning above the new minima may not receive an increase. The increasing frequency of sub-contracting and employment of temporary labour in the industry has also made job security an important Numsa demand. This and the demand for action to eliminate racially discriminatory training are awaiting a response from Seifsa. Deregulation of small business has already become a point of contention in the talks. Seifsa has argued that exempting small businesses from the main agreement will stimulate growth and employment. Numsa has contested the idea that deregulation creates jobs and has argued that all workers should be covered by the main agreement. In the clothing and textile sector, where bargaining takes place in several regional and industry-specific councils, workers are discussing ways of improving their bargaining strength and the possibility of centralised bargaining. Wage negotiations in the clothing sector deadlocked in the Eastern Cape with workers demanding a R30 across-the-board weekly increase and management offering R17 from 1 May and a further R4 from November. A dispute has been declared and although the option of mediation has been put forward industrial action appears likely. Eastern Cape workers are hoping through their demands to equalise wages and learning periods in the industry. If they are successful, the agreement could lay the foundations for national bargaining.

- \* The strike table reflects only strikes which involved more than 50 workers.●