

# Workers down tools over killer blast

By ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

**M**ore than 3 000 AECI workers from the Modderfontein factory went out on strike on 16 September protesting against the deaths of eight fellow workers. The strike follows an explosion in the factory on 14 September, when nitro-glycerine exploded, killing the eight workers.

The workers, the majority of whom are members of the SA Chemical Workers Union, put the following demands:

- That nitro-glycerine be phased out and replaced by another substance;
- that the packing house be separated from the cartridge house;
- a danger allowance of R500 per month;
- the suspension of a manager responsible for the department where the explosion occurred; and
- an end to casual labour.

The workers were also demanding that workers in the explosives department as well as supervisors be upgraded. Management refused to meet any of the demands on upgrading of workers, arguing that grading is determined by the job appraisal system.

On the demand of phasing out nitro-glycerine, management undertook to present recommendations to shareholders on the issue, and committed themselves to consult with unions after shareholders have made their decision.

According to Godfrey Ramothata, local organiser of SACWU, over the past 20 years, nearly 50 workers have been killed in explosions at the factory.

- 1973 – 6 workers killed;
- 1975 – 5 killed;
- 1976 – 2 workers killed;
- 1982 – 7 workers were killed;
- 1985 – 14 workers died;
- 1994 (Feb) – 4 workers killed;

- 1994 (April) – 3 workers died;
- 1994 (Sept) – 8 workers killed.

Ramothata added that four of the dead workers were employed as casual labourers. Siphso Ngozi, a shopsteward, said that the explosion was so powerful that the eight bodies were badly mutilated. "The workers were buried in only two coffins, as we were picking up pieces to put together for burial."

"The demand for a R500 monthly danger allowance stems from the risks to which we are exposed at the factory on a daily basis," one worker said. Management has responded to this demand by offering a once-off ex-gratia payment of R2 000 to those workers who were on the afternoon shift in Factory 1 when the explosion occurred.

On the ninth day of the strike, management issued an ultimatum to workers to return to work by 28 September or face dismissal. On 1 October SACWU dropped the demand on danger allowance and modified its demand on upgrading of workers and supervisors. Manene Samela, national organiser of SACWU, said the union wanted management to make an undertaking that job appraisal will form the cornerstone of centralised bargaining. "But management refused to make this undertaking," Samela said.

Management fired about 2 800 workers. At least 21 workers were injured when management called in the police to disperse demonstrating workers. The main issue then became the reinstatement of workers. The workers were reinstated without any of their major demands being met. The principle of no work no pay will apply, although workers will not lose their benefits.

Although workers have embarked on some form of industrial action previously in support of health and safety, this is the first recorded strike of its length with a heavy emphasis on safety and health at work. The other action similar to this was the stayaway by mineworkers in 1988 when 188

### *AECI workers striking against danger*

Kinross miners were killed in an underground accident. There was also a case of a five-month go-slow by ERPM workers who were protesting against management's decision to change the underground shift system without consulting with workers. Management dropped the new system and reverted to the old system, only then did the go-slow end.

According to Shirley Miller, CWIU's health and safety officer, her union's members at AECI argue that nitro-glycerine can be made safer, although the demand by SACWU to phase it out and replace it with a less explosive substance is reasonable. "The main problem with the bosses is that they don't see it necessary to involve workers and their unions in ensuring that the workplace is safe. Workers need to be constantly trained to recognise dangerous work environments and substances."

Miller said two international experts have arrived to participate in an inquiry to 'determine what went wrong'. "The problem with inquiries like this is that there is hardly evidence left after the explosion. The cartridging house been completely destroyed." Miller said her union and SACWU are co-operating at this inquiry which started on 30 September and is being chaired by the Department of Labour. "Management was surprised that we sat together, held joint caucuses and presented a united front." Samela confirmed this, saying: "When we are facing management, SACWU believes that we should present a united front."

The tensions between the NACTU-affiliated SACWU and COSATU's CWIU were visible at a report-back meeting on 28 September. Samela said workers calling themselves CWIU members had not joined the strike, and were therefore aligning themselves with management against other workers. Samela however, later said that he had communicated with Muzi Buthelezi, general



Pic: William Matlala

secretary of CWIU, who said he would ensure that CWIU members join the strike.

But the battle for supremacy at AECI between the two unions dates back many years. Although SACWU has a majority of members at AECI, CWIU sources said they have been gradually increasing their membership at the plant, thereby heightening tensions. Samela said the poaching of each other's members has been going on for the last ten years. "SACWU members leave to join CWIU, and vice versa, that does not worry us at all," Samela said. According to him, what angered SACWU members was the arrival of CWIU officials accompanied by management on 15 September, a day after the explosion. Samela said they expected CWIU to deal with his union directly, not through management.

The inquiry into the causes of the explosion will continue on 17 November. Two international experts were present at the inquiry, at the invitation of SACWU, to help determine what went wrong on that fateful day of 14 September.

#### **The dead workers have been identified as:**

1. KJ Ramoshai
2. VA Dlakana
3. MA Mbewu
4. EM Mahlangu
5. BG Khambule
6. MW Moabelo
7. T Mokoka
8. TP Phaka ☆