

# Being casual

**W**hen permanent work was the norm, you applied for a job by handing in an application form or going for an interview. However, casual, contract or temporary work is replacing many permanent jobs. The means of getting a job has also changed. An insert on Cape Town's Bush Radio illustrated this. Some researchers went to the docks to establish what employment practices were like. They came across the following:

Aspirant workers would wait at a company's gate. A bell would ring. This was the signal that the company would now be employing casual workers. The workers would storm the gate, wrestling to get there first. The stronger men usually made it and were employed for a day. The weaker ones had to wait for the next shift to wrestle their way to employment.

## Defining a casual

Dennis Nkomo, a FAWU Johannesburg branch organiser, describes a casual as someone who works up to three days a week in a company. If he or she works more than three days that person is not a casual. Companies that need extra labour for a short period use casual workers. A casual usually does not enjoy the benefits (like pension fund and medical aid contributions) that permanent workers do.

Companies use casual workers because they do not have enough work for that

*Etienne Vlok examines casualisation and how FAWU and South Bakels are handling it in an innovative way!*

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person to be employed full-time or because they have a temporary vacancy. They argue that to employ that worker permanently would be a waste of money as they do not have enough work.

## Permanent casuals

However, companies often employ casuals for more extended periods to cut costs. Casuals do not enjoy the benefits that permanent workers do, so they are cheaper to employ. Casuals are often not organised collectively so employers do not worry about unions and their demands. The casuals argue, as Nkomo did, that a person who is employed for an extended period should be appointed as a permanent or temporary worker.

Nkomo explains, 'If a company has casuals every day it means that there are vacancies and then it should appoint those workers full-time.' But companies get around this by appointing different casuals every day. Thus, the companies avoid changing the casuals' status from casual to permanent. Unions often have agreements with companies on employing casuals.

The companies can violate the agreement if they keep on appointing casuals

According to Nkomo, many companies give their permanent workers huge benefits but the casuals in the same company receive nothing. Casuals often earn a lot less than permanent workers. The Young Christian Workers (YCW), who organises casuals, argue that if companies considered what work casuals were doing they would pay them more.

The relationship between casuals and permanent workers is sometimes antagonistic. Nkomo attributes this to 'employers using casuals without the shopstewards' involvement. The permanents then see the casuals as a threat. If a shopsteward is involved, it benefits both the permanents and the casuals'.

### Unions for casuals

Some unions have started to organise casual labour more actively. The YCW names SACCAWU and FAWU in the Free State as examples. Belonging to a union can protect casuals and stop employers using casuals to undermine unions.

FAWU has tried to organise casuals in the past, but it is difficult. Nkomo explains: 'We collect subs through stop order facilities. However, companies will not provide stop orders for casuals.' Nkomo admits casuals could pay union dues at the union offices, but that does not happen often.

The YCW says that unions do not organise casual workers because they are not sure if the casuals will be there next month. The union depends on its membership to pay the bills and provide the necessary resources.

### South Bakels

South Bakels produces raw materials for bakeries. The company is in Martindale,

Johannesburg and has branches in Cape Town, the Eastern Cape and Pietermaritzburg. It employs 240 people nationally, with about 170 in Johannesburg, ten of which are casuals. The bargaining unit consists of 110 workers, eight of which are not FAWU members. FAWU is the only recognised union.

### Baking a relationship

Niglas Ndebele is the chairperson of the shopstewards at South Bakels in Martindale. He describes the relationship with the management 'as tricky in some places, but overall we work hand-in-hand. They are transparent but not enough regarding the most sensitive issues.' He admits that in 1985 the relationship was difficult, but that it has improved. 'Initially the management did not understand what a union does, but now they do.'

Ilze le Roux, human resource manager at South Bakels, agrees: 'We can talk to the union about most things. We have a quarterly meeting where we share the financial statements with them. Our minimum wage is R3 000, which is above industry standards, and we had a 40-hour week and six months maternity leave long before the BCEA came into effect.'

Le Roux ascribes the good relationship to their transparency and communication with the union. The company trains workers. 'We train the shopstewards to understand the business side of the company better.'

### Employment practices

Le Roux defines the different workers: 'A casual does not work for more than three days a week, does not get benefits or qualify for leave. We usually get casuals from the Department of Labour. A temporary worker has a fixed-term contract. They qualify for leave and have UIF and tax deductions. We



*South Bakels does not employ casuals from its gate anymore.*

get them from the Department of Labour or we ballot for them. We pay a contract worker by the hour. They usually work on a certain project. A permanent worker gets all the benefits'

South Bakels assesses daily whether they need to employ casuals. It usually employs casuals when someone is sick or on leave. Casuals work the same amount of hours as permanent workers and earn R80 per day. They do the same work as permanent workers but do not operate machinery. Ndebele says that when the company needs to employ casuals, management, the shopsteward and the supervisor discuss it first.

When administrative personnel are sick, South Bakels temporarily employs a worker from the factory in the administrator's job. They then appoint a casual to replace the factory worker. Le Roux says 'the shopstewards asked us to do this to teach workers new skills and to move them around'.

## Balloting

In the past South Bakels employed casuals by choosing people that were waiting at its' gates. Le Roux explains why they stopped this 'One does not know anything about that person. So it is a security risk. Another problem companies experience when employing casuals is nepotism. But we took a strong stance against it'

To stop nepotism the company and the union agreed that if someone takes long-term leave, workers in that department can hold a ballot. Ndebele explains: 'A name of someone in the department is drawn from a hat. Whoever is chosen can bring a family member or a friend to work during the leave.' Le Roux adds 'many workers here support eight or ten people and this is one way to help the families and inject more money into their homes'. (See first box on p 50)

## New Canada

When South Bakels has a vacancy or needs

### **'I have never had a permanent job'**

Quentin Andrews is a casual at South Bakels. He has been working in the dispatch section for 11 weeks. Originally from Kimberley, he has a standard nine and came to Johannesburg to find work. Andrews has never had a permanent job: 'In 1995 I worked in the bakery at Vryburg's Shoprite and in 1996 in the bakery at Hyperama-Eastgate. My brother was the security guard at the Shoprite. They needed a replacement for a woman going on maternity leave for three months. I earned R699 per month. A friend told me about the

job at Hyperama. They needed a casual with bakery experience.'

South Bakels employed Andrews after his friend was chosen from a ballot. He replaced someone whom they fired. 'Maybe I could become a permanent worker. They need someone here who knows the job and I am learning. I do not know anything about FAWU or what they stand for.'

The normal working hours are 7:30am to 4:30pm. Casuals are paid R400 per week. But Andrews works overtime until 5:30pm and so earns R482 per week.

a casual for a few days it goes to the Department of Labour's New Canada centre. Le Roux explains the system there: 'We inform them that we need someone for a certain period with certain skills. They check their lists with names and skills and send the person to us. They are not always extremely efficient. Sometimes we get people two days after we needed them.'

Nkomo adds that it is not necessarily the same person every time. 'At New Canada they have a list of available people and try to give them all opportunities.'

### **No brokers**

Initially South Bakels considered using labour brokers to recruit and organise the casuals, but the union suggested they use the Department of Labour.

Le Roux describes the process: 'Two labour brokers offered to find and co-ordinate casual labour for us. They would employ and pay the casuals. I think they also provide scab labour. However, we spoke to the union and decided not to use the labour brokers. We decided to get casuals from the Department of Labour instead. It would mean us not spending money on brokers and employing people who need jobs.'

### **From casual to permanent**

Management has a verbal agreement with the union that once a casual or temporary worker has worked at South Bakels for three months it must appoint him or her as a permanent worker. However, this does not apply to those workers replacing someone on long-term or maternity leave or contract workers.

Le Roux admits that sometimes the company employs casuals because they have more work than they can handle. After three months they will then decide whether to employ a casual permanently. Before they do this the shopsteward, supervisor and management discuss the casual's skills, performance and absenteeism record. If they find that they need this person permanently they will appoint him or her. Ndebele adds 'when we have a shortage of workers the union always works towards employing the casuals permanently. We registered a casual whom we got from the Department of Labour recently as a permanent. We realised that we needed someone and was happy with his performance.' (See box on p 51)

### **Casuals at South Bakels**

According to Nkomo, FAWU does not organise the casuals at South Bakels

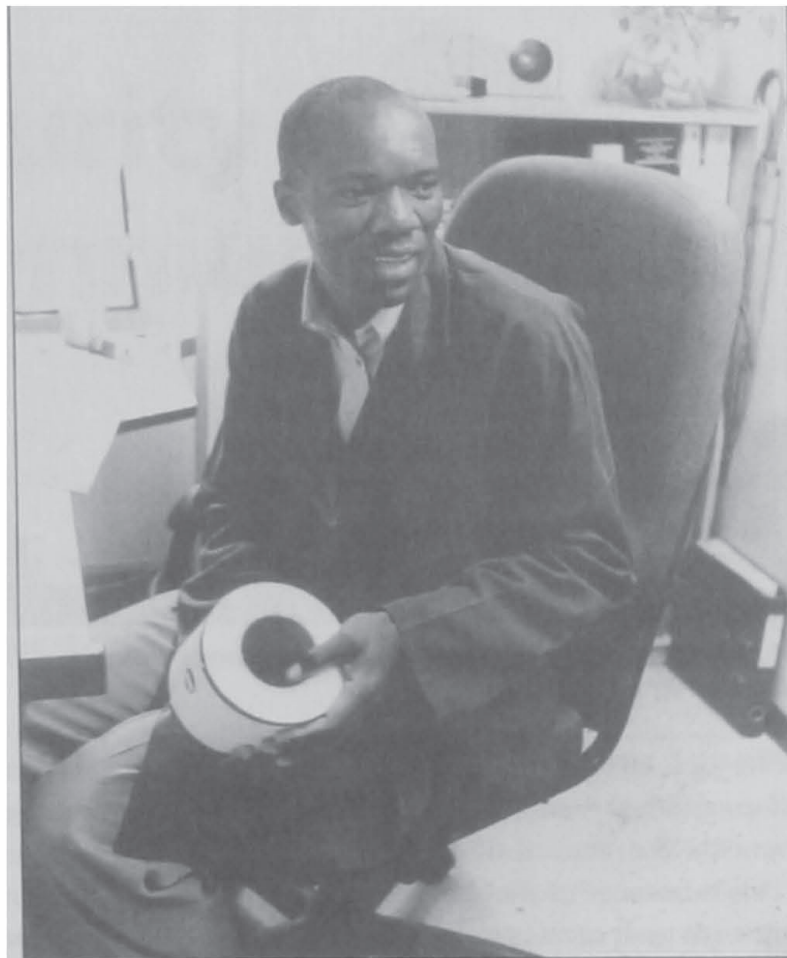
because they are not the same workers every time 'If it were certain people all the time, it would be possible, but that is not so'

Ndebele adds that they have not tried to recruit the casuals at South Bakels. 'We invite them to union meetings where some casuals make good contributions. Once you are a casual, whether it is for two days or two months, the union represents you'

The casuals and permanent workers are not distinguished in any way at South Bakels. They wear the same clothes and eat at the same canteen.

Ndebele says 'the casuals do not pay subs, but they can use the union if they have a grievance. All the FAWU members have to pay R5 to cover the shopstewards' costs when attending union meetings, but not the casuals.

The members subsidise them. In December we employed many casuals but



*Niglas Ndebele works in the printing room, making labels.*

there were still no complaints from the union members about subsidising them.'

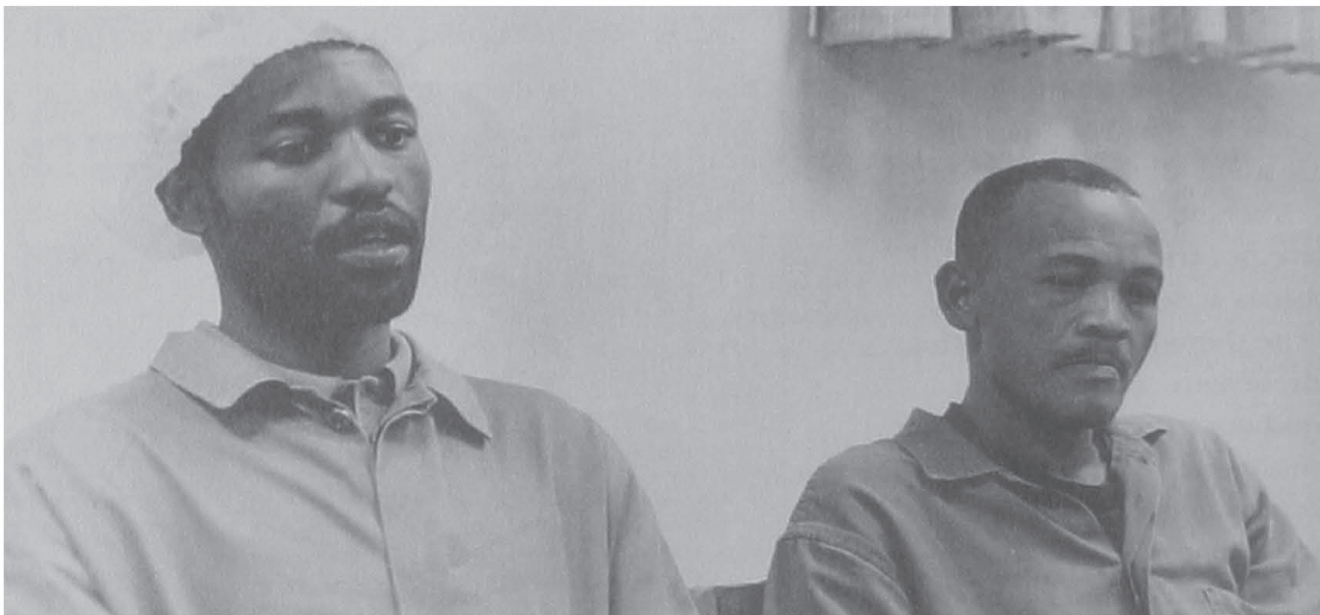
### **'I am happy to be permanent'**

Buyani Mabaso is the newly-registered permanent worker at South Bakels. He grew up in Estcourt and now stays in Dube in Soweto. He completed standard nine. 'In 1996 I had a permanent job at Budget Sales but I left because I only got R150 per week. In 1997 I did not work. Last year I was a guard at Future Security for two months. They paid me R800 per month.'

He came to work for South Bakels in November 1998. The company got him from the Department of Labour. 'I registered there in 1997. You hand in your ID and tell them what type of work you can do and what qualifications you have. Every morning at

7am you go there to see whether they have any work. If they do not have anything, you might wait until 2pm. I got the job at the security company through the Department of Labour. I sometimes got a piece job for half a day.'

Mabaso is a machine operator in South Bakels. The company taught him how to operate the machines. At the time of the interview he had been a permanent worker for one week. He then joined FAWU because 'they can protect and represent me. I am very happy to be a permanent worker.' Mabaso suggests that the union represent casuals also and try to get them registered



*Buyani Mabaso, a casual-turned-permanent worker, and Quentin Andrews, a casual worker at South Bakels.*

### **Wages and benefits**

The casuals at South Bakels do not receive benefits like medical aid or pension fund. 'This is because of the short term that they are with us. It creates too many administrative problems for us. Because of their nature as temporary workers casuals do not qualify for provident fund,' continues le Roux. The wages for permanent workers and casuals are different. According to Ndebele they are negotiating for them to get the same wages. Permanent workers get a yearly increase, but not casuals who get R10 an hour.

### **A challenge to companies**

In their research, Bezuidenhout and Kenny found that 'to replace a stable labour force with a marginal one can potentially lead to loss of productivity over time and social unrest'. They feel that companies face a choice: go for a short-term cost-cutting strategy using subcontracted labour (or even casual labour), or attempt to build longer-term investment in workers' skills, security and commitment.

Companies that employ casuals regularly do so to cut costs. This often

shows a lack of creativity or weak management. Companies that retrench workers and employ casuals in their place must remember that those workers who stay behind will have seen how the company operates. One cannot expect to find a happy and effective workforce then.

### **A challenge to unions**

The struggle around casualisation will be a struggle that goes on forever. FAWU and South Bakels offer a wake-up call to those unions who have not yet started innovative organising methods for casuals. Unions need to seriously rethink how to tackle the biggest barriers to organising casuals – such as collecting dues and dealing with their temporary nature. Unions also need to deal with casualisation in a way that strengthens organisation and lessens division between casuals and permanents. Unless this is done, casual work will kill the labour movement.

### **References**

- Bezuidenhout, Andries and Bridget Kenny 1998 Innes Labour Brief 10 (1)*
- Rees, Rob 1999 'Interview with the YCW'. SA Labour Bulletin 23 (1)*