

CWIU's struggle for centralised bargaining

Chemical workers around the country have embarked on action in support of their demand for centralised bargaining. In May thousands of Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) members took to the streets of Johannesburg to back their demands. CWIU played a prominent part in the LRA demonstrations in June. Workers have also taken action at plant level – including demonstrations and strikes

Now is the time

CWIU shopstewards* explain why the issue is being taken up so strongly now.

Limited progress in the past

Negotiations with companies in the chemical sector around centralised bargaining have been taking place for four years, with little or no progress being made

At the 1991 CWIU National Congress workers adopted a strong resolution to fight for centralised bargaining. Thereafter, the issue was discussed in workshops, National Executive Committee (NEC) meetings and Branch Executive Committee (BEC) meetings. The union also held three National Bargaining Conferences to work out a plan of action. This included the demand that employers attend national and regional meetings held by the union to negotiate centralised bargaining, as well as demonstrations, stoppages and marches in many factories. Sector councils were set up as a stepping stone to full industry level bargaining

Most employers were highly resistant to

By Tanya Rosenthal

centralised bargaining, as Meshack Ravuku, national company negotiator, explains:

"The response of management initially was that they wanted to very cleverly shut the door in our faces (though) it would appear that some of them, particularly the big ones, whilst they were reluctant, wanted to discuss the issues"

Negotiations deadlocked in February 1993. Although some progress was subsequently made in informal meetings with the bigger companies, such as Sasol, AECI and the oil companies, the goal of centralised bargaining remained elusive.

At the March 1994 COSATU Campaigns Conference a decision was taken to demand that centralised bargaining be written into law. This strengthened the CWIU campaign.

New Labour Relations Bill

The draft Labour Relations Bill has not met demands for legislated centralised bargaining. The Bill's failure in this regard has added impetus to the CWIU campaign.

CWIU called special shopstewards' councils in February to discuss the Bill. Workers decided to fight for centralised bargaining. There is now a real sense of urgency among shopstewards. Fosroc shopsteward Freddie Nelukalo says: "We understood that some of the bosses still

believe that the issue can be resolved next year or even in 1997. We cannot wait that long because by then parliament can pass the Bill without even rectifying some of the problems "

Why centralised bargaining?

Shopstewards identified a number of benefits which would derive from centralised bargaining

Standardisation

"We want to make sure that things are uniform and that there is some form of standardisation of wages, grades, training and other basic employment conditions, which at this stage are at an unacceptable level," says Semoka Sedibe, shopsteward at Consol,

Effective bargaining

With centralised bargaining the union can bargain effectively around its six pillars: adult basic education and training, retirement funds; industry restructuring; bargaining on substantive issues; health, safety and the environment and job security. These issues cannot be bargained only at plant level since gains made there would be very limited in scope

Gains in small companies

Centralised bargaining is critical to the improvement of wages and conditions of workers at small companies

Daniel Mfunwana, shopsteward at Fosroc, explains: "There are some small companies and they don't have power if they are alone. It's important to use centralised bargaining because if we are united and it is national we can beat the bosses. If we are still using plant negotiations bosses are using a lot of tricks - you can't get what you want."

Effective use of resources

Centralised bargaining will also mean that the union's resources are used more effectively. Organisers will no longer have to spend so much time negotiating at all the different

plants

Mobilisation

Four factors have ensured a wide degree of mobilisation around the campaign:

Effective union organisation

The union has worked hard educating shopstewards and has held numerous meetings, conferences and rallies.

Involvement of shopstewards

Central to the success of the campaign has been the role of shopstewards. Shopstewards have regularly attended the revived locals and shopsteward councils. BEC meetings have endorsed the decision to take the struggle forward

Plant meetings

In factories like Fosroc and Consol there have been plant meetings twice a week where shopstewards update workers on the campaign, discussion is held and action assessed.

Democracy and worker control

Through education, rallies and regular plant meetings, workers have been fully included in the campaign. The ability to make their opinions heard in the union has ensured that the campaign is worker controlled. Regular report-backs and meetings have ensured that workers are able to make well informed assessments and decisions regarding the campaign

Apart from successful mobilisation, workers feel strongly about this campaign for a number of reasons.

Material benefit

Workers expect centralised bargaining to deliver improved wages and conditions.

Relative deprivation

Workers compare their position with that of workers in other companies: "if you compare yourself with other companies in heavy chemicals, they are more highly paid than



The LRA campaign has strengthened CWIU's demand for centralised bargaining.

Fosroc. If we support centralised bargaining we can at least be a bit up from what we are being paid presently," says David Mofokeng

Fighting injustice

Shopstewards explain that they are fighting for centralised bargaining as a means of tackling injustice.

Thami Limba, a shopsteward from Consol, explains how wage increases still depend on arbitrary decisions: "We have got our members, who are so-called staff members, and those people normally get their wages according to how loyal they are to their boss and the like. Under centralised bargaining everybody will be getting the same."

Shopstewards at Fosroc explain that they are fighting for centralised bargaining as a way of tackling racism in pay and promotion. "If you go to the office block, we call it Randburg or Brackenhurst, because that is

where all white people are. You come down here (to the factory), it is what we call Soweto or Thokoza or Phola Park. We believe in equal job, equal pay. Here, you are still being judged by the colour of your skin," says Freddie Nelukalo.

"We have people here who have been working for roughly ten years as an assistant supervisor who cannot be promoted. The bosses then say we have got more than 50% black supervision. That's where your black skin ends, being a supervisor. You cannot find a black manager or a black administrator. That is why we are fighting for centralised bargaining," says Mofokeng.

Confidence from past struggles

Past victories mean that workers are confident that they can make gains. Thami Limba explains why workers at Consol are so strong: "For the past ten years we never fought a losing battle in Consol. We had very few

strikes and all of them we won. We also fought very hard on dismissals in this company and there have been very few."

Unity

Workers have gained strength and courage from unity with other workers.

"What gives me power is that FEDSAL and NACTU have joined the campaign and all other COSATU affiliates have joined the campaign," says Mofokeng.

Chemical workers still stress the need for unity in the chemical industry, as Mfunwana explains: "We (chemical workers) must do one thing. When Henkel is banning overtime we must also ban overtime. What is the main aim of doing that? So that the bosses can see that the workers are doing one thing and that they (the bosses) are not going to succeed."

Negative company reaction

The negative reaction of companies to the campaign seems to be fuelling militancy. "In our company they are still living in the apartheid era. They still regard workers as workers. I don't think they regard workers as people... We still believe if we do have problems we have to sit together and negotiate, but there is no point to negotiate with people who are not willing to listen to your problems or people who are arrogant. We are open-minded, we are reasonable people, but if you are being put in a tight corner it comes to a point where we have got to do something about it and that is exactly what is happening," says Freddie Nelukalo.

Defending the union

Workers regard a refusal to negotiate centrally as an attack on their union. "The position that COSATU took is a very crucial one because we still believe if the bosses cannot agree to centralised bargaining, then the unions in South Africa will become non-existent – there will be nothing called COSATU as a federation," says Nelukalo.

Gains made

Although it is too early to assess the degree to which managements' position has shifted as a result of struggle, a major positive spin-off has been that the campaign has helped build organisation.

All the shopstewards interviewed say the campaign has helped build organisation and unity. For example, the Katlehong local, which had been paralysed by the violence, started sitting again on 2 May.

"The local in Katlehong is now functioning very well because this campaign has united workers to such an extent. I haven't seen this for the last seven years or so," says Nelukalo.

The campaign has also drawn in and strengthened shopstewards in small factories that had just joined the union.

The future?

A major strength of the campaign is that regular assessments are made and strategies are continually re-evaluated. Future action will thus depend on the position taken by management and evaluations made by workers.

What is certain is that CWIU has the resources – both material and leadership – and the drive to sustain the campaign. The longer employers refuse to attend meetings and move forward in negotiations the more angry and frustrated workers will get, which in turn will fuel the campaign. Employers also stand a great risk of destroying any gains made in the past in developing a more co-operative relationship with the union and chemical workers. ★

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"This article is based on interviews conducted with shopstewards at two chemical factories, Consol and Fosroc, in Gauteng."