

Labour Action

Constituent Assembly call: stayaways and marches

On 1 February, while De Klerk opened yet another session of the whites-only parliament, over one million workers stayed away from work in support of the call for a constituent assembly. According to COSATU, a further 250 000 people were involved in other forms of mass action on the day of national action. Nonetheless, the stayaway was less impressive than previous national stayaways.

The call for mass action on 'Constituent Assembly Day' was endorsed by the ANC, PAC, COSATU and NACTU. This is the first time such broad unity in action has been forged around a *political* demand. COSATU and NACTU have called joint stayaways in the past, but around a trade union issue (the LRA) rather than a political demand.

The stayaway sparked debate in the labour movement about the use of the stayaway tactic:

- ⇒ Was there mass support for the stayaway among trade union members?
- ⇒ Were workers sufficiently aware of the importance of a constituent assembly?
- ⇒ Was the tactic used too early in the negotiation process?

COSATU did not take a national decision on the stayaway, but instead decided to leave this decision to the individual regions. The Wits, Western Transvaal and Eastern Cape regions took decisions to support the stayaway from work. Other regions decided to engage in other forms of action instead.

Many in COSATU welcomed the stronger link in ANC activity between mass action and negotiations. It came at a time when the state is attempting to paint all forms of mass action as criminal violent activities, which should have been suspended together with the armed struggle.

"The militant feelings of workers on the ground was reflected in the mass action," according to Kgalima Motlanthe, who is the chairperson of the ANC's PWV region, and the National Union of Mineworkers' education officer. In the Wits region, in particular, workers' militant mood was influenced by attacks on working class communities, such as the massacre in Sebokeng.

"Workers are frustrated that the state is dragging its feet. We marched for Peace and Freedom on 6 December, and were promised that political prisoners would be released by Christmas. There was a feeling among workers that the whole process of negotiation must be given a push," said Motlanthe.

While there is widespread worker support for the programme of the ANC, there may not have been a thorough understanding of the concept of a constituent assembly. According to the acting chairperson of the Johannesburg COSATU local, Sam Tambani, "The general membership of COSATU in our area was not properly informed about the meaning of a constituent assembly, and the campaign was not discussed thoroughly enough. Despite this, there was support for the stayaway, but that support must be deepened."

The stayaway raised questions about the position of the union movement in the tripartite alliance



Demonstrators gather on the Grand Parade near parliament in Cape Town on 2 February

Photo: Sally Shorkend/Afrapix

between the ANC, COSATU and the SACP. It was a test of democratic practice in the relationship between the organisations. Some felt that the ANC made the decision, and COSATU simply had to rubberstamp it.

COSATU's Neil Coleman acknowledges that "There were problems of co-ordination in the way that the stayaway was called." Motlanthe suggested that this was mostly a problem of moving the alliance onto a regional level where it has never really operated in the past.

The question is whether these are simply teething problems, or whether they will become deeper problems of democratic practice and accountable co-operation be-

tween the organisations.

The stayaway made many activists ask questions about the role of those who are leaders of both a trade union and a political organisation. Some of the ANC's regional leadership are also COSATU or union leaders. There may be times when such leaders experience a tension in their accountability to various parties.

There may also be an assumption in ANC structures that such leaders are speaking on behalf of COSATU when they are not in fact doing so.

There is little doubt that workers' involvement in the day of mass action strengthened the demand for a constituent assembly. Despite the controversy, the

support of the working class for this demand is clear. The challenge now is to deepen workers understanding of constitutional issues, and build on the mass mobilisation that has already taken place. ❖

(Lael Bethlehem)

Stayaway in the Eastern Cape

The call for mass action on 1 February in support of demands for a constituent assembly met with an 84% stayaway in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage.

This emerged from a telephonic survey of fifty two companies employing 37 867 hourly-paid African and col-

oured workers. In line with previous findings, a near total African stayaway was experienced in the area, while coloured workers' participation in Uitenhage exceeded that recorded for Port Elizabeth. Nevertheless, coloured support in Port Elizabeth was greater than it has been generally in previous years.

Only one of the companies in the sample recorded normal absentee rates. This Uitenhage factory has been relatively unaffected by stayaways since the workforce was replaced after an unlawful strike some two years ago. A second Uitenhage factory was not affected by the stayaway, inasmuch as short-time has reduced the working week to four days and production is no longer scheduled on Fridays. The results presented below exclude both these factories.

Stayaway participation		
Area	African	Coloured
P.E.	95%	65%
Uitenhage	97%	87%

Employer responses

Ninety per cent of employers adopted a policy of no-work-no-pay discipline, but five spokespersons warned that they were reconsidering this stance and penalties might be imposed for future stayaways.

An additional four companies reported that disciplinary action would be taken. Only one of these has imposed an umbrella penalty,

docking the attendance bonuses of all those who were absent. The others have chosen to investigate each case of absenteeism individually, before penalising bonuses or issuing warnings if reasons advanced are not considered satisfactory.

One firm will apply this discretionary approach only to salaried employees who did not report for work.

"Hourly-paid workers will not be disciplined because the stayaway was well-supported throughout the area. We might have disciplined if we had been singled out. Each staff member who stayed away will be asked his reasons, and will face disciplinary action if they are not acceptable. We will look at individual circumstances. These are different for the person who lives in Kwa-Magxagki and the person who lives in Soweto-by-the-Sea. The more senior the person, the more responsibility he carries, and the more responsibly he should behave."

This manager added that the company could not afford to lose production, having experienced industrial action last year.

Four employers reported an unprecedented level of participation in the stayaway by salaried coloured staff, including one who said that he could not understand why the company's predominantly coloured, hourly-paid workforce stayed away on 1 February, when previously they had ignored calls to stay at home.

Six of the companies elected not to schedule production for the Friday. "It suited us to close the factory because our order books are lean and we don't need production" said one manager. Management at one firm abandoned plans to shut the plant when this proposal was greeted with an angry response from white workers.

Another company which experienced a near total stayaway by its predominantly black workforce, nevertheless kept production lines running with a small minority of white workers, hired strategically when the workforce was increased recently "to overcome the stayaway problem".

Advance consultation

Widespread consultations between management and worker representatives were initiated before the stayaway. Ninety four per cent of companies received advance notification of the stayaway.

The ANC's role in this stayaway was evident in a letter it wrote to one company requesting that workers not be penalised for participating.

Three spokespersons for management said that there were indications of union opposition to the stayaway initiated by the ANC. This could explain the willingness on the part of some shopstewards to negotiate to work time lost on Friday 1 February. One employer claimed that workers were complaining about a lack of

democracy in stayaway decision-making. "We are thinking of independently establishing worker sentiment with a secret ballot for each stayaway. It's time to practise democracy, not just talk about it" he said.

Alternative work arrangements

These were discussed at several plants. At three of these, time lost on the Friday was worked on the Saturday - at normal rates. Agreement on a similar proposal could not be reached at a fourth factory, but 45% of the workforce nonetheless reported for work on the Saturday.

By the same token, a Saturday work proposal at yet another company was rejected by shopstewards who were rankled when a section of their constituency elected to work a double shift on the preceding Thursday rather than lose a day's wages.

Payment arrangements

Tensions surfaced over union requests that Friday wage payouts be brought forward to Thursday. Eight employers agreed to an early payout, while management at ten factories rejected such requests - which prompted workers at two of these plants to down tools on the Thursday afternoon.

A compromise was reached at five firms to pay wages on the Saturday. In Uitenhage, workers from two factories collected their pay on Friday but without repor-

ting for work. Conflict threatened outside one set of factory gates when these workers confronted departing workers who had worked their shifts. ♦

(Judy Parfit, *Industrial Relations Unit, UPE*)

Mass retrenchments: NUM negotiates training, trust funds

As the economy continues to decline, retrenchments have become a burning issue for workers. The struggle over retrenchment is likely to become a focus of the CO-SATU Living Wage Campaign.

Mineworkers have been amongst the most severely affected. The figures are shocking: in the past two years 50 000 mineworkers in South Africa have been retrenched. Mining employers expect the loss of a further 20 000 jobs this year. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) estimates that, unless gold prices rise dramatically, 100 000 jobs will be lost in the mining industry over the next ten years.

These retrenchments are having a devastating effect on the lives of mineworkers and their families. NUM is attempting to resist retrenchments, but often the union does not have the power to prevent them. Instead, it is forced to negotiate the *terms* of retrenchment, in

order to salvage some gains.

The first priority in such negotiations is to ensure a decent severance package. The NUM has also been demanding that companies retrain workers, so that they have the skills which will help them find new jobs. In a path-breaking agreement at Harmony gold mine, workers won the right to five weeks of retraining at the company's expense.

Another demand put forward by NUM in retrenchment negotiations is that the companies establish trust funds to finance co-operatives for retrenched workers. NUM's co-operative programme began in the wake of the 1987 strike, in an attempt to provide jobs for dismissed workers. So far, NUM has established 16 co-ops. The union hopes the trust funds will enable more to be set up.

The union has negotiated six trust funds with R1 million each. This money is available to retrenched workers in the form of loans to finance the development of co-ops. NUM's co-op division provides co-op members with education and skills training, and assists them in planning and drawing up their constitutions.

Co-operative division coordinator Kate Philip points out that, in an industry where about 60 jobs are being lost every day, the union must find new strategies to empower workers. The trade union movement may increasingly find itself

engaging in development work in order to respond to the needs of its members. ❖
(Lael Bethlehem)

Labour Struggles at the University of Durban-Westville

A university is a unique employer, because university employees range from cleaners to professors. There are enormous differences in salaries and working conditions for academic and non-academic staff, and the university is structured to maintain a division between these categories of employees. But in recent months, workers, lecturers and students have united in action at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW).

The tradition of joint struggle at UDW began in 1989 when progressive forces on campus won the struggle for the appointment of a progressive university rector. Over the past few months, the Combined Staff Association (COMSA) has united academic and non-academic staff, and has worked with the South African National Students Congress (SANSCO) to challenge the harsh conditions faced by staff.

The first struggle taken up by COMSA was to ensure that the pay rise granted to lecturers in April 1990, was extended to include non-academic staff. The Minister of

Finance had announced a 10% increase for all public service employees, but the UDW Council decided to limit the increase of non-academic staff to 5%! After a series of mass meetings, marches and negotiations, the university agreed to grant the lowest categories of non-aca-

agreed to hire all workers who had been employed by Sneller. Although wages paid by Supercare were similar to Snellers, UDW agreed to supplement these with R50 per month, and pay the long service benefits workers would have received from Sneller. This victory proved the



Staff at UDW protest against racism in the university
Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix

ademic staff a 10% increase as well. This was seen as a major victory, and a challenge to the university's distinction between mental and manual labour.

This struggle was followed by action taken by cleaning workers. The cleaning service was contracted to Sneller Cleaning Company. Workers had long complained about this company's poor wages and working conditions. United action on the campus forced the appointment of a new cleaning contractor, Supercare. After demonstrations and protracted negotiations involving COMSA, the workers, UDW administration and Supercare, the company

potential for united action between those working for a sub-contractor boss and those working for the main employer. This is an important development, as more and more employers are making use of sub-contractors. Workers are often divided in this way, and sub-contracted workers usually find themselves at the raw end of the deal. If the union movement can unite all workers in a single workplace, this will go a long way towards countering management strategy.

The most recent struggle at UDW has been a parental rights campaign. In the past, maternity leave was unpaid, and staff on probation did not have access to maternity

benefits. The gender issues sub-committee of COMSA won the demand for three months paid maternity leave, and full maternity rights for workers on probation. Although the demand for paternity leave was turned down by the university, the provision of decent maternity benefits is a major step forward in the struggle for parental rights on the campus.

UDW is an important example of unity between academic workers, non-academic workers and students, between sub-contracted workers and other employees, and between men and women. Hopefully this unity will empower the campus community to lead the process of transforming the university into a non-racial democratic institution of higher learning in a new SA. ❖

(Ashwin Desai)

COSATU and NACTU in united action for increased wages for transport workers

City Tramways workers have awakened to their collective power while being faced with critical questions about the future of their industry.

For the first time in more than 50 years, Cape Town's buses ground to a halt as more than 1 500 drivers and co-workers downed tools between 7 and 14 February.



There are two unions competing with each other to organise the workers, but they managed to bury their rivalry and take joint action. The unions are Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), affiliated to COSATU, and the Transport and Omnibus Workers Union (TOWU), affiliated to NACTU.

The striking workers were demanding a 22% across-the-board increase and R1 200 minimum monthly wage. The strike erupted with workers occupying the company headquarters and besieging depots with buses. A banner displayed prominently during a march on the company's headquarters read: "TOWU and TGWU: Fighting for survival. Viva NACTU! Viva COSATU!"

But workers settled on the eighth day when management threatened them with dismissal. The strikers won 22% (which amounts to R30) for the lowest paid, and 15% for the highest paid. TGWU's Nic Henwood commented: "The strike fell apart after 8 days. It was illegal, it was a very new experience and workers could not hold out against the pressure. The threat of dismissal put lots of pressure on the longest-serv-

ing workers, mostly drivers.

"In the end the bosses won. The workers made major gains, but the bosses won. We did not manage to consolidate the strike, and everything the workers built slipped out of their hands. Workers are not satisfied with their increases. R700 per month is not a living wage."

According to Henwood, the key question for the present is uniting the workforce: "Tramways workers have to address the question of how to build one trade union. They will support any union which can deliver the goods - in this strike both did."

But possibly most important is the inability of the company to pay a living wage and provide a safe and cheap transport service, at the same time as making a profit. Henwood's response is adamant: "There is no room for the profit system in public passenger transport. The bosses must get out."

"Because of our gains, they are pushing up fares and stripping company assets as they bail out of their responsibility for public transport. TGWU is campaigning for increased government subsidies, but eventually for a nationalised public passenger transport system under the control of workers. This is not just a struggle to be fought by workers - it involves all organisations of the working class." ☆

(Cape Town correspondent)