

Engineering/metals strike in Uitenhage and PE

For better wages not profits

Since 1 July 2014 the engineering/metals sector workers strike led by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) has been in full swing. **Mfundo Mpushe** explains how the strike unfolded in the Nelson Mandela Metropole.

William Matlala



Young metalworkers take to the streets of Johannesburg.

Strikes by the union are taken as a last resort and are a tactic the union employs after several attempts to resolve matters peacefully with the employer have failed. History shows that employers will seek to save money for shareholder profits rather than spend it on increasing workers' wages and benefits. It is also common knowledge that employers will not give in easily on wage increases. Hence, workers have to put pressure by going on strike.

This is what Erik Olin Wright calls the antagonism between 'associational-power' of workers which is pitted against the 'interests of capitalists'. Argues Wright: '...increases in the power of workers adversely affect the interests of capitalists... since the profits of capitalists are closely tied to the exploitation of workers, the material interests of workers and capitalists are inherently antagonistic. Anything that strengthens the capacity of workers to struggle for and realize their interests, therefore, negatively affects the interests of capitalists'. It is this antagonism that one sees in the engineering sector strike.

HIGH PARTICIPATION

In Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth, known after the merging process as the Nelson Mandela Metropole, the engineering sector strike has been positive as far as participation of workers is concerned. The strike has also been non-violent.

'If the strike is legal I support it. Although it's hard as I'm the only bread winner at home, I fight for my rights. I stay strong,' said Andiswa Sowazi from SP Metal.

In general workers take turns in going to the picketing lines. For instance, the group that goes on Monday is not the same group that you will see on Tuesday.

'The problem is that we don't have enough money for bus fare to come every day but we are in a strike fighting the same cause. When you're employed by labour brokers you don't have much rights in the factory. It's very sad you don't know when will you be made permanent,' added Sphokazi Tali also from SP Metal.

Most workers live at Kwanobuhle and Langa townships - about 7km from workplace - and it costs R20 to and from work.

In Uitenhage most companies like SP Metal, Spicer Axle were closed during the strike and only a few small companies opened in the area. At Kruisriver a few workers turned up for work at National Standard.

In Port Elizabeth one or two companies were operating using scab labour from labour brokers. This is why one of the demands of this strike is to ban labour brokers.

At Auto Cast Company in Korsten operations continued as staff members were put on production lines. Because of the full support of the strike in this plant, management were left with no choice but to use their office employees. To these companies it's production at all cost.

Kruisriver is a remote area in Uitenhage that has also some of the most exploitative companies with bad working conditions. It is not surprising that there is low worker consciousness in this area. At some companies workers were not organised, resulting in some were working whilst there was a strike.

Kruisriver is an isolated area where unions should do a lot of organising work as some workers do not even know their rights. For example, at Uitenhage Super Steel, workers were promised increases by their employers in exchange for not going on strike.

EXEMPTIONS

In Port Elizabeth some engineering companies like Formex moved to the motor sector using the exemption process which allows

employers to dodge paying wage increases. Exemption works in two ways. Firstly, it happens when a company claims it cannot afford a particular wage increase, and then applies to be exempted from paying the increases.

Secondly, some companies claim that their scope of work has changed and that their new function belongs to a different sector altogether like the motor sector. They then register for exemptions. Obviously there is a process of verifying such claims. However, what we have observed as unionists is that companies move from the engineering to the motor sector, which pays lower rates.

Most motor sector companies have been put under pressure to lower rates by big auto companies. Some like Johnson Controls have lost a contract with Volkswagen South Africa (VWSA). Some like Kromberg and Schubert even relocated to Botswana. Petrol attendants are also in this sector, which is historically dominated by individual employers who give increases when they wish. This has not gone well with Numsa which pushed for a maximum wage increase of 11% in 2013 - a figure that was even higher than that of the auto sector's 10%.

ACTION AT AUTO COMPANIES

VWSA and General Motors South Africa (GMSA) which employ about 2,600 and 1,100 Numsa members respectively are two big auto sector companies in Port Elizabeth. VWSA has not been affected by the strike as they import all components instead of using locally manufactured ones. So at VWSA it was business as usual because of this. It also meant no presence in picketing lines as some workers were not even aware of the strike let alone knowing what type of demands their colleagues were fighting for.

GMSA was heavily affected as it is dependent on local suppliers. Therefore, the company closed when the strike started. When compared to workers from Kruisriver, workers

from that side of Port Elizabeth felt the pinch and knew what was going on as far as negotiations were concerned.

Ford South Africa, which has about 600 Numsa members, is one of the automobile companies that was affected by the strike. Ford SA and GMSA were both based in Port Elizabeth with VWSA about 34km away in Uitenhage.

ANGER AT MEDIA

Strikers were angry at the way that the media reported on the strike especially when they reduced the demands to a single issue.

'Media are not giving a true reflection of the strike, it's not about wages only but there's a package of total ban of labour brokers, section 37 (also known as the peace clause) to remain, and a housing allowance. But they only talk about the rejected 10%, 9.5% and 9%. Let me tell you something - those wage offers had conditions attached to them like introduction of new rates which are another attack on newly employed workers who do the same work but earn 50% less than old worker,' said a visibly shaking Andile Tu from GV Donald.

CONCLUSION

As the strike still continues workers are hoping to achieve their double digit wage increase, and a total ban of labour brokers. In the problem areas like Kruisriver Numsa must organise the 'unorganised' and bring an end to the workers' nightmares. Numsa will continue to put pressure on auto companies like VWSA which seem not to be currently affected by the strike and be in solidarity with workers at that company. ^{LB}

Names used in this article are not the workers' real names as they asked not to be identified.

Mfundo Mpushe is a Numsa shop steward based in Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape.