

accommodation, health and schooling for their children suggests that these have to be the terrain of union organisation. It is impossible to divide the lives of forest workers between the time when they are residents and the time when they are workers. At all times they are addressing the employer. The unions need to respond to the challenge that this throws up.

Unions also need to be aware of and organise - together with other mass organisations - around the land question, family life on the land, standards of accommodation and the like.

At present, workers in state forests are totally un-unionised and ill-equipped to deal with the challenges that the state's 'commercialisation' project will bring.

Workers urgently need legislative protection. At the obvious level, there is a need for labour legislation to be extended to rural workers. But there is also a need for legislation that protects the tenure arrangements of rural workers, the right of access to land and to products of the land and so on.

Problems caused by illiteracy suggest that this is a crucial issue of organisation, in addition to the issues common to workers everywhere - wages, health and safety, hours of work and racism in the workplace.

Because the forestry industry is so vertically integrated, workers in the pulp and paper, sawmilling and other sectors have a key role to play in strengthening forestry workers. However, forestry workers are due to join COSATU's new farmworker's union when it is established. The desirability of such a move is open to question.

The highly concentrated nature of ownership in the forestry sector suggests this is an industry where centralised bargaining could be effectively established. This would facilitate, more than anything else, the extension of better conditions and wages to remote and even unorganised workers enduring some of the worst working and living conditions in the country. ☆



Forestry workers: problems & prospects for PPWAWU

With the help of PPWAWU, SNUKI ZIKALALA visited forestry operations in Natal and the Eastern Transvaal. He also went to Sappi forests at the company's invitation, and - without invitation - to one of the state forests. He reports what he saw.

Travelling through the Eastern Transvaal towards Swaziland, there are vast green expanses of beautiful pine trees grown for newsprint and gum trees for mine pegs, roofing and telephone poles. The whole area gives a sense of relief from the polluted industrial areas of the PWV. But the beauty is spoiled by plumes of smoke and steam and spirals of fumes from the Ngodwana paper mill. The smell of the area is sickening. However, Nick Bantish, Deputy Director of

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Human Resources at South African Pulp and Paper Industries (Sappi) assured me that it was "just steam" and not dangerous to human lives.

Over 80 000 workers are employed in forestries and sawmills in South Africa. They are barely affected by social and political developments in the rest of the country. They are neither protected by the Labour Relations Act nor do they have basic social provisions. Forestry and sawmill workers live at the mercy of the owners of the forests - both the state, and the big private companies such as Sappi, Mondi and HLH - who control their daily lives.

So far, the Printing Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PPWAWU) has been able to organise only 15 000 members in this sector - not even one fifth of the work force. The general secretary of PPWAWU Sipho Kubheka explains: "Forestry and sawmill workers are in a different situation from other - industrial - workers," and that the unions face particular problems in organising them. Amongst other things, union organisers have to

cover huge areas, in the less developed parts of the country and are at times denied access to workers. Workers are situated in company compounds and it is therefore very difficult for the organisers to meet and discuss with them. "You must understand," says PPWAWU's general secretary, "that many company managers in these areas are very conservative and hate anything that has to do with workers organisations."

Forestry workers are closely and coercively supervised. They seem to be treated as mere factors of production. The management exploits the fact that workers are illiterate, unskilled and not protected by labour laws. Workers are denied responsibility, challenge and initiative in their jobs. There is little that motivates them and their morale is very low.

Contrasts between management theory and practise

Sappi claims to be a progressive and caring employer. There are contrasts between what



Union organisers face much resistance from management - here the 'feared' Moses Ndlovu organises in his particular strategic style: sitting down amongst the workers so as not to be noticed while they appear to be relaxing though listening intently to him

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

they say and what they do however.

● Training

Before workers are employed, they are given special training in operating chainsaws, fire fighting, planting and maintenance of trees and driving. Health and safety classes are also conducted. The technical school with six instructors, situated in Ngodwana, was opened only this year. Fifty people are being trained per course.

Intention is one thing, however, and practice another. Chainsaws are the most dangerous machines used in the forests. According to one chainsaw operator: "These machines are very noisy. The noise can make you deaf. They shake and vibrate a lot. When I get home after work I can hardly take off my shoes. I have sore fingers from operating the chainsaw."

● Safety

Forestry workers are picked up in the early hours of the morning and left in the forest to cut and roll the trees down to the road. In the presence of Sappi officials, workers complained that they know very little about their basic rights, such as the Workmen's Compensation Act. Sappi has not initiated any of the upgrading courses that I had been told about.

Contrary to what the management had said earlier, workers declared that the rate of injuries is very high. They volunteered to take us to a colleague injured a few days before. "Workers do get injured but they don't report as they are afraid that they will lose a number of days away from work," they said.

Workers showed us a defect in a crane that hauls logs from the mountain. They have to work next to that crane and stack the logs beside the road. At any moment logs which are being pulled might land on the workers. Officials of Sappi shrugged their shoulders when they were confronted with this.

● Health

Working with chemicals is very dangerous. Some of the chemicals cause sores on workers skin and inhaling them for a long time can damage their livers and kidneys. Chemical fumes also damage eyes and affect the brain.

By chance, while travelling in the forest with Sappi officials, we met a group of women who

were spraying the trees. They were not wearing masks and held the sprayers carelessly, inhaling the chemical while working. They were totally ignorant of the dangers.

They told us in front of Sappi officials that they were not given masks. The blame was shifted from one person to the other. "It does happen that you run out of stock at times," explained the regional director of Sappi in Nelspruit.

PPWAWU pays special attention to forestry workers

PPPWAWU considers forestry to be a key sector for a future restructured South African economy. General secretary Siphosiso Kubheka explains that "the future democratic government will have to have access to forestry, because that is one of the important sectors that will give answers to housing problems," adding that PPWAWU is "opposed to the privatisation of forestry by the government because forestry is the main sector in our industry."

At its last NEC meeting in February, PPWAWU decided to pay special attention to this sector. The aim, says general secretary Kubheka, is to have "a very strong forestry sector in our union, which will in fact be a pillar of our union."

PPWAWU has a strong power base in the forests in the Natal midlands. Previously, it experienced difficulty in establishing its presence in other areas, although inroads have now been made in the Transvaal. PPWAWU has managed to sign recognition agreements with Sappi, Mondi, HLH, and Hans Merensky. Yearly negotiations are being held at plant level on health and safety and wages.

The NEC meeting earlier this year resolved that forestry and sawmill workers be given maximum attention, and that more resources be put into this sector. Subs will be increased so that organisers can obtain transport and office equipment.

According to general secretary Siphosiso Kubheka, the union is spearheading a campaign for forestry workers to be covered

by the LRA. "The long term objective of PPWAWU is to see to it that the forestry workers are at the same level as other workers, in terms of education, standard of living and earnings."

National structures of shop stewards are to be set up. A special educational programme for forestry and sawmill shop stewards is to be drafted and a campaign launched for the establishment of an Industrial Council in that sector.

Serious organisational problems

PPWAWU is still struggling to set up its structures in the forestry industry. Because of limited resources and distances to be covered, as well as conservative employers, the union has not been able to organise and service its potential members. Workers are just given stop order forms to fill in, but there is seldom any follow up or education on their rights and on union aims and methods.

Shop stewards meetings I attended in Nelspruit and Pietermaritzburg were dominated by organisational problems. Workers were not happy with the service they get from the union. Such meetings are also irregular as the majority of shop stewards cannot pay the transport costs. Links are weak between shop stewards in the region so the union is not in a position to organise joint actions.

- Nelspruit regional organiser, Lawrence Mooi has a number of problems. His office has one car which is used by two people and has to service workers in Nelspruit, Barberton, White River, Sabie and Graskop. Most of the time the telephone/fax machine in their office is out of order. Communication breaks down when the two organisers are out of office. This slows down organisational efficiency in the region.
- In the Pietermaritzburg region, which is the stronghold of PPWAWU, the office has one old bakkie. Four organisers have to share it. With experienced stalwarts like Moses Ndlovu always on the road, the other organisers are forced to communicate with workers by telephone.
- PPWAWU offices in the Eastern and

Western Cape, Southern Transvaal, Northern Transvaal, and South Eastern Transvaal have no transport at all. It is a real nightmare for these organisers.

Illiteracy - a major problem

PPWAWU is organising an educationally disadvantaged workforce in forestry - 95% of the workers can neither read nor write. Their meetings are conducted in local languages and meetings with the bosses have to be translated.

PPWAWU's special education programme for forestry workers must improve this situation. This has been one of the weakest sections of the union. Regional structures lack education officers to train workers on basic trade union rights and negotiation skills. Shop stewards lack the kind of knowledge necessary for their role.

PPWAWU is looking into effective methods of preparing educational courses for the workers. The new education officer, Welcome Ntshangase has a heavy load on his shoulders.

Centralised bargaining

Sipho Kubheka says that "it is a nightmare for us when we have to negotiate with the employers. We have to go from one negotiation to another and this overstretches our resources." It is particularly difficult in forestry because of the spread of plantations and "an organiser will spend more than six months moving from plant to plant negotiating."

PPWAWU has therefore decided to launch a mass campaign for centralised bargaining. Workshops will be organised at all branches, where workers will be informed on the aims and advantages of centralised bargaining.

However, Sappi's Nick Bantish says: "We are satisfied with the plant level bargaining. We believe in plant level bargaining because conditions are different from area to area. However, we are presently negotiating with PPWAWU nationally on pension funds, job evaluation structures and medical aid. These are conditions which are applicable to all our employees in the country."

According to PPWAWU's forestry and

sawmill organiser, Dixon Motha: "We are spending endless nights trying to change the attitude of these conservative managers. So far, we have received negative responses from Sappi, but other companies like HLH have not yet committed themselves. The future democratic government has to legislate that there should be industrial councils in all industrial sectors."

Single union for farm and forestry workers?

Forestry and farm workers are a major concern to COSATU. More than one and a quarter million rural workers are not covered by the LRA. They are isolated from workers in other sectors. They have no job security, they live in fear of reactionary farmers and foresters and of possible loss of accommodation and school facilities if they join a union. COSATU is waging a major campaign that such workers be covered by the LRA.

However, less welcome for PPWAWU is the decision taken at COSATU's Fourth Congress last year that a farm workers union be formed, combining

- PPWAWU's forestry workers,
- Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) farm and plantation workers, and
- South African Clothing and Textile Union (SACTWU) cotton and wool workers,
- together with other non-unionised farm workers.

Kubheka explained PPWAWU's view that: "You cannot break the vertical line of production. Workers who are in the nursery also plant trees in the forest. Chainsaw cutters cut trees that go to the sawmill for printing, paper and wood. Therefore, it is illogical that such a line should be cut. We feel strongly about that decision."

Challenges for labour in forestry

PPPWAWU has a reputation for being a tough opponent. Employers fear the presence of PPWAWU in their enterprises. [see box p 54]

However, because of the nature of the

industry and conservative management attitudes, PPWAWU officials have to be well prepared when going into negotiations. There are indications that PPWAWU is developing a more co-ordinated and thought-through strategy:

- It is now encouraging its members to engage in strikes in accordance with the recognition agreements they have signed with a number of companies. This will, to a large extent, reduce mass dismissals in forestry.
- It is placing well researched and thought-out demands to the employers. For example, PPWAWU is now pushing the management to hand over the National Provident Fund to the workers. "Workers don't benefit from the interest on the fund. When they get pensioned they leave the plant without a cent. They can't even put up a house for themselves. We want all workers to control their own money," said PPWAWU organiser Motha.
- It is canvassing campaigns well in advance and handling one issue at a time. "This will make our work much easier and more effective. We won't be pulled in all directions," commented Motha.

However, PPWAWU is still faced with a number of organisational problems. Its head office is still understaffed. They don't have national organisers in wood and paper and pulp structures. They have no media/communications officer. They have to develop a research centre, employ skilled people to handle their educational and organisational problems which need urgent attention. The campaign for centralised bargaining needs skilled and well informed people for bargaining forums.

Forestry workers faced with retrenchments from Sappi and other forestry companies need a strong union to defend their jobs and living places. If PPWAWU can show concrete results in its campaigns, it will encourage a growth in union membership. Higher levels of organisation and preparation will enable workers to improve their material conditions and raise their political morale. ☆

"This is not life at all. You just work to enrich the company"

When you enter the Sappi's Lotsaba forest near Barberton you are first met by the depressing sight of the hostels. There are male and female single hostels which are about 200 metres apart. Family quarters are available, but mostly house members of the supervisory staff.

A pall of despair hangs over everything. Workers are confined to the area and have no social life at all. Theirs is to wake up at five in the morning and work till late.

It was a sad tale I heard from the workers. Ten of them share a single room, which can house one family. There is no kitchen in the complex and workers use primus stoves to cook meals.

Within the compound complex, a shop is provided by the management. According to one worker: "Prices are inflated, but we have no alternative since we are far from towns and supply stores."

Women's living conditions are not that different from their male colleagues. They are not allowed to live with their children if they are not married. Once a woman is found to be pregnant, she loses her job immediately.

There are no recreational facilities in the compound. The only thing that is visible is a football ground. One worker declared that Lotsaba is "just like a prison. We don't have an entertainment centre here, not even a cinema. After work you must just sleep and prepare yourself for hard work. This is not life at all. You just work to enrich the company and there are no future prospects for us here."

On weekends, workers have to travel up to 140 km to visit their loved ones. Transport is scarce and expensive. The company provides workers with transport only once a year.

Young hostel dwellers whom we met at Lotsaba compound come from far areas like Pietersburg, Tzaneen, Piet Retief and Komatipoort. They told us: "There is no employment in those areas, hence we are here in Barberton. Our main wish now is to seek employment in Johannesburg. We hear that conditions of employment are far better than here, and white bosses pay a lot. Unions are much stronger there. They don't get intimidated easily. We don't care about the violence there. All that we want is a better life."

Timothy Khoza, the main PPWAWU shop steward at Lotsaba, told us that threats are always used against workers who are members of the union. Lotsaba management prides itself on having dismissed nine shop stewards following VAT demonstrations last year. This has demoralised a number of workers.

As we were leaving, Khoza looked almost helpless surveying the situation of the workers he represents. ♦



Inside a company hostel: this woman worker has been with the company for 15 years - she is surrounded by everything she owns in the world

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

Particular problems facing women working in the forests

We went up to the forest area where some 86 women were working. It was an eerie place. The only sound we could hear from a distance was that of a chainsaw.

Transport is not provided even on rainy days. Their working conditions are appalling. They have to be in the forest from 6am until 3pm. Their job is to strip felled trees. The set target is 65 trees per day. Some of the women don't even know how to count. They just go on working until sunset, thinking that it is only then that they meet their target.

The biggest problems for the women are health and safety and security. Though they are supplied with gloves and partly with protective clothes, they often get injured while working with the trees. Splinters in their eyes are a daily risk.

PPWAWU shop steward Silvia Manyoni described the particular problems facing women in the forests: "There is no security and privacy here. We work with our male colleagues who move the felled and stripped trees to the road. Even if you need the toilet, there is nothing here and it is difficult for you to hide somewhere. There are women who have been raped by their colleagues and no action has been taken.

"We are not even allowed to leave the place during our menstrual periods. Many of the women develop nasty vaginal infections because of prolonged exposure to blood-saturated pads. It is so frustrating," said Silvia Manyoni, with tears in her eyes.

Women we talked to said they joined PPWAWU in the hope of increasing their wages, but they have very little understanding of the role of a union and what is expected of them. ❖



Women workers hear union organisers speak for the first time in their lives - They face very particular problems as women, problems they hope the union will address

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

Breaking into the state forests

The manager of Weza State Forests broke into a sweat when he found the tireless and popular PPWAWU organiser Moses Ndlovu at Weza plant.

I had accompanied Moses Ndlovu and Dixon Motha, PPWAWU national organiser in forestry, on one of their missions. We entered the premises illegally and met workers who had just knocked off work. They were exhausted and full of dust, but brightened up when they heard the name of Ndlovu and as he spoke to them about the union.

The director of the state forest, Ackerman, was shocked to hear his 'docile' employees shouting "Amandla!" and "Forward to the struggle!" He came running at top speed to the 'illegal' gathering and demanded that we leave.

As Dixon Motha reasoned with him, Ndlovu rapidly talked to the workers, giving them advice on how they should get organised and sign stop orders so that the union can get the right to enter the plant and protect them.

When Ackerman heard the name Ndlovu, he rushed up to him pleading with him to leave the plant immediately. This was a huge delight to the workers. For the first time in their lives they saw the most feared director being afraid of an African organiser.

"How long have you been here? How many companies have you managed to organise in this area?"

What was the response of the workers," asked the extremely agitated Ackerman.

When Ndlovu told him that the whole Weza area is about to be unionised, Ackerman declared these were "his" workers and that we had no right to talk to them or to visit them in "his" area. He warned us sternly that we should never set foot in the state forest again.

Workers were ordered into a closed truck full of dust and onto a wood loader to be taken back to the hostel compounds. As they were driven off we heard them defiantly shouting "Amandla!" ♦



"These are my workers. You have no right to talk to them."

Photo: Snuki Zikalala/Labour Bulletin



'Company transport': workers travel back to their compounds in the 'comfort' of a wood-loader

Photo: Snuki Zikalala/Labour Bulletin