

Labour Action

Homelands rumble

Transkei

Labour Bulletin 14.6 looked at worker action in the Transkei over the last two years. Worker action is pressurising the military council to introduce protective labour legislation and recognise COSATU affiliates. The military council's response has been contradictory: it has placated workers through promises and a number of tentative steps toward recognising their demands; on the other hand it has allowed police action against strikes and never seriously intervened to force companies to recognise unions or bargain with workers.

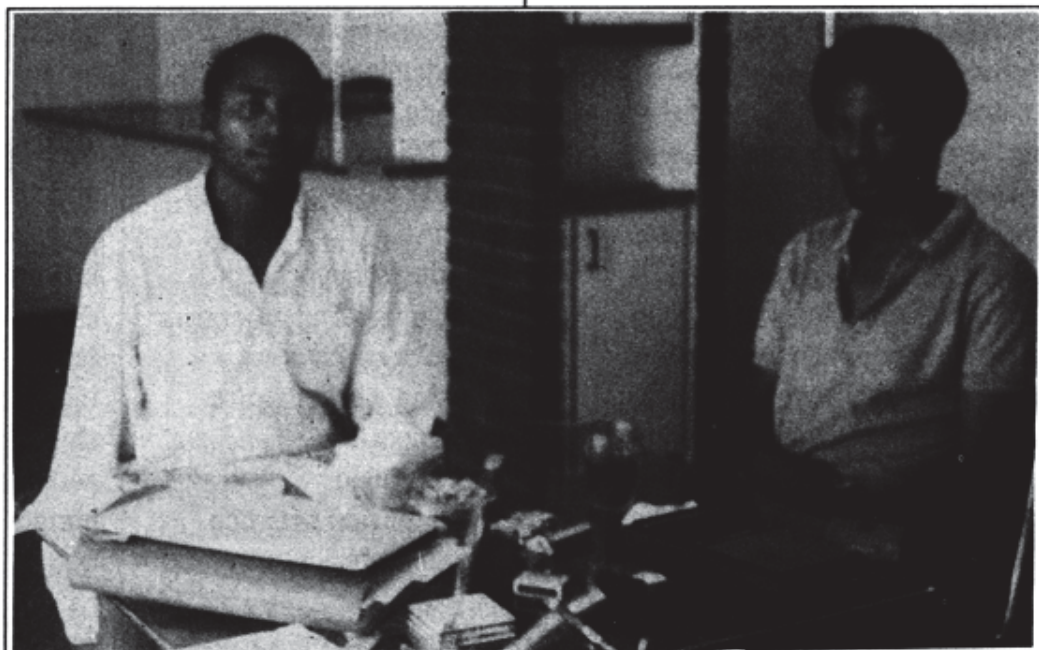
Recent events have again shown that workers cannot rely on the military council's good faith or on the special charms of General Holomisa. On Friday 2 March Mongameli Dyantyi, the chairperson of the interim COSATU structure in Butterworth, was detained by the Butterworth security police. Dyantyi is a shop steward from SAB and the person who accompanied our writer for much of her stay in the Transkei.

On Monday 6 March Butterworth

came to a standstill as workers from all factories, banks, the post office and telephone exchange stayed away from work. Approximately 10 000 workers marched to the office of the security police and demanded the release of their leader. They also restated their demands for recognition of COSATU, re-instatement of workers dismissed after the October general strike, and an end to harassment by employers.

On Monday soldiers were sent to Butterworth. According to the military council they were there to "protect the workers". Brigadier Keswa of the military council also came to collect workers' grievances. However, when a delegation went to meet Holomisa later in the week, he claimed to not have had anything to do with events in Butterworth.

On Tuesday the stay-away continued and Dyantyi was released, although the police were still hunting down other members of the committee. Workers met on Tuesday evening to assess their action. Although their leader was released, they decided to teach the military a lesson, and "show them that we are not scared of them". So instead of returning to work the



Mongameli Dyantyi (left) - detained by the security police.

Photo: Renée Roux/Labour Bulletin

next day, they forfeited another day's pay and only returned to work on Thursday.

Workers strike against homeland system

The unbanning of the ANC and the SACP, and the release of Nelson Mandela has sparked off action in Ciskei, Venda, Gazankulu and Bophuthatswana against homeland institutions. The demands of strikes, marches and petitions have ranged from a living wage and union recognition, to re-incorporation into South Africa, an end to the use of witchcraft by government officials and the removal of homeland leaders.

In Venda and Bophuthatswana the strikes have included a large number of civil servants striking against selective salary increases for senior bureaucrats. Venda civil servants spearheaded a strike that spilled over into the industrial areas and the state tea plantation. It was only the police, nurses and soldiers who did not join "because we are run by white generals."

The current strike of all non-academic staff at Unibop is significant because it includes 100% black and white manual and clerical strike. The action was sparked by the announcement of a 12% increase only for academic staff. About 450 workers were dismissed on Monday 12 March, but won't be paid because the wage clerks also joined the strike. Workers are being assisted by UDUSA (Union of Democratic University Staff Associations) which has membership at the university, and two active academics have been detained. ☆

Public sector organisations step up opposition to authorities

Outside the homelands, public sector workers are also gearing up to confront the state on issues ranging from privatisation to racial discrimination and the announced 10% increase for civil servants, while ministers and MP's have been awarded an increase of 26%.

COSATU-affiliated public sector unions, NEHAWU, POTWA and SARWHU are proposing national action in the form of stoppages, go-slows and overtime bans as well as marches and demonstrations. A number of other unions such as NACTU's NUPSW and black staff associations are showing interest in joining protest action. The Police and Prison Civil Rights Union (Popcru), started by Lieut. Gregory Rockman, has announced that it is launching a living wage campaign for a 100% increase.

Four hundred Black prison warders at Diepkloof started a sit-in on 13 March for an end to discriminatory practices with respect to promotion, benefits and working conditions. The warders' "interim committee" is also demanding an increase of R850 across-the-board. ☆

Hospital workers strike in the Western Cape

Even the enraged members of the conservative white staff associations look set to start putting words into action. When parliament opened on members of the

South African Nursing Association (SANA) marched to protest the increases. Their new militance has won them formal recognition by the Commission for Administration and the right to negotiate directly on behalf of nurses for the first time, a move that is obviously designed to prevent more nurses turning to the progressive trade union movement.

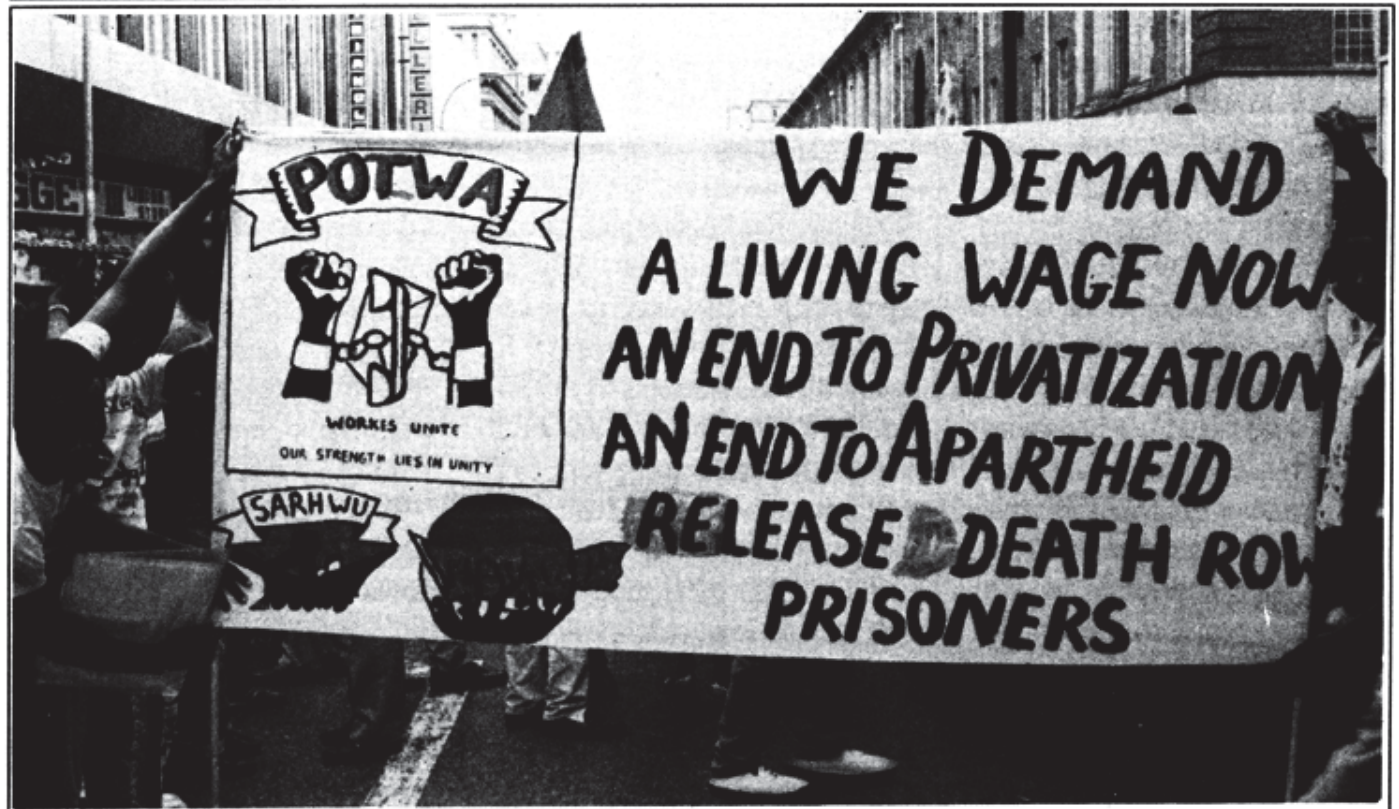
It is in this context that 1 500 general assistants in 3 Cape Town hospitals decided to down tools on 5 March. These workers are members of the unaffiliated HWU, and their frustrations with not being able to negotiate with the authorities had been growing for a long time.

These workers were demanding almost exactly what every public sector union has been demanding for years:

- ⇒ An increase in the minimum from R260 to R1 500 per month
- ⇒ Permanent worker status
- ⇒ Six months paid maternity leave
- ⇒ A 40-hour week
- ⇒ Recognition of HWU
- ⇒ End to privatisation

The demands grabbed the attention of workers throughout the state health sector and by Wednesday 14 March workers in 17 state hospitals and 7 day clinics had joined the strike. This is the biggest public sector strike to take place in the Western Cape.

Most of these workers were unorganised at the time of joining the strike. A HWU organiser told *Labour Bulletin* that strikers were in the process of joining HWU. The strikers are also getting active co-operation from COSATU and NEHAWU,



Workers show off their banner during a public sector march in Johannesburg

Photo: Morice Smithers/Labour Bulletin

which is organised in one of the hospitals, and from community structures. HWU was formed in 1985 to organise health workers in state and private institutions in the Western Cape. It is unaffiliated to COSATU or NACTU. Unity talks with NEHAWU have been unsuccessful.

The state sector does not recognise unions, and appointed a retired magistrate to hear workers' grievances. The union decided to reject this out of hand and is demanding to meet directly with the Ministers concerned and with the Commission for Administration. The union is also refusing to negotiate with local hospital authorities, except recently over the handling of emergency services. Management has started to use students and the SADF to relieve exhausted nursing staff who have been doing cleaning and emergency tasks. Nurses were hopelessly overworked even be-

fore the strike.

It is not clear where the strike will end, but it is significant for a number of features:

- ⇒ the length of the strike: in previous health sector strikes workers were soon dismissed
- ⇒ the level of discipline amongst workers, who are being allowed to remain on the hospital premises
- ⇒ the lack of police presence and intervention, and the lack of violence in the strike
- ⇒ the sympathy amongst other hospital staff for the strike: nurses have shown strong support and interest in the union, and the superintendent of Groote Schuur, the biggest hospital, publicly stated that the workers' demands are justified

In spite of the massive support for the strike, the state has not responded, the main reason being that the hospitals are still functioning. It does not seem to

care that in the words of a nursing sister: "Casualty patients live because we just manage to plug up holes, stitch them up and send them home. Patients are cleaning up and making tea." Only two factors could precipitate a real crisis in the short term: if the nursing staff joined the strike, or if there is a sudden flood of patients into all the hospitals.

But because of the extreme hierarchy, nursing ethics and their conditions of service, it is most unlikely that the nursing staff will join. Till now the union has not used a form of industrial action or protest that nurses can join without striking.

The strike again raises the thorny question of organising in the health sector, and organising nursing staff in particular. They keep hospitals functioning and the patients alive. Numerous hospital strikes have ended in a stalemate or mass dismissals in the past because they do not go

beyond mobilising the general assistants.

In this case, the inability to mobilise nurses is even sadder, as most of the nursing staff are coloured workers and clearly in sympathy with the strike. ☆

AECI bows to racism

When a white fitter (Nogueria) assaulted his assistant (Matlala), AECI Modderfontein management ignored the disciplinary code and simply reprimanded him. At the end of January 130 SACWU members downed tools in one department. Workers are particularly sensitive since the 'Wit Wolwe' killing of a Modderfontein worker, Standford Mazikwana, last year.

SACWU met the white worker's union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union. The unions agreed that both workers should be given temporary transfers and this was done. White workers were not happy or not told, and downed tools for one hour demanding Nogueria's return. More negotiations followed with offers and counter-offers being rejected, and management always protecting Nogueria.

Management suggested a public shake of hands between the two people, but refused the union suggestion that this should happen in a *mass meeting*. On 21 February the company decided to transfer both workers back to the plant. This time all the black workers downed tools.

The AEU interdicted AECI from dismissing Nogueria, and the company used this not to act. Instead it turned on the 5000 striking workers, who were later joined by AECI Zommerveld.

After interdicts and threats to dismiss workers, settlement was finally reached. The company and the union agreed that in return for letting Nogueria keep his job, AECI would re-instate all SACWU members who were dismissed for assault in the past two years. ☆

Defiance grows

A number of recent strikes indicate that the mood of defiance has reached a high pitch: workers are feeling generally sick and tired of managerial practices in general, and racist practices in particular. Two recent TGWU strikes illustrate this clearly.

At the DTMB plant in Durban, workers laid a grievance against a manager, and expected to follow the normal procedure. When the manager announced that he "was not prepared to be tried in a kangaroo-court", workers took the intended insult quite literally. The manager was frog-marched off the premises, because, in the words of a shop steward "he called us kangaroos". The manager has not been seen on the premises since.

Women workers at Fidelity Guards have had a long-standing grievance, alleging continual sexual harassment by a supervisor. As is often the case, they were unable to produce substantial evidence of the harassment and could not get rid of him.

At the end of their patience, 15 workers attacked the company offices and stabbed the supervisor. It was quite an event with secretaries fainting all over the place. The 15 workers have been dismissed and some of them charged. ☆

Justice, democracy and peace

NUM has given a new focus to its defiance campaign on the mines. While stepping up their defiance of racism and discriminatory practices on the mines, mineworkers are now also making a call for justice, peace and democracy, and calling on white miners to join the NUM.

Since the second week in March, approximately 100 000 workers Witbank, OFS, Klerksdorp and Rustenburg regions have engaged in strike and protest action against repression in the mines. Their demands have centred around discriminatory practices in the allocation of facilities and working conditions.

Workers are demanding the abolition of segregated toilets, canteens, hostels and sports. They are also demanding the right to form hostel committees, without the mine security and indunas, and the right to bring their wives into the hostels.

Miners are also demanding the rights to go underground without waiting in queues. This time of waiting is deducted from their wages. White miners do not have to queue. This particular demand is causing a lot of friction between white and black workers. A number of actions have been broken up by teargas and rubber bullets. In the OFS, workers at one mine started an underground sit-in on 15 March. One shift was brought out at gunpoint. The next shift continued the action.

It remains to be seen whether this action spreads to the other OFS mines. ☆