

# Industrial action 1993

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**T**he first six months of this year were characterised by relative calm as far as industrial action is concerned. According to the Department of Manpower, this period saw significantly fewer incidents of industrial action than the same period in 1992. The lull did not continue into the second-half of 1993. This is not unexpected, as this is when the majority of annual wage bargaining takes place. The period of calm was shattered by several strikes which dominated the industrial relations landscape: the SACCAWU strike at Checkers-Shoprite stores; the SADTU national teachers strike; and the SAMWU municipalities strike.

What follows is a review of industrial action, as recorded by IR NETWORK, during the ten months from May to the end of October 1993. For the purposes of this review, 'industrial action' includes all forms of worker protest during normal hours of work. The statistics below refer to the frequency of industrial action and, unless stated otherwise, do not refer to person-days lost.

## Commentary

COSATU-affiliated trade unions remain the most active and militant in terms of industrial action. Over two-thirds of all industrial action involved a union affiliated to COSATU. Unions involved in the other one-third are the NACTU affiliated Municipal, Education, State and Health Workers Union (MESHAWU), and SA Chemical Workers Union (SACWU),

SADTU (since affiliated to COSATU), the Mineworkers Union (MWU) and SA Broadcasting Staff Association (SABSA) affiliated to FEDSAL. The action taken by SACCAWU, NUMSA, and FAWU (all COSATU affiliates) can in most instances be linked to COSATU's primary campaigns for 1993 – as outlined at its Campaigns Conference earlier this year – namely, around wages, centralised bargaining and the crisis in the public sector.

Most of the industrial action involving SACCAWU and FAWU was triggered by a wage dispute. Average wage settlements, as recorded by IR NETWORK, fell from 16,2% in the second quarter 1992 to 10,6% in the second quarter of 1993, and from 12,9% in the third quarter of 1992 to 8,7% in the same period this year. It is therefore not surprising that wage disputes were the prime cause of industrial action. This was one of the issues highlighted at the COSATU Campaigns Conference, where declining real wages and '... the wholesale attack on the living standards of workers' was condemned. The fairly high incidence of industrial action in the retail sector as well as the food and beverage industry, is explained by SACCAWU's and FAWU's presence in these sectors.

Much of the industrial action involving NUMSA has been aimed at fighting what COSATU calls the "systematic attack on centralised collective bargaining" by the employer body in the motor industry. NUMSA has favoured marches and demonstrations and the union appears to be unwilling to commit itself to a national strike over the threatened collapse of the motor industry Industrial Council. It may be waiting for intervention from the National Economic Forum, which resolved not to undermine centralised bargaining forums, while the situation remains unresolved.

The public sector was the sector most affected by industrial action during the period under review. National strikes by SAMWU and SADTU, which together have approximately 150 000 members, had a substantial impact on the number of man-



days' lost to the economy through strike action – accounting for 70% thereof. According to a *Business Day* editorial, this rising militancy in the public sector is 'an inevitable part of the maturing process of any sector's industrial relations'. COSATU targeted the public sector for action earlier in the year. The government's unilateral imposition of a 5% ceiling on wage increases, on top of other grievances, fuelled the public sector's militancy.

Industrial action in the mining sector, where over 12% of all industrial action occurred, was limited to individual mines. Wildcat strikes were the most common form of action in this sector. These were frequently triggered by workers' dissatisfaction with mine management's lack of response to their grievances. Grievances ranged from alleged discriminatory practices to violence. The chronic state of the mining industry may be dampening workers' willingness to participate in full-blown strike action (although the possibility of a mining industry strike did loom large at one stage when NUM announced plans for a strike ballot following a deadlock in wage negotiations with the Chamber of Mines).

Violence continues to be associated with strike action, especially when picket lines are crossed and scab labour is employed. Strikes by SACCAWU (at Game), NUMSA (at Bosch), and FAWU (at ABI) were marred by allegations of assault on customers and damage to company property.

Unions regularly used picketing, particularly in the retail sector, to draw attention to the strike and the reasons for it. Companies retaliated by obtaining interdicts restricting or prohibiting picketing outside their stores.

Employers also resorted to using the lockout. SACCAWU was locked out at Checkers-Shoprite and the Carlton Hotel during the past six months.

Labour unity received a huge boost when several unions embarked on a joint wage strike at Highveld Steel. What is notable is that two of the unions involved come from opposite poles of the political spectrum: the

Mineworkers Union (MWU) is loosely aligned to the rightwing Afrikaner Volksfront (AVF) while NUMSA is affiliated to COSATU and aligned to the ANC and SACP. Also involved in the strike were members of several craft unions who are not known for their propensity to strike.

## Conclusion

The ten months from January to October 1993 have witnessed several large strikes, particularly in the public sector. Industrial action in this sector can be expected to continue as public sector workers acquire full worker rights under a new dispensation.

Industrial action in the private sector has undergone a considerable decline. This downward trend goes hand in hand with the trend towards corporatism with its emphasis on co-determination. This suggests that while levels of industrial conflict remain fairly high, the notion of industrial peace is not wholly inconceivable in SA. ☆

## Strike statistics

☐ Unions involved in industrial action:

SACCAWU ..... 18,2%

NUMSA ..... 12,7%

FAWU ..... 10,9%

☐ Sectors in which industrial action took place:

Public sector ..... 21,8%

Retail ..... 12,7%

Mining ..... 12,7%

Food and beverage ..... 10,9%

Triggers of industrial action:

Wages ..... 47,3%

General grievances ..... 16,3%

Retrenchments/ job security .. 10,9%

Discipline and dismissal ..... 7,3%

☐ Strikes, expensive in terms of person-days lost (approximate figures):-

SACCAWU:

Checkers-Shoprite ..... 290 000

SACTWU: Da Gama ..... 58 000

NUMSA & MWU:

Highveld Steel ..... 14 800

SACWU: AECI ..... 22 500