

Strikes and worker expectations in KwaZulu/Natal

DEBBY BONNIN, THEMBEKA GWAGWA and ARI SITAS* investigate three key disputes in the recent wave of strikes in KwaZulu/Natal. They find workers talking about new expectations and new standards of living.

The political strikes, boycotts and stay-aways of the 1980s and early 1990s occupied much editorial space in the South African media. After a period of relative disinterest by the media, strikes have again received much national prominence – and notoriety.

The strike-wave took place in KwaZulu/Natal as well, and has been accompanied by a flood of comments from various quarters urging workers to come to their senses, and urging the government to make workers come to their senses.

This strike-wave has not been as extensive as the 1973 Durban Strikes, nor as dramatic as some of the stay-aways of the 1980s. Unions, employers and government would be unwise,

however, to underestimate its significance.

The strikes reflect a clash of two 'moral economies'. The first is emerging from organised and unorganised black workers. It reflects the new mood of expectation among black workers, and provides its own interpretation of the concepts of affirmative action, racism, economic hardship and adequate living standards. In KwaZulu/Natal these 'interpretations' are amplified by the results of a decade of violence. This mood is particularly acute in the public sector.

These expectations have clashed fundamentally with the second 'moral economy' – the priorities of employers. Supported by the mainstream press, employers argue for worker discipline and wage restraint for the sake of economic growth and the success of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).

Not only do workers feel 'entitled' to their demands, but they expect the government – their government – to rally around their grievances. An estimated 48 000 workers in areas as diverse as the clothing and textile, food, chemical, plantation horse-racing and public sectors have gone on strike since the beginning of May. At least two workers have been killed. Threats and intimidation have been on the increase. Patients throughout KwaZulu/Natal have suffered from the hospital strikes.

It is difficult to analyse all these events in detail. However, three particular case studies can be used to illustrate the significance of these actions: the health workers' strike at King Edward VIII Hospital, that involved 2 000 people; the Toyota strike, involving at its height nearly 6 000 workers; and the Pick 'n

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Pay Strike, involving 600-700 workers. The Toyota and Pick 'n Pay strikes were part of national industrial action.

Health workers

The recent industrial action at a number of hospitals, clinics and provincial ambulance and emergency services almost brought the entire health service in KwaZulu/Natal to a standstill. In less than six months industrial action has affected King Edward VIII, Wentworth, Addington, Prince Mshiyeni, Clairwood and King George V hospitals (all within the Durban functional region). Outside Durban the GJ Crookes, Edendale, Osindisweni, Madadeni, Ngwelezane, Nkonjeni, Eshowe, Bethesda, Kokstad, Matatiele and Stanger hospitals have all been affected.

The industrial action – in the form of demonstrations, sit-ins, pickets and strikes – started before the April election and continued while the health services were being restructured. The action reflected not only the grievances of workers and staff, but also frustrations about the political process.

The King Edward strike, for example, had its roots in the pre-election period. In April, health workers at Edendale struck over both political and bread and butter issues. Go-slows and a strike by Natal Provincial Administration (NPA) ambulance and emergency services drivers followed. The drivers spoke of “long-standing discontent” and warned that the “paymasters in Pretoria” would be blamed for any loss of life. The strike ended when the NPA committed itself to improving conditions by 7 July 1994.

No sooner had the first wave of strikes been settled when nurses, cleaners and administration staff at Prince Mshiyeni hospital stopped work. They were followed by Edendale workers. At that stage COSATU's public sector forum was centrally involved in the disputes. The traditional professional associations of nurses, such as the SA Nursing Association and the Public Service Union, were marginalised.

On 15 April, as the region was teetering on the brink of civil war, King Edward workers joined the strike wave. The Central Workers'

Forum (CWF) was formed in an attempt to unite workers from all sectors of hospital staff. It led a second strike in May and another in June.

At Prince Mshiyeni the strike was resolved after two months when management agreed to back-pay strikers and dock the amount over a period of time. This caused a counter-mobilisation. Non-strikers intimidated the wage clerks not to pay the strikers. They formed a Concerned Workers' Group which, according to ANC supporters, were assisted by the KwaZulu Police in intimidating National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) shopstewards.

By June there seemed to be a lull in industrial action. The Minister of Health in KwaZulu/Natal proposed a commission of enquiry into the grievances of workers and a bipartisan task force to look into the issues of security and weapons, and the problems of effective management.

But by August the strikes had restarted at King Edward, around old and new grievances. These grievances included low salaries; corruption; nepotism; lack of serious affirmative action; poor communication between management and workers; lack of transparency; and bias towards staff associations.

Workers decided that so many organisations operating in one workplace was divisive, and so the CWF took firm control. This was the body that would handle negotiations with management. The management initially welcomed the CWF, but they later adopted a hostile attitude. Negotiations broke down as a result and the strike became increasingly volatile.

The demands tabled by the CWF were that:

- housing subsidies be given to all workers;
- parking bays not be reserved for certain categories of staff;
- staff members get free medical services;
- security be tightened to avoid loss of property;
- night duty allowances be given to all workers;
- the R500 bonus that was given to Transvaal health workers also be given to

them;

- the merit system be restructured;
- the hospital social club be democratised;
- promotion be applied equally to all racial groups;
- bridging courses' selection committee be transparent;
- the 5% increment that workers were supposed to get in November 1993 be granted.

When negotiations broke down the MEC for health was called in to defuse the strike.

Proposals from the CWF, endorsed by the MEC, included:

- the appointment of a commission of inquiry;
- an explanation from a professional person on how government monies were distributed;
- the transfer of a staff member allegedly involved in sexual harassment; and
- speeding up the process of night duty allowance allocation.

But some workers rejected the proposals. NEHAWU and COSATU lost much ground, and were seen by many as working against the workers' demands. The CWF itself became divided on the issue – some members were pleased with the proposals and others were not.

COSATU, NEHAWU, SANA and NPSWU each followed a different approach in trying to defuse the strike. Consequently, when the workers returned to work, the four organisations decided to disband the CWF and to form a new body consisting of their representatives. The press reported "sinister" forces out to undermine the government, the "alliance" and COSATU. This angered the leaders of the original CWF who then called for a second strike. Workers responded to the call, demanding that the new forum be disbanded and the old one reinstated. In response management moved to dismiss all the workers who had participated in the strike.

After COSATU's intervention and some tense bargaining, workers were readmitted with a promise from management that the issues would be looked into. Workers grudgingly returned to work without having achieved a satisfactory solution.

Auto workers

Toyota began its in-company negotiations before the national standoff between NUMSA and the auto employers. Long before the national strike Toyota workers and management were locked in arguments, go-slows and stoppages.

The disputes at the Prospecton plant started around May. Dissatisfaction among workers over dismissals, wages, provident fund contributions, car leases and medical aid plans sparked – in the words of management – "ongoing and unprocedural industrial action". Sporadic stoppages led management to close down the factory. After heated exchanges and a promise to work hard at finding a settlement, operations restarted on 26 May. On that day canteen workers, organised by the United People's Union of South African (UPUSA), started their own strike which almost spilled into solidarity stoppages on the assembly line.

The national motor industry strike marked a second round of conflict at Prospecton. A day before the decision by unions to launch the national strike, workers in five of the nine plants stopped work. This well-publicised trial of strength had its own peculiar features at Prospecton. Not only were its costs enormous and its impact on the supply and service sides of the industry great, but it also led to a range of unexpected tensions.

Together with the wage demand, there was anger over perceived racism in promotions, training and the hierarchy of the company. This was fuelled by the national demand to close the gap between grades – what NUMSA general secretary Enoch Godongwana called "the twin evils of a racist wage structure and the results of discriminatory education".

A small core of a few hundred younger black workers were particularly militant. They were opposed to the lowering of the wage increase demand from 15 to 12%. They wanted less emphasis on "education packages and other nonsense" and more on wage demands.

When a misunderstanding arose between the trade union and these young workers over a march to Durban, they occupied and trashed the trade union offices. Some left NUMSA,



Truckers blockade, Mooi River, Natal: unions and employers should take note of new expectations

encouraging their co-workers to join the Azanian Workers' Union. Little came from that initiative.

There were also larger groups of workers who wanted the quickest settlement possible. They were impatient with other motor plants for dragging out the strike, and were content to settle for less. The shopstewards at Toyota were sandwiched between two vocal groups that both wanted fast results, but for completely different reasons.

The strike ended on 7 September with both management and labour counting their losses and claiming marginal victories. One Toyota shopsteward said they were glad it was over – “now we can earn”. Another shopsteward said: “I was disappointed that our labour ministers did not come and make the motor bosses look after their workers. We are not asking for too much.”

The Pick 'n Pay strike

The main reason behind the Pick 'n Pay strike was dissatisfaction among workers with the

process of implementing a wages increase. The union and management began negotiations in November 1993 for an increase which should have been implemented by March 1994. But workers felt that management was delaying the process and “negotiating in bad faith”. Workers felt that their demand for R229 across the board was a reasonable compromise on their initial demand of R291, and were consequently not prepared to accept management's offer of R175.

Aligned to this were two other issues: the agreement on the flexibility of labour and the non-replacement policy. There was a feeling among workers that they would be working harder as a result of these agreements, without being paid for the extra effort.

There were a number of unarticulated grievances which contributed to the dissatisfaction among workers. These included dismissals, for what workers regarded as petty issues and a feeling that management was using dismissals to retrench, the increasing use of casuals and job insecurity, lack of

promotion for African workers, and the spending of money on outside projects at the expense of employee's needs.

When the strike was over the return to work in many stores was hampered by casuals employed during the strike still being at work. This led to further stoppages.

Even after the final settlement of R180 across-the board for 15 months, was reached workers felt there were still a number of outstanding issues. They wanted the 15 months to be reduced to 12 months; for workers injured during the strike to be compensated; and for disciplinary action against workers who took part in the post-strike stoppages to be stopped.

Pick 'n Pay workers were happy with the support they received from SACCAWU, COSATU and other workers.

They believe their strike will be of long-term benefit to the labour movement because of intervention of the labour minister. "The strike set up a foundation on which a completely new worker-friendly LRA can be developed. We believe in an investor-friendly economy but not on the basis of a worker-hostile economy, you need a healthy balance."

Common themes

As we have argued, the strikes reflect a "clash" of moral economies. For black workers this involves a new standard of living and a new horizon of expectations. They expect the government to empower them. This mood has magnified the issues around industrial bargaining. Given the mood, it will be difficult to convince workers to abandon strike action when parliamentarians are getting such big salaries.

According to a Pick 'n Pay organiser there are likely to be a lot of strikes provoked by employers. "There is an attitude on the part of employers that even if they have money, the workers have taken the presidency. And why should we also allow them to get everything that they want. Let's show them that Mandela may be president but we are still employers. We can still decide what is best for them. My view is that strikes are wild spots in the collective bargaining process, but employers

will bring in a political element."

Expectations are particularly high in the public sector, where workers want to see change in the old structures. At King Edward, as in other areas of the public sector, the demand is to change the whole management. Workers maintain that government ministers cannot continue to be advised by supporters of the old government.

Affirmative action has become a major issue in public sector disputes. Workers have demanded that they be promoted, that blacks move into managerial positions, and that there be equal opportunities for all.

Even at Pick 'n Pay, where the dispute was essentially about wages, shopstewards observe that the expectations of workers are much higher.

Workers complain about the lack of promotion opportunities. They maintain that when management does promote shopstewards to the position of supervisor, it is with the intention of undermining the union. The promotion is not accompanied by any education and training, which limits the person's capacity for further advancement. There is a perception, shared by Toyota workers, that racism is still active on the shopfloor and in managerial structures.

Although there is a sense of an economic upturn, economic pressures on households have not declined. Economic pressures are particularly marked in KwaZulu/Natal with its high level of unemployment and the economic consequences of eight years of political violence. These pressures strengthened workers' resolve not to accept less. As one shopsteward said: "Everyone can see that Pick 'n Pay is the richest company in this country. But why are the workers starving? Pick 'n Pay doesn't look after its employees."

The economic climate also means that any threat during a strike of dismissal, retrenchment or replacement can make the situation more volatile. This pressure "makes some people believe it is a life or death situation". SACCAWU organisers feel that violence can only be prevented through the Labour Relations Act: "The solution is to broaden the right to strike. In South Africa

workers don't have the right to strike, they have the freedom to strike."

Many of the workers we interviewed, from a number of different sectors, talked about the issue of job insecurity linked to casualisation of labour and retrenchment. For example, Stevedore companies and Portnet has retrenched workers every year for the last 10 years and replaced them with casuals. This year dockworkers marched through Durban's streets in support of their demand of no retrenchment – they won a stay-of-execution. But Deter security guards who went on strike over unfair retrenchments were fired and replaced. The possibility of losing ones job makes workers more determined to achieve their wage demands.

While these are economic issues, they have political repercussions. The government will need to address the changed expectations of workers. Workers don't perceive the Alliance to be falling apart, but view it as operating "in terms of our different constituencies", as a Pick 'n Pay worker put it. Workers interviewed were prepared to

"tighten their belts" and give the government a chance, but only if it benefitted the unemployed. "If it's going to only benefit shareholders and employers, then strikes will be part and parcel [of the new South Africa]," said one worker. "We need a clear programme for employment. Workers can't be chickens."

The new Labour Relations Act will pose a further challenge to labour, capital and government. It also provides an opportunity to address these problems. After all, a worker-friendly LRA is one of the most important – and realisable – of workers' expectations. ☆

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