

# chemical *cracks* consol

Chemical workers at Consol Glass draw the lessons of their recent strike

**S**hootings, death threats and drunken scabs trying to do our jobs...these were just some of things we had to face during our three-week strike at five plants. The first ever legal strike by Consol Glass workers organised by Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) started on 12 August. CWIU represents more than 2 000 workers at Talana in Dundee, Bellville, Pretoria, Clayville and Wadeville.

In one incident a group of armed men shot at strikers; in another a shopsteward's family received death threats. Management employed white scabs only and paid them more than the striking workers; non-strikers were given free food and drinks. Management also tried to cause ethnic conflicts among workers.

But we were not discouraged and nor did the management succeed in breaking worker unity. Quite the contrary. Workers outside the bargaining unit joined our strike voluntarily and members of other unions physically supported our strike. Our demands were an increase of R1,20 an hour on the lower grade, back-payable

to 1 July, with a moratorium on retrenchments for the next 12 months. The bosses' offer was an increase of 90 cents an hour with conditional job security and no offer of back-payment.

Although the plant was operating 24 hours a day, the scabs produced rubbish, not fit for any customer. Some of the bosses and supervisors confessed to workers that this was the case.

Workers were very concerned that the scabs did not have the skills of the permanent workers to handle the sophisticated Consol machinery. The scabs had no training or experience and did not understand the safety requirements.

## Memorandum

Noting the inferiority of the Consol products produced by the scabs - many of whom drank alcohol on the job - we delivered a memorandum to management on 25 August demanding:

- the removal of all scabs from the premises
- the banning of alcohol during working hours
- that only trained people be allowed to work, in order

to maintain good quality products.

Management was given 24 hours to respond to the memo. After that, we said, we would take over the company to ensure the survival of the factory and its machinery.

When the deadline was up, workers in each plant marched and toyi-toyed to their local manager's office to demand a response.

Management reaction varied; mostly it was negative. In Clayville, negative management response led workers to peacefully take over the factory. The administrative buildings, security officers and the production floor were occupied by workers. The scabs ran away, leaving machines unattended. In no time, workers had seized control. They stayed at their posts for the next two hours.

A week later, the bosses agreed to back-pay and job security and to an increase of 95 cents an hour.

## Background

Thus ended four months of wage negotiations, which had started in early May but deadlocked at a conciliation

board hearing on 21 July 1992 after four national negotiation meetings. The strike had started after the CWIU conducted a strike ballot. More than 90% of the workers within the bargaining unit voted 'yes'.

All the plants formed strike committees of shopstewards, active union members and one negotiating team delegate. For the Transvaal plants (Wadeville, Pretoria and Clayville), a regional strike committee was formed with

representatives from all the plant strike committees.

The main duties of the strike committee were:

- to form a strike fund;
- to plan the overall co-ordination and to liaise with other plants on strike;
- to inform the union offices at branch level of the developments and to keep all other union branches, national office and head office informed;
- to ensure unity and discipline among the strikers;
- to issue press statements;
- to seek solidarity within COSATU affiliates, especially with Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), who are organising Amalgamated Beverages Industries (Coca-Cola) and South African Breweries' companies, and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), whose members transport Consol



*Consol shopstewards assess their strike*

*Photo: William Matlala*

- products, especially bottles; to educate and mobilise workers about the working class struggle.

Though guidelines and strategies were adopted by all workers, the implementation did not always go according to plan. Not all the plants established a strike fund.

This strike showed us that a working class united can never be defeated. Workers felt their victory directly and learned a great deal.

Our advice to other workers who are going on strike is this: As workers we must plan, prepare, mobilise and consult with all workers. We must build solidarity with other workers within the companies that our company supplies and build solidarity committees. Most importantly, we must allow workers to put forward their views at general meetings.

We have learnt it is very important to plan your strike

from the very first day you draft your proposals. It is also important to assess the strike once it is over, so that you can draw the lessons and prepare yourselves for the next round of battle.

CWIU members would like to thank everybody who participated in their struggle for a living wage, especially the organisers, COSATU affiliates, workers outside the bargaining unit and strikers' families who supported them.

Through our struggle we have learnt that the struggle for a better living wage has no colour and no party politics, it is a struggle for the whole working class. The bosses attack us, the working class; we therefore attack back as a united working class against them. ☆

**VIVA CONSOL  
WORKERS, VIVA!  
VIVA CWIU and  
COSATU, VIVA!**