



Opening up a "new world" for workers

*"Management thought they could always push us around because most of us are women and we are all used to years of not answering back. But the past fourteen weeks has strengthened us. We have learned that we can fight for our rights and that we can endure" **Jasmine Salie.***

The atmosphere at National Panasonic's plant in Parow Industria in Cape Town was electric that August day in 1989. Banners, songs and posters had been prepared the previous day and workers were impatiently demanding "wanneer dan?" Then at 11am, workers in the stores department, led by their shop stewards, marched towards the factory exit. Taking the longest route through the factory, they were joined by workers from other departments, their voices echoing through the factory singing "senzeni na" and shouting "amandla".

The entire production process came to an immediate halt. Some workers belonging to the other union at the factory joined in, while others watched with tears in their

eyes. The administration staff rushed out of their offices to witness what was later called a "highly emotional and moving experience".

Management viewed the procession with shock and fear. This was the first strike in the history of the company. It was to last a full fourteen weeks and proved to be a "victory for workers' militancy and solidarity" in the words of union organiser Brian Williams. The experience for worker Sarah Grodes, "opened up a new world for us. We will never be the people we were before."

Tension in the factory had been building up since June - with workers' go-slow actions, work-stoppages and marches through the factory - in a struggle to obtain access and

bargaining rights for their union the Electrical and Allied Workers Trade Union (EAWTUSA) **. They rejected the Radio Television Electronic and Allied Workers, the sweetheart union the bosses chose to deal with.

After months of fruitless negotiations with the management of this Barlow Rand subsidiary, EAWTUSA held a ballot of all their members on 18 August and received the go-ahead to call a strike for 24 August.

When the day came and the striking workers marched towards the factory gates, a huge roar went up from some 200 hundred other workers gathered there. These were Plessey workers, also members of EAWTUSA, who had been locked out of their company

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** Electrical and Allied Workers Trade union of SA. Later to merge with other unions to form MEWUSA, affiliated to NACTU

the week before. Together, the Panasonic and Plessey workers marched past the riot police towards the nearby All Saints Church. This was to become the nerve centre of the strike over the coming months.

On the first day of the strike a register was made of all the strikers' names and addresses. A strike committee was set up combining the shop stewards committee with elected worker activists. Their role was to co-ordinate and receive reports from the other elected committees.

The media committee was responsible for producing pamphlets and keeping a strike diary, and writing thank-you letters for donations and other support received. The education committee arranged workshops. Speakers from various organisations came daily to speak to the strikers. Visits by cultural groups were thoroughly enjoyed by the strikers. Workers also organised their own plays and cultural activities.

Much effort also went into the work of the fund raising team. Discos were organised on a regular basis. Food stalls also provided valuable income. T-shirts for sale were designed and produced by strikers. Once a week all the strikers would go on fund-raising drives in different areas, with collecting lists and letters explaining the reasons for the strike. Traders, doctors, lawyers and others would be approached for support either in the form of

money or groceries. The response was very good.

Valuable solidarity also came from the South African Council on Sport (SACOS) because in their view National Panasonic had a history of sponsoring rebel cricket tours of South Africa and other racist sports events. SACOS made arrangements for striking workers to display posters at sports events denouncing the company, and announcements were made over the public address system explaining the strike and encouraging donations for the strikers.

Strikers visited other companies in the metal sector explaining the strike and appealing for financial and practical solidarity. They also went to high schools to speak to teachers and students. Support also came from civics, churches and mosques. On 12 October, about 6 000 people marched through Parow industrial area, distributing pamphlets to the public and presenting a memorandum to the management in support of the striking workers.

After eleven weeks, the strike began to take its toll. The role of the counselling committee was to provide moral and material support to workers. When strikers were unable to pay their bills, a letter would be sent to the company explaining the situation and asking for an extension. Monies and food parcels were distributed to the most needy workers on Fridays. Financial hardship was not the only problem. Many workers faced

opposition from their families. Older workers would visit such families to explain the necessity for the strike. This often helped to make them more supportive, but the strains were beginning to show.

Occupation of the factory was the last card to be played. On 20 November the strikers managed to enter company premises through the back entrance. They occupied the administration block, took control of all the offices and the switchboard, and switched off all the computers. No vehicles could enter or leave the premises. The strikers were "having a ball". Some were seated in the manager's office with their feet on his desk puffing on cigars "to see how it feels to be boss".

The next day Barlow Rand's negotiating team flew down from Johannesburg to meet with the union. On 23 November, 185 of the original 186 strikers marched victoriously back into the factory, wearing the T-shirts they had made during the strike.

Although an agreement was signed which resulted in many gains for workers, to me the most important victory was the discipline, unity and power that was developed amongst the workers. They were exposed to their own hidden talents as well as their ability to endure. These lessons and the strong links between the workers and the community will serve as an investment for future battles that lie ahead. ☆