

Pick n Pay

Casting aside workers, unleashing conflict

Over the years work conditions at Pick n Pay have radically changed. **Faiza Davids** recounts how this happened from 1989 onwards and how workers became less and less important to the company. She also talks of waging old struggles anew.

I was a shopper at Pick n Pay in Sea Point. My mother asked if they needed staff and in 1989 I started work. I trained as a cashier as a casual, working 24 hours a week.

The first experience I had of workers enjoying gains they had made was on 21 March. I was on a till when a customer asked me where the permanent staff were. I said it was a day off for them and that it was one of the days the workers negotiated for themselves, Sharpeville Day (later Human Rights Day).

The other day that these workers negotiated was 16 June (now Youth Day). I realised that the permanent workers belonged to a union and had agreements in place: recognition and wage agreements and a good parental rights agreement. I was told by workers that in the 1980s they had to strike at Pick n Pay to get a union, then Ccawusa (Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union – now South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union – Saccawu).

JOINING THE UNION

Later I asked the company for a permanent job so that our income could be more in the household. I

lived with my mother and grandmother at the bowling club in Three Anchor Bay where my mother worked as a domestic.

My brother had married and my father passed away so it was difficult to keep me at university without their income. We had to depend on my casual wages, my mother's income, and grandmother's pension. We coped as I was fortunate to live on the premises where my mother worked and so rent wasn't an issue.

In 1991 I faced discipline for the first time. I was told that my till was R2 200 short and that a SAP detective would question me. Workers started speculating but I stuck with my story which was the truth. Fortunately there was no disciplinary enquiry. The culprit was brought to book and during this time I discovered there was a shop steward.

I then approached my supervisor to ask the store manager for a full-time job.

I was employed full-time in April 1991 – one of the last employed full timers. I then enjoyed 16 June and realised the difference between full-time and casual work. My conditions changed and I worked a 45-hour week and did

not work on public holidays. I worked an early and late shift and the store closed at 6pm Monday to Friday, at 2pm on Saturday and did not open on Sunday.

I enjoyed being a full-timer and I joined the union and attended meetings. I learnt what the union was about and we had a very vocal shop and strong shop stewards. I discovered that the shop stewards committee always went to the manager's office with workers.

In 1992 one shop steward went on parental leave, and the other two were dismissed. I was nominated with another three workers and we formed the committee in the store.

I attended shop steward councils and learnt about the structures and broader issues shop stewards dealt with. We were facing the issue of job security. I was newly elected and already on my way to Johannesburg and was very excited.

END TO PERMANENTS

The meeting was sponsored by the company to consider its proposal on a study regarding work standards. I met with shop stewards of other stores and provinces and it was my first time in such an intense meeting where



Workers at the Seapoint Pick n Pay sign a childcare petition.

lots of dissatisfaction was raised with the company's proposal.

The proposal came in the guise of job security but it wanted to measure workers' productivity according to standards. This was to streamline the company and it was the end to employing full-timers.

Between 1991 and 1993 the company entered into an agreement with the union to regulate casuals. It had regulars who worked 24 hours a week and non-regular casuals who worked 32 hours a month. There were also part-timers working certain hours.

In 1993 the company issued the union with a retrenchment notice on 3 300 jobs. It was just before our annual shop steward conference in Bloemfontein. We resolved through heated debates to work with the company's proposal on the 'Job security, flexibility and mobility of labour'.

We had confrontations with management up to 1994 in wage negotiations. I was going through intensive education at the Workers' College at UWC. Management was very hostile and we had to exert pressure often going on wild-cat strikes in our plant concerning their attitude, unfair treatment of workers and unilateral decision-making. We dealt with discipline,

grievance and other issues on the shop-floor.

We had a protracted wage strike in 1994 and were the first union to strike in the new South Africa. We struck for six weeks and management tactics and police involvement were tough.

MOVING TO UNSUSTAINABLE JOBS

In October 1994 we signed the 'Job security, flexibility and mobility of labour (F&M)' agreement and casuals were regulated through another agreement. The regular and non-regular casuals became new part-timers (NPT). We negotiated an agreement for NPTs with set conditions.

There were conditions for casuals to convert to NPTs. Casuals had to get a number of hours in a certain period to qualify to become a NPT. The shop stewards committee went through clock cards to add up these hours. In some instances the company said they couldn't say whether a casual qualified or not. We eventually completed the exercise and managed to get many casuals converted to NPTs.

NPTs could join the union with union deductions from their wages. The process for workers to

become full-time was regulated by the F&M agreement.

The F&M agreement was very unsettling because workers had to move from departments they worked in to others and even to other stores if there was over staffing. I was demoted from a cashier to a till packer but my rate of pay stayed the same. Workers were very unhappy during this phase. They were offered voluntary retrenchment packages and some resigned.

The 1990s was a period of learning about changes in labour legislation and I participated in Saccawu's campaigns as an affiliate of Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions). We were optimistic about the legislation protecting workers and improving working conditions and lives.

We had a period when the F&M agreement ensured job security and we successfully created jobs. We dealt with stores, shifts and hours for NPTs. We took part in the recruitment process when workers moved from part-time to permanent.

We had a Relationship By Objectives (RBO) process going on at a national and regional level in the company. We had transparent plenary sessions at a national level where the CEO, general managers and top union leadership met to hear about the state of the company.

The more the RBO process continued, the more management became relentless in their dealings with workers. Management were dealing with the business and neglecting workers. Various staff programmes that were supposed to bring everyone together were implemented. However it was more about the company getting workers to comply with it. The union represented the majority of workers and the company had a

problem with the relationship.

In 2004 Sectoral Determination 9 for casuals came out. Saccawu negotiated a set of conditions which opened the door for ambiguous definitions and practices by the company.

The casuals (NPTs) were now determined as variable time employees (VTEs). They were part of the bargaining unit but not covered by the F&M agreement. VTEs now had benefits such as a provident fund, annual, sick, occasional and parental leave. They only had 85 hours guaranteed but could work up to 196 hours like full-timers without being full-time.

Another type of worker was created in this process called an occasional time employee (OTE) who only worked 24 hours a month. The company was only offering this employment and not the 85 hours guaranteed VTE employment making employment very precarious. These OTEs were told to get a foot in the door and apply for the 85 hour guaranteed positions. An environment of competition for jobs was created and not even for a full-time job for that matter. Jobs were less sustainable.

In 2005 we went on a wage strike and this was the first time that casuals went out in numbers. We signed a wage agreement that had conditions to deal with productivity. We now had to deal with stores trading later. VTEs were now working variable hours because they were not part of the F&M agreement. They were forced to work late trading hours without management taking into account their personal problems. Their contracts had been changed to suit the needs of business.

Pick n Pay has been franchising stores at a rapid rate. It now has more franchise than corporate

stores. It is listed on the JSE. The previous corporate stores that have been converted to franchise stores now reflect as part of the group enterprise and not as retail division, which means that the retail division has become smaller.

The franchise stores have individual owners and the labour turnover is high in most of them. The conditions of work are not the same as in the corporate stores which operate under the same brand. The customer doesn't know the difference but the practices are different.

ADVERSARIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The union is now excluded from many aspects that we were involved with before like recruitment. Management is asserting their prerogative more because they are the custodians of policies and procedures. Management however most of the time don't adhere to the agreements, policies and procedures. We have had many disputes due to the relationship becoming more adversarial.

We are dealing with matters in a hostile environment where workers are treated as if they are not part of the business and as if they don't understand it.

Three years ago the company launched a rebranding with new concepts. This was a fresh food concept that workers think leads to lots of waste. This restructuring affected workers negatively. We are facing over staffing in terms of the F&M agreement.

New stores opened with the new look fresh food concept and with that came late trading especially in regions that had never traded later than 6pm. These changes have adverse effects on workers and development is minimal in the lower rank of jobs.

Employment equity and skills development is a formality, not a reality and we have a dispute regarding representivity.

In 2009 Saccawu Pick n Pay struck around racism in employment practices that has been raised by the union over many years. Transformation is non-existent with no meaningful dialogue with the union or workers. We work under conditions that are at times explosive because of management attitudes, unfair treatment, inconsistencies and not listening to workers.

Workers who work late have to deal with social problems at home around their children and drugs and crime. Full-time workers and casuals have no childcare facilities but are expected to work late trading hours. Workers have to pay extra for after hours child minders.

Casuals struggle over weekends and on public holidays. Women are assaulted and raped going home after working late. Saccawu is running a campaign around late trading and safe and reliable transport. In Pick n Pay we have won company transport for late workers but we still experience problems with child-care.

I have launched a child-care survey in our shop stewards council that looks at issues workers have regarding child-care. We are going to compile a report and present it to the company through our national negotiating committee. We want child-care facilities which have been on the agenda for more than 20 years. We are hoping that such facilities become a primary issue because its benefits are societal. LB

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