



rainbow **strike** *at* **Frame**

The Frame Textile strike in November last year was a landmark – for the first time a ‘rainbow’ alliance of African, Indian and white monthly-paid staff joined hands and downed tools together. SACTWU legal officer MIKE MURPHY reports.

We are used to reports of white scabs working during ‘black’ strikes. But the Frame monthly-paid workers strike points to the possibility of a different approach. In

workplaces where weekly-paid black workers are well organised, there is potential for a ‘second wave’ of unionisation amongst monthly-paid employees.

History of organisation at Frame

The battle by NUTW (now SACTWU) to organise the giant Frame Textile Corporation (nearly 30 000 employees) began in the early 1970s, and recognition was finally won in 1986. The agreement between company and union obliged the company to bargain with monthly-paid employees but only in a separate bargaining unit from the weekly-paid, and only as majority was achieved in the Paterson grades C1 to C3.

The success of the union in handling worker problems in 1987 and 1988 amongst the weekly-paid, and the promotion of union members into the C1-C3 grades, led by mid-1989 to a demand for organisation amongst the monthly-paid staff. Frame was starting the huge process of retrenchment that has cut the company to a workforce of 9 000 today, but this process only accelerated the recruitment of staff seeking protection against unfair retrenchment or poor retrenchment packages.

By the end of 1989, SACTWU negotiated its first salaried staff agreement, covering its majority membership in the C1, C3 and B-monthly grades at the biggest Frame factory, Frametex at New Germany.

Organisation has gradually extended in the Frame New Germany complex to the present position, reflected in the table below.*

SACTWU membership relative to total employees (approx)

| | |
|----------|----------------|
| INDIANS: | 190 out of 210 |
| BLACKS: | 117 out of 130 |
| WHITES: | 50 out of 115 |
| TOTAL: | 357 out of 455 |

The group most reluctant to join SACTWU was the C2 grade employees. These are predominantly white artisans, on artisan's rates of pay. But SACTWU now has over 60% membership in C2 grade, and is only eight members away from majority amongst the whites. Only two years ago it was said of the whites: "They will never join a black union."



Workplace issues for salaried staff

While the weekly-paid workers' struggles have focused on wages, the organisation of monthly-paid staff was focused on 'favouritism'. This was a grievance about management giving preference in employment, in promotions, and in 'merit increases' to their 'blue-eyed boys' – mostly whites.

The union demands, for the first two years in the monthly-paid bargaining unit, therefore concentrated on correcting the enormous pay discrepancies between workers performing the same jobs. The focus was on a fair grading system, and levelling out the pay gaps by distributing the annual increase away from the high-paid towards the low-paid.

While the higher-paid workers remained outside SACTWU, there was little resistance to this redistribution process. But it soon became clear to the higher paid workers that if they did not join the union they would receive lower pay increases than the lower-paid workers.

SACTWU also succeeded in closing the other loophole for favouritism, namely the merit increase, which was abolished. All this allowed higher-paid workers to overcome their dislike of COSATU unionism, and to join SACTWU. By the 1991 bargaining round in the monthly-paid bargaining unit, the

* The racial categories throughout this article are not used because of support for apartheid, but because we recognise that non-racialism must be built out of the reality we live in.



Shopstewards at Frame: part of a landmark strike

Photo: Cedric Nunn

SACTWU demand was an across-the-board percentage increase. This remained the same in the 1992 bargaining.

Another key demand was to set annual negotiations and implementation dates for the monthly-paid at the same time as for the weekly-paid. This co-ordination was vigorously resisted by the company, which admitted that such a change "would give the union too much power". This demand is still on the table.

Lead-up to salaried-staff strike

From 1990, Frame has been in deep financial trouble. In 1991, having suffered losses of over R200 million, the company tried to enforce an 8% settlement on the monthly-paid when inflation was fanning at 16,2%. Strong union resistance involving a number of in-factory demonstrations led to a 12,5% deal being struck.

During 1992, the company avoided

processing staff disputes in order to avoid financial outlay. The result was that minor issues that would normally have been settled were blown up into long-running grievances, and more major issues were delayed so that the belief grew that the company "did not care about its monthly-paid employees".

This perception was dramatically reinforced when bargaining started in September. Barely two months after awarding the weekly-paid workers an increase of 15,6% (calculated year-on-year) or 10,7% (calculated normally on the split increase usually used at Frame) the company announced its 'offer' to the monthly-paid of a *decrease* of 10%. After this absurd bargaining ploy was dismissed by the union, the company dug its heels in at its 'final' offer of a wage freeze.

The response of the monthly-paid at a general meeting was one of outrage. From the white artisans came the proposal for an immediate "down tools", but this was outvoted in favour of the Labour Relations Act dispute

procedures. The union negotiating team was told to suspend negotiations until the company came with an offer similar to the 1991 settlement, and to meet the company again only at the Conciliation Board meeting arising out of the dispute over the company's "insulting" pay offer.

When the CB application was filed the company adopted delaying tactics with the result that the CB never met, and with the further result that their "insult" was allowed to fester for the full 30 days. When the union announced a strike ballot the company panicked and rushed forward with a 5% offer. This was clearly too late, and did not deter the staff from voting 94% in the ballot in favour of "industrial action". The ballot was however, more of a signal of staff anger to the company than a definite decision to strike.

There followed a period of 'wait-and-see' on both sides, during which attempts were made to get across to the company the unfairness of treating the staff so much worse than the weekly-paid. But the MD, when called to a general meeting in the canteen, barricaded himself behind a door with armed guards outside, and sent the Personnel Director to the meeting. He was promptly ejected.

A new final offer of 8% was again too little too late, and the time had clearly come to strike – or back down. A go-slow proposal was rejected – clerical workers pointed out that it was difficult for them to make this count – and a show of hands vote was taken on an all-out strike.

This was undoubtedly the Rubicon vote. The monthly-paid shopstewards had felt from the start that members would not strike – that they were by custom too concerned about loss of pay, and the danger of dismissal. The weekly-paid shopstewards had scoffed at the prospect of a staff strike and it seemed clear that the company was also sceptical.

Yet when the spontaneous vote was taken, it was unanimous. Another vote on "How long for?" and "when do we start?" was taken unanimously minutes later.

Why this new-found militancy?

How to explain this militancy from traditionally non-militant workers?

Obviously, everyone was angry at the company and inflation had been particularly severe on everyday food items in the last year. But the fears expressed before the vote were perfectly rational:

- ☐ Have we got the *right* to strike?
- ☐ Won't we just lose money if we go on strike?

These fears were addressed in the meeting by explaining, firstly the 'protected strike' right under the LRA. This is made far stronger at Frame by a clause in the recognition agreement which stipulates that in the event of a strike the company must 'fire all or none' and 'rehire all or none'. Secondly, a 'balance sheet' of monetary gains and losses was drawn up, showing that a 1% increase was worth spending 3,2 days on strike over to win that 1%, before one actually loses anything in monetary terms.

Another factor which influenced the decision to strike was the existence of a vociferously pro-strike minority – the white artisans who, by being out of the bargaining unit in previous years, had suffered lower percentage increases than other staff.

Having voted to strike, the staff began to raise problems that had not occurred to them before. For example: "What do I do when my boss – whom I know personally – comes to me outside the factory, takes me by the arm, and says 'Come on, Joe, lets get back to work'?" This problem, of close personal relations, was solved by emphasizing the legality of the strike under the LRA.

It had been provisionally decided at the Wednesday meeting to start the strike on Monday morning. But when it became clear on Thursday that management were using the interim days to prepare to ride out the strike, an urgent general meeting was called and the strike started there and then. Each member was given a notice by the union explaining the fundamentals of strike action: pickets, disciplined attendance at strike meetings etc. This notice was also used as 'proof' to anxious

spouses of the legality of the strike, to counter anticipated phone calls from management to harass employers – via domestic pressure – into breaking ranks.

Bringing the strike forward by four days meant hurried organisation of pickets, and the key for the meeting venue (the local ANC hall) could not be located, so that members had to stand in the road for several hours. In spite of this only a handful of members went to work on Friday, which was the first test of individual commitment.

Picketing continued on Saturday to cover the shift workers, and on Monday the first strike meeting recorded an over 90% attendance. Out of 357, a total of six members crossed the picket line, two of whom had arrived at the gates 'under safe escort' in a police car.

Role of weekly-paid workers

The weekly-paid workers went on strike in 1990 for three weeks. The monthly-paid workers had 'worked' but there was little to do. Now the situation was reversed, but the loss to the company was far greater – to pay the weekly-pays for doing nothing as the factory ground to a halt was an obvious pressure on Frame to settle.

The weekly-paid workers were fascinated by the Friday demonstration at the main gate by the strikers: banners, slogans, even the occasional *toyi-toyi* by their supervisors and foremen was certainly something new. But this tactical distancing between the two sections of the workforce could not be sustained indefinitely.

By the third day strong discontent was voiced by some of the monthly-paid production staff around certain higher-skilled weekly-paid workers carrying out monthly-paid functions. On the Monday a proposal to picket the weekly-pays from Tuesday was carried by an overwhelming majority, to loud applause.

The other advantage of having the weekly-pays at work was the availability of information around the effectiveness of stopping production. Another useful source of

information was the C4 grade employees (head foremen) who had joined SACTWU during October, but were too new to ballot and join the strike. With this information it was possible to know the state of production in every mill and plan accordingly.

Strike leadership

The majority group, the Indians, took the dominant leadership role during the strike, with the agreed tactical exception that white artisans crossing the picket line would always encounter white picketers.

This tactic had problems: because the majority of white artisans were not union members, their crossing of the picket lines gradually demoralised their fellow artisan picketers. This meant that by Monday the white workers, who had been confident of shutting down the sites through control of lights, water etc had lost confidence in winning the strike.

Black monthly-paid leadership were exerting a different kind of influence. Since nearly all monthly-paid blacks have risen via promotions from the weekly-paid ranks, their attention was on their 'connections' amongst the weekly-pays, to ensure that no weekly paid workers crossed the picket once the pickets started targeting the weekly-pays.

Settlement

From day one of the strike, the pickets had put up a placard on the main gate of the factory, inviting the company to settle at a compromise figure:

SACTWU 12,5% – Frame 8%

Meet us halfway, Mr Simeoni

And from day one, the company adopted the position that the 8% offer had been conditional on no strike. Frame's posture now was that the 'offer' was 0%, a piece of wishful thinking that nobody took seriously.

Settlement was reached on the afternoon of day four when a 9,5% increase was agreed to by a full-house of the general meeting. There was a feeling of elation amongst the membership: they had won their first strike!

A few days remained before the December

shutdown. But even in this short space of time what became clear was the totally new spirit amongst the monthly-paid. As one shopsteward said: "Everyone is united now, after being on strike together. We're all comrades now! We've done something together, and we've shown we can stand up for ourselves."

The scabs can look forward to repercussions in 1993 as a result of this new spirit. But the repercussions proposed are in keeping with the entirely non-violent strike, where not even management complained about intimidation. The proposal is to hang a 'list of honour' on the factory gate once a month, with the names written large on it of "all those ladies and gentlemen that went in to work while we were outside fighting for *their* increase".

After the strike there was a surge of new members into the union – the waverers clearly saw on which side their bread is buttered.

Some organising conclusions from the strike

This strike showed that the issues of inter-racial co-operation will be worked out in a real context rather than in the abstract. The strike also showed that this traditionally conservative sector can be surprisingly militant in the face of rocketing inflation. But in order to organise successfully this monthly-paid sector there are some key issues:

- ☐ There is little culture of united action but this solidarity can develop rapidly through regular workplace meetings.
- ☐ There is no tradition of direct democracy as is well-established in the COSATU unions. But the constant reminder that the union is the workers themselves, and does not move without a mandate, empowers and unifies workers. Workers began to say "We will decide, and then we will do it. No-one will tell us what to do!"
- ☐ Once the issue of united action has been overcome the real and rational barriers of united action can be addressed: "Won't I get fired?" etc.
- ☐ The monthly-paid are more demanding than the weekly-paid sector and this is the

biggest challenge facing unions – the need to upgrade their quality of service. The questions asked of unions are very direct: "Are you prompt, efficient, and focused on our problems?"

Monthly paid workers also have potential from their vantage point in the production process to critique current management practices. From this vantage point, it is clear that the "low productivity of South African labour" which management constantly complains about is in large part the result of poor management. In Frame, management has to decide if it will respond to demands which infringe on 'management prerogative', such as:

- ☐ weeding out of poor management
- ☐ an end to excessive managerial perks
- ☐ reasonable productivity deals which eliminate wasteful practices.

What lessons for non-racial unionism?

Here and there in recent times there have been examples of individual white workers joining black unions. But apartheid has typically placed non-African workers in the higher-paid jobs so the possibilities of genuine inter-racial co-operation has never been tested on any large scale.

With the opening up of higher-grade jobs to Africans the monthly-paid sector has become more ethnically mixed, and so the primary focus of non-racial unionism will therefore, be located in the monthly-paid sector. Workers in this sector will have a clear choice: racial division and powerlessness, or inter-racial co-operation to fend off attacks on their living standards. The Frame strike shows that, where there is a struggle for common goals, the potential problem of racial conflict can be overcome if the union is sensitive to its members' different cultural backgrounds. ☆

