

Security strike violence

Union leadership found wanting

Violence in the security strike earlier this year was widely condemned. **Martin Jansen** reflects on the reasons for violence and speculates on union responsibility to stem violence through improved organisational tactics.

Not since the great strike wave of 1987, have we seen such worker militancy displayed by the security workers' strike earlier this year. Whilst this was a positive indication of workers' willingness to struggle, there are nevertheless areas of weakness and concern that the labour movement needs to reflect upon in order to strengthen itself. As the revolutionary, Che Guevara, remarked, "Tell no lies, claim no easy victories!"

The strike received unusually wide media coverage, largely because of the violence. Virtually all writers in the media, and even the leadership of Cosatu, condemned the violence, regularly pointing fingers at strikers. Such negative publicity towards the strikers was manufactured by the conservative mainstream media and also from the

liberal newspaper, the *Mail and Guardian* and even Terry Bell, the left-wing labour journalist chipped in about alleged 'vandalism' by strikers.

Here I will reflect on reasons for the violence and highlight challenges that unions face to strengthen their organisation and improve their chances of winning strikes.

STRIKES AND VIOLENCE

Trade unionism is about strengthening bargaining power to defend workers' interests and win demands to improve living standards and working conditions. Within traditional collective bargaining, when the bosses and unions are unable and unwilling to compromise, they resort to pressurising each other to make concessions. From the unions' side the strike is the ultimate weapon to pressurise employers. The power of the strike depends upon the unity and political commitment by strikers and, importantly, the effect of the strike on company's operations. The power of workers must ensure maximum disruption of company operations to severely affect business and profitability.

The form that strikes take, including the extent of violence, depends on numerous factors. Unfortunately most media and some unionists choose to view violence in strikes as worker brute thuggery. Yet, the violence of the police, state and private security forces is hardly criticised.

Over the past few years workers have chosen to increase their strikes' power through various tactics, including trashing cities (municipal workers), violence and vandalism (security workers) and picket lines at supermarkets, preventing shoppers from buying. Strikers are not friendly towards scabs and resort to physically assaulting them to prevent them from breaking the strike. Over the years this has resulted in the deaths of some workers, who often through economic desperation are on the wrong side of class conflict.

In these strike experiences there is a trend for strike tactics in the services industry to correlate with the economic and social function that they perform. The strikes by municipal workers are often dominated by the refuse collectors and cleaners and they resort to trashing cities with rubbish. Similarly, striking security workers seem to deliberately create insecurity through acts of violence and 'vandalism' as if to say, 'no security workers, no security'. Besides recent efforts by retail workers at Shoprite to prevent customers and workers from entering supermarkets, female workers at Pick 'n Pay in Port Elizabeth, resorted to not wearing overalls and came to work in pyjamas and 'nighties' to maximise the disruptive effect on customers.

Traditionally violence in strikes is a last resort against scabs and when defending the strike from attacks by police and other violent agents



Left: Security strikers march on May Day

employed by the bosses (such as the Red Ants employed in a recent Shoprite-Checkers strike). The security strike had several features that made violence and death almost inevitable.

Violence is an intrinsic part of the security industry. In order to qualify as a security worker you need to be trained for violence and your job is to use it in defence of private property you are hired to protect. The strike was an attempt by security workers to wrest profits from their employers. They are aware that their low wages and poor working conditions ensure that the industry is one of the most profitable and fast growing. In a period of increasing socio-economic inequality and desperation for working class people it was inevitable that the strikers would resort to violence. Violence was an important form of power aimed at winning the strike in a desperate situation where the stakes were high. Defeat meant losing demands and also a greater assault on workers' already limited rights. A victory for security bosses would mean an even more repressive working environment and would set struggle back by several years.

Much of the workers' frustration and anger came from the experience of initial unity in a week-long joint strike by 16 unions

party to the dispute, and then the unexpected when 14 unions split off and signed an agreement with the employers. Despite Satawu being the majority union, the bosses were unwilling to negotiate an improvement with constant threats and regular court action against it. This fuelled the violence, especially against other workers who were seen as selling out by returning to work and 'scabbing'.

South African labour law, specifically the Labour Relations Act, does not prohibit employers from using scab labour to weaken strikes. The code of conduct on strikes also prohibits workers from interfering with the operations of companies during strikes. These laws clearly favour employers and undermine the strike so severely that only desperate measures and a healthy disregard for the 'rule of law' can assist in strengthening workers' power. The violence and ungovernability tactic was also a means of drawing attention to the strike from the media, the public and those holding the reins of state power to apply pressure to break the bosses' resistance.

However, in trying to strengthen their strike, workers' were often left to their own devices without strong leadership and support from the unions involved, Satawu and Tawu, and their federations. Their violent

tactics were often applied indiscriminately without any sense of who their class allies could or should be. They virtually smashed up and brought to an end the Cosatu Western Cape May Day rally, reportedly aggrieved about the speakers on the platform and the rally being too celebratory whilst they were suffering. The May Day rally was an opportunity for them to gain solidarity from other Cosatu members but instead it alienated them.

The leadership of Satawu and Cosatu were unable to exert discipline on the strike. This was an unprecedented occurrence. The unsavoury events and early ending of the rally raised some questions about the attitude of union leaders to workers' struggles and particularly strikes.

SOLIDARITY FOREVER?

Unions in South Africa have a poor track record of promoting solidarity with each others' struggles. There were times in the past when workers within the same union would not support the strike of fellow members in a factory right opposite them.

Satawu seemed unprepared for the extended and militant strike. Much was left to the self-organisation and self-activity of the workers with little direction on the ground. This is often a good thing, except when most workers have little experience of past struggles or the necessary political acumen to lead a massive strike against strong conservative employers. Serious mistakes and organisational problems are likely to occur with life threatening consequences. The workers' actions displayed little of the sophisticated struggle tactics of the past which involved actively winning over other workers and members of the community and

building solidarity. Instead, self employed people and small businesses became victims of the strikers' frustrations.

It was only at the Special Cosatu Central Executive Committee meeting on 3 May that the security strike was discussed and solidarity pledged by union leaders. However, much of what the CEC agreed did not happen, and few shop stewards and members of other unions took support action. This was reminiscent of the 1987 mineworkers' strike, when Cosatu General Secretary Jay Naidoo called for solidarity action only in the final week when the union was virtually defeated.

Is it not time to put living wage campaign structures in place well in advance to prepare for, and coordinate, wage and other struggles across sectors? Why are workers' struggles confined to themselves and not broadened to build the widest unity and maximum power to ensure victories? What is the purpose of unions and their federations other than to build broad fighting unity of members and working class allies?

BUILDING ORGANISATION, LEADERSHIP AND CONSCIENTISING

Strikes present rare opportunities for unions to educate members about issues that contribute to politically conscientising them and strengthening their strike in practice. The fact that security workers were not working meant their daily routines of wage slavery were interrupted. For a short while they did not have to rise at dawn to work uninterruptedly, without breaks and go home at night or clock in for the dangers of the night-shift. They were grappling with their class standing in society in the process of engaging in a brutal struggle with capitalist bosses for improved wages and conditions of

employment. They were focused on how to win against a powerful group of employers. This presented fertile ground for leaders to sharpen workers' class consciousness and build strong organisation. But there was little evidence of such activities.

Satawu and most unions do not have strike funds that could at least assist workers with feeding themselves and their families. This could have offset the alleged criminal activities that a small number of strikers resorted to in order to survive. More importantly, economic pressure undermines strike unity. Could the proceeds of union investment funds not be channelled towards supporting workers' struggles? Why after two decades of progressive unions are strike funds not an integral part of union organisation?

STRIKERS' DISCIPLINE

Organised discipline must be a central feature of strikes and here the security strike was wanting. Satawu was unable to fully impose its strike rules and discipline. There was little evidence of well organised disciplined strike committees to lead the strike. On the other-hand, that the strike remained strong and was victorious is testimony to the workers' strength and how much more could have been achieved with attention to certain areas of strike organisation.

APPEALING FOR STATE INTERVENTION

In the strike, constant appeals were made to the Minister of Labour by Satawu and Cosatu to assist in resolving it. The union movement has historically favoured collective bargaining that is independent of state interference. The labour legislation framework adheres to this independence and has set up

mechanisms and institutions such as the CCMA to facilitate resolution of disputes.

In a capitalist society such intervention by a capitalist government is likely to favour employers. This is in evidence when workers attempt to strengthen their strikes by keeping scabs out and by disrupting company operations. The state usually responds with violence as seen in recent protest marchers by strikers and communities. Recently, Oupa Mbhele, a Satawu organiser involved in the contract cleaners' strike, was shot four times at close range by police and is in a serious condition in hospital. The winning of strikes should depend on the strength of thousands of workers and their allies in working class communities.

CONCLUSION

Recent strikes show that workers and unions like Satawu are prepared to struggle to advance the interests of their members. These struggles come after more than 15 years of attacks on the living standards of working class people through various neo-liberal measures by the state.

Conditions for the working class have become unbearable, especially for those in low-paying insecure employment such as in the security and retail sectors. Workers and their unions are forced to struggle against the greed of their employers. Unions appear not to be prepared for this period of intensifying struggle at workplace and community levels. They need to give this more attention than the ANC presidential debate which has resulted in the neglect of Living Wage and Jobs and Poverty Campaigns.

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