

MASS ACTION FOCUS



Blowing down the walls of apartheid? Mass action march in Pietersburg

Photo: William Matlala

Millions back mass action

While the low level of participation in the ANC's mass action campaign in July led much of the media to describe it as a 'flop', the week of action beginning on 3 August was undeniably a success. It began with the biggest stayaway in South African history – an estimated four million workers heeded COSATU's call on both Monday and Tuesday – and climaxed on Wednesday with over 70 000 ANC supporters rallying at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. In addition, workplace and community centred actions occurred throughout the country. JESSE FENICHEL gives the details.

LABOUR ACTION

According to COSATU figures, over four million workers stayed away on Monday and Tuesday. In addition, almost one hundred marches and demonstrations were held on those two days, in which over 300 000 people participated. The range of these actions was impressive. In drought stricken Lebowa, 10 000 marched on the homeland parliament demanding an interim government, road construction, plumbing and electricity, an end to the harassment of the ANC, and the disbanding of homeland governments.

On the Tuesday a disciplined crowd of over 50 000 ANC supporters, led by Chris Hani and Sam Shilowa, marched from King William's Town to the Ciskei in an attempt to present a memorandum to homeland leader Brigadier Oupa Gqozo. Gqozo had earlier warned that the march would not be allowed to take place and that the demonstrators would be met by armed troops at the 'border'. In a day of high tension, in which Ciskei troops came close to firing on the crowd, the ANC supporters eventually forced their way to Bisho stadium where they held a rally.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of workers who stayed away. However, all the evidence suggests the two day action was even more successful than the VAT stayaway in November last year. According to COSATU, 90% of workers in townships stayed away on both days, with the highest support in the Western Transvaal, Highveld, and PWV and the lowest in the Orange Free State and Western Cape. In addition, 92% of students stayed away. The action was also not confined to a stayaway. Marches and demonstrations were held in many townships.

SA Labour Bulletin's own survey of companies in the PWV area, on the first day of the strike, found that:

- most reported a 90-100% stayaway among black workers
- most Indian and coloured workers, in the companies surveyed, were at work
- the stayaway was less successful in the public sector, although accurate figures were hard to get
- in NACTU-organised plants, participation

varied widely, from as low as 10%, to close to 99%.

Most unionised plants apparently reached agreements with employers, both formal and informal, concerning the stayaway and Wednesday demonstrations. While the vast majority of private sector employers indicated they would adopt a "no work, no pay, no discipline" approach, many public sector employers indicated they would take disciplinary measures against workers who stayed away.

Similar surveys were undertaken in Cape Town, Natal and the Eastern Cape. In Cape Town, the survey showed support for the action ranging from 10% to 100%. African participation was overwhelming - greater even than during the VAT campaign. However, only 20% to 29% of coloured workers stayed at home, except in certain textile plants that closed after negotiations with SACTWU.

In Natal, a detailed survey found that about 67% of the workforce in the Durban and Pietermaritzburg areas stayed away on the first day, with the percentage dropping slightly on the second day. Support in Northern Natal was considerably less (15-18%). In Natal as a whole, over 50% stayed away in all sectors except paper and printing (30%). The highest level of support for the stayaway (84%) was in clothing and textiles. 14% of the companies shut down after reaching agreement with workers and their unions over making up lost production.

On both Monday and Tuesday, 95% of hourly-paid employees stayed away in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage. Production was also disrupted on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at well over half the companies surveyed. The stayaway was strongly supported by both African and coloured workers - with 90% of coloured workers staying at home on Monday. 93% of companies reported that discussions were held in advance of the stayaway with shopstewards, but agreements on a programme of action were concluded in less than 10% of the companies.

On the mines, the general strike received uneven support. According to the Chamber of

Mines, almost all gold mines functioned at normal capacity. Some coal mines experienced substantial stayaways although, in all but one, agreements were concluded to make up lost production. However, the NUM painted a different picture, claiming a 90% stayaway on diamond mines, 80% on coal mines, and 60-70% support for the first day of action on "some" gold mines. In all, says NUM, 170 000 miners participated in the two day action.

Occupying the cities

The alliance's plan of action for 5 August centred on marches and city centre occupations. According to the ANC, approximately 400 000 people participated in these. The largest was the march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria led by ANC President, Nelson Mandela. About 70 000 ANC supporters marched through the streets of Pretoria to the Union Buildings, and hoisted the ANC flag on top of the statue of General Louis Botha.

Significant demonstrations also occurred in other cities. In Johannesburg about 5 000 people, unable to travel to Pretoria, marched to John Vorster Square police station. In Bloemfontein approximately 5 000 ANC supporters occupied the streets around the Bophuthatswana 'consulate', forcing the consul to allow a delegation inside to present a memorandum. Thousands marched in Durban and approximately 1 000 people occupied the city's central post office. Thousands also marched in Pietermaritzburg.

Approximately 50 000 marched on the Grand Parade in Cape Town, a culmination of separate marches from the surrounding townships. A delegation of protesters went to the Receiver of Revenue and stated their intention to pay their taxes into a Democratic Trust Fund until an interim government was in place.

Perhaps most significant were the many demonstrations held outside the larger centres. Groups of demonstrators gathered, even in small Northern Transvaal towns, to show their support for the mass action campaign. In the ultra-conservative town of Warmbaths, about

300 ANC supporters from Belabela township staged a sit-in.

Workplace actions

On Thursday and Friday the tripartite alliance called for local and workplace demonstrations, including factory occupations. In some cases these actions were carried out successfully. In others, employers pre-empted them by locking workers out.

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive survey of actions and the following simply gives an indication of events:

- About 2 000 CAWU members marched down Commissioner Street in Johannesburg and were confronted by 50 armed Inkatha supporters who were escorted back to the Wolhuter hostel by police.
- CWIU members at SA Cynamid (a US corporation) and eight other factories were locked out because employers suspected they were planning factory occupations. They were. When eventually allowed in, workers occupied areas of the factory.
- POTWA members occupied the main post offices in Durban, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth as well as post offices in Transkei.
- 300 SACCAWU members marched on Hyperama, CNA and other companies to deliver memorandums dealing with high food prices, retrenchments, and wages. Hundreds of SACCAWU members also marched on three different Pretoria police stations and demonstrated outside the National Produce Market.
- In Germiston, several hundred SACCAWU members marched on companies at which members were on strike or being retrenched. At its Friday march workers were teargassed by the police.
- Approximately 2 000 SAMWU members occupied the Cape Town civic centre for two hours.
- Railway workers occupied various depots in Cape Midlands, Port Elizabeth, and the Orange Free State.
- TGWU members blockaded the streets of Port Elizabeth, successfully tying up the centre of the city. Truck, bus and taxi

drivers participated.

The tripartite alliance has promised rolling mass action – an ongoing series of demonstrations and protests – until democratic elections are held and the violence is curbed. COSATU has promised to defend workers

dismissed during the strike and to blacklist employer hardliners.

It will be important to see if the alliance, and COSATU in particular, can build on the momentum of a momentous week. ❖

A winter of discontent

What were the reasons behind the August mass action campaign? And what does the success of the action mean for the ANC, its allies, and its opponents? JEREMY BASKIN looks at these questions as well as the future of the aborted SACCOLA/COSATU charter.

Four million workers absent for two days; millions more students absent from school; major demonstrations and marches - by any criteria, the ANC and its allies achieved what they set out to do. Indeed, from all accounts, the mass action programme during the first week of August involved more people and covered a greater geographical range than any other comparable action in our country's history (see previous article).

Relatively few workers were dismissed as a result of the action. COSATU estimates that approximately 1 000 members lost their jobs. It remains to be seen how the tripartite alliance (not simply the unions) fights for their re-instatement.

Indirect casualties were more disturbing. Approximately 30 people lost their lives on the two days of the general strike. This, sadly, does

not represent an increase in the number of deaths which could have been expected on any other two 'normal' days. Some have blamed these deaths on the mass action itself, implying that the victims were people opposed to the strike. However, the dead included many ANC supporters, such as those massacred in Northern Natal, allegedly by KwaZulu policemen.

The intimidation factor

Some have argued that the success of the action was due to widespread intimidation and the non-availability of transport. In the nature of things, this allegation is hard to deny. Many people may well have felt scared to go to work, even without being directly threatened and despite the calls for peaceful action. Others may have reported intimidation to their