

# National stayaway against LRA and elections

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The Labour Monitoring Group (LMG) reports on the  
September 5/6 stayaway

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**I**n a significant step towards worker unity, 500 delegates representing the two main union federations, COSATU and NACTU, as well as the independent unions, met in Johannesburg over the weekend of August 26 and 27. This - the Second Workers' Summit - called for a week of industrial action to protest against the Labour Relations Amendment Act (LRA) and the September 6 election.

The Workers Summit was called to evaluate progress in the campaign against the year-old LRA and decide on further action. Discussion was inhibited by the presence of over 200 heavily-armed police who video-taped the proceedings and maintained a strong presence inside the hall

throughout the summit. This degree of police intimidation is unprecedented in national union meetings. However, in spite of this provocative action, the delegates were able to conduct their business.

It was reported at the summit that over 300 000 workers had balloted in favour of industrial action against the LRA. The summit formulated a programme of sustained peaceful protest against the Act. The delegates also noted that the September elections represented continuing repression and that community organisations are prone to taking "political action" in response to repression. In the following week consultation took place between unions and community organisations.



**Elijah Barayi,**  
**COSATU president**  
*Photo Ziemiński/Afrapix*

This resulted in COSATU calling for two days of "peaceful political action" on the 5th and the 6th of September. NACTU called for a stayaway on the 6th (election day) and also on the 12th of September (Biko day). As a result of conflicting calls for industrial action (and the form the action was to take) there was some confusion as to when the stayaways were to take place.

The stayaways were conceived by the Workers' Summit as part of a wider programme of action against the LRA. The actions are to include demonstrations, a month-long consumer boycott after the elections, sit-ins and overtime bans. This stayaway is the second called to express opposition to the amended LRA, the first took place on 5, 6, and 7th June 1988.

The Labour Monitoring Group (LMG) conducted a nation-wide tele-



**NACTU president**  
**James Mndaweni**  
*Photo: Ziemiński/Afrapix*

phonic survey to monitor the extent of the stayaways.

The sample was drawn from the Industrial Register of the Bureau for Market Research at UNISA. Our sample consisted of 25% of all firms with over 100 employees. The survey covered all sectors of the SA economy, including small towns. It is important to remember that we surveyed management, one of the protagonists in the stayaway, who, as much as the unions, have a vested interest ... the outcome of the survey.

## Survey results

### Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal (PWV) - (manufacturing and commerce)

In the PWV the survey revealed that 39% of black workers observed the Tuesday day of action by staying



away from work. On Wednesday 72% of black workers in the PWV area stayed away from work. The higher response on the second day is the result of a number of factors:

- Wednesday 6 September was election day and therefore the political aspect of the stayaway was clearer;
- there was no confusion about there being a stayaway on election day, unlike on the Tuesday;
- members of NACTU unions also participated in the Wednesday stayaway.

The survey showed that Indian workers, unlike African workers, did not observe the stayaway in significant numbers. Coloured workers' support for the stayaway was more higher than that of Indian workers, but remained well below that of African workers.

On Tuesday, larger and better organised companies experienced high stayaways while smaller and unorganised companies generally experienced low or negligible stayaways. However, on Wednesday, the stayaway spread to the smaller and less organised companies (particularly in so far as African workers were concerned).

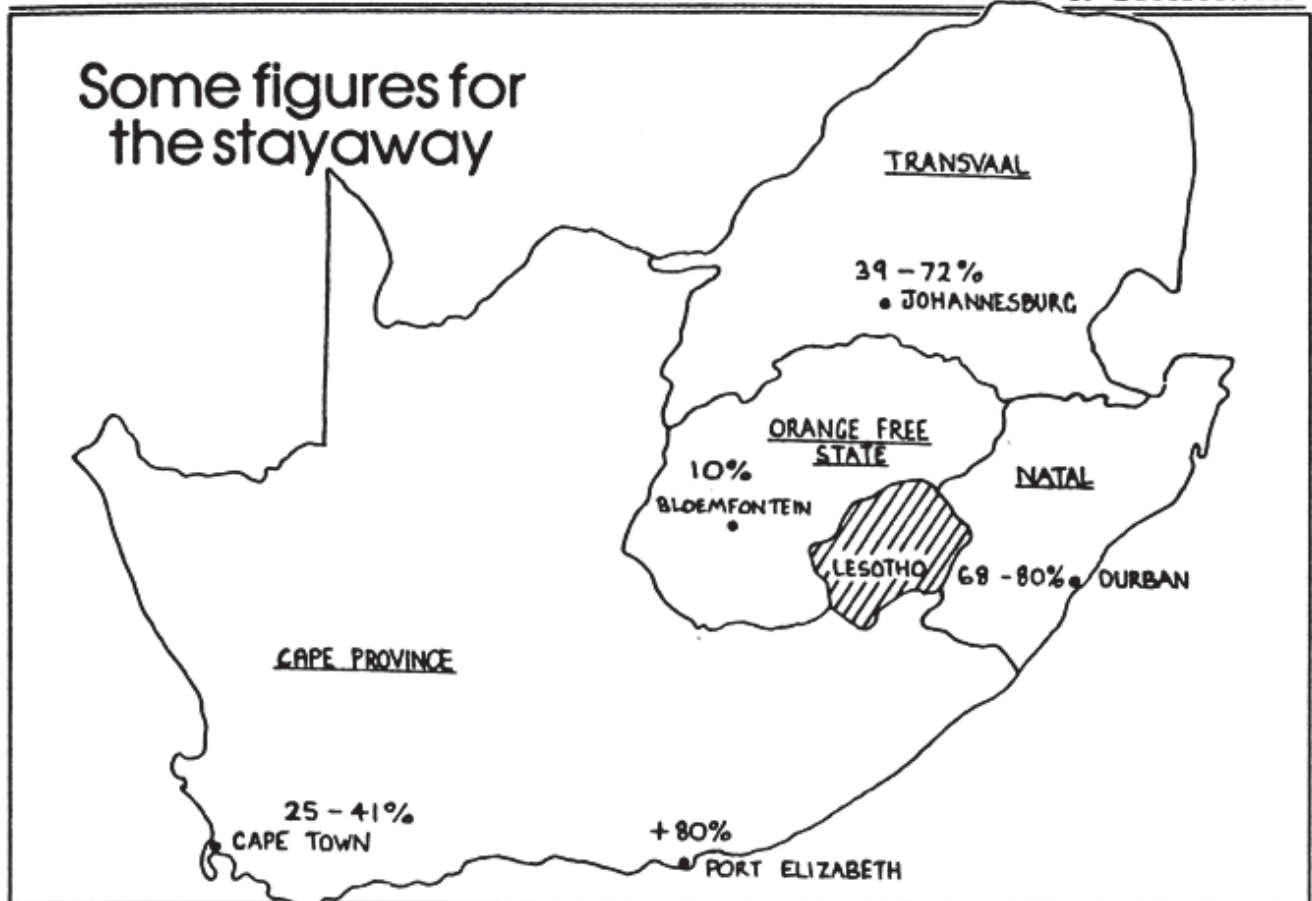
Furthermore on Wednesday, public transport was not readily available because Putco was not operating and SATS reported very low utilisation of train services. There were few taxis available on Tuesday or Wednesday. Some companies reported that workers came to work where private transport arrangements had been made in advance.

### **Other urban and rural areas**

Negligible stayaways also occurred in commerce and industry in the outlying areas in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (these include Pietersburg, Lichtenburg, Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom, Welkom, Bethlehem, and Harrismith). Although there was no widespread stayaway in Rustenburg a few companies were severely affected and in the Eastern Transvaal 19% of workers stayed away. On Wednesday, a 12% stayaway was reported in the Transvaal country districts while towns in the OFS experienced a stayaway of less than 10%.

### **Mines**

There are indications that a slightly higher proportion of miners responded to the stayaway than was the case in June 1988. We were unable to carry out our usual survey on the mines because of a lack of co-operation from mine managers. We were therefore forced to rely on the figures given by NUM and the Chamber of Mines. NUM's survey of their branch offices showed that 57 000 members at more than 28 mines stayed away on Tuesday and 100 000 members on Wednesday. The Chamber of Mines claimed a stayaway on the mines of approximately 6% (that is, about 30 000 workers) on both days. Collieries experienced a greater stayaway than gold mines. Chrome mineworkers also responded to the call and on some mines 70% stayed away. On



some diamond mines a small proportion of workers stayed away.

## Management responses

Management seems to have adopted a general policy of no-work/no pay/no penalty. A small percentage of employers indicated that they will be taking a harder line on absent workers with a few threatening to issue written warnings or to fire absent workers. This seems to have happened in some cases. NUMSA reported that disciplinary action had been taken against about 300 workers in several small metal firms in Kempton Park for participating in the stayaway (*Business Day* 8.9.89). Anglo American served workers and the NUM with a court interdict to compel workers to resume work at

President Brand, President Steyn and Kriel gold mines.

## Western Cape

Not less than 25% of workers stayed away in Cape Town on 5th September. In addition, SATS reported that their passenger rates were down by 40%. There was a significant increase in numbers on the 6th when 41% of black workers observed the stayaway and a number of firms closed down for the day.

Though the response in Cape Town is lower than in other urban areas, it was considerably higher than the stayaway in June 1988. The workforce comprises a considerable number of coloured workers who have tended to be less supportive of stayaways than coloured workers in



the Eastern Cape.

### Eastern Cape

In keeping with past experience the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area seems to have the highest stayaway. The area seems to have experienced a stayaway of more than 80% on both Tuesday and Wednesday. In Uitenhage there was a strong African and coloured participation and in Port Elizabeth there was a strong African participation but coloured participation was patchy.

### Durban

This area reported a 68% stayaway on Tuesday and a 80% stayaway on Wednesday in the greater Durban district. Again this percentage was the result of a survey of 25% of companies employing 100 or more people.

What is unusual about this figure is that it is substantially higher than that of the Transvaal. Interestingly a significant number of Indian workers stayed away on both days. Wednesday (election day) observation of the stayaway rose to 80 percent.

### General comments

1) Sectors nationwide most affected by the stayaway:

**Chemical**

**Textile and clothing**

**Metal, motor and engineering**

**Food and beverage (to a lesser extent)**

The regions most affected by the stayaway were the main metropolitan areas of Durban, Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging, and the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area.

2) Some unions negotiated agreements with employers to accommodate the stayaway. Responses by management included: day-long closures; agreements to make up lost time; granting of unpaid leave.

3) Surprisingly some employers seemed unaware that a stayaway had been called. However, most employers saw it as a form of protest action against the general election rather than the LRA. Some employers expressed resentment at being targeted for policies for which they did not feel responsible.

### Implications:

During 1985 and 1986, stayaways took place frequently - 21 in 1985 and 33 in 1986. Most of these stayaways were regional or local rather than national. However, since 1987 they have been less frequent - only 7 in 1987 and 6 in 1988. But more importantly, most of these stayaways were nationwide.

The September stayaway conforms to the trend since 1987, ie. stayaways are happening less frequently but involve a much larger number of workers nationwide. Significantly, the stayaway seems now to be seen as part of a wider programme of sustained protest rather than as a one-off demonstration of collective power.

Unlike most previous stayaways,

the aim of this action was not primarily demonstrative, but was also designed to facilitate changes to the Labour Relations Amendment Act. Clearly the success of the stayaway will strengthen labour's hand in negotiations with Saccola over the Labour Relations Amendment Act. ☆

## A closer look at the Eastern Cape

by *INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS UNIT (IRU), UPE*

**M**ost Uitenhage factories ground to a halt on 5 and 6 September 1989 when 89% of workers stayed away from work in protest against the LRAA and African exclusion from parliamentary elections.

In Port Elizabeth, 86% of African workers did not report for work on Tuesday or Wednesday. Coloured support was patchy: 27% on 5 September and 28% on 6 September.

These were some of the findings of a telephonic survey of 49 companies (38 in Port Elizabeth and 11 in Uitenhage) employing 33 915 workers, conducted by the IRU. Figures from the 38 companies which could provide an African/coloured breakdown of absenteeism yielded the following table:

	% Stayaway on 5 September	% Stayaway on 6 September
<b>Port Elizabeth</b>		
Africans	86%	86%
<b>Port Elizabeth</b>		
coloureds	27%	28%
<b>Uitenhage</b>		
Africans	97%	97%
<b>Uitenhage</b>		
coloureds	81%	82%

When these statistics are combined with those supplied by employers who do not record African and coloured absenteeism rates separately, the following picture emerges:

	% Stayaway on 5 September	% Stayaway on 6 September
<b>Port Elizabeth</b>		
Africans and coloureds	62%	63%
<b>Uitenhage</b>		
Africans and coloureds	89%	89%

The findings reinforce a pattern evident in previous stayaway surveys conducted by the Unit: an African stayaway in excess of 80%, strong coloured support in Uitenhage, and relatively weak coloured participation in Port Elizabeth.

### Toy-toying against the LRA

Three of the companies in the sample recorded normal absenteeism levels on 5 and 6 September. Two of these currently employ mainly casual workers as a result of industrial action, while the third, which is Port Elizabeth-based, employs only a handful of Africans.



Fifteen (31%) of the organisations in the sample experienced worker protests, either on September 1, anniversary of the promulgation of amendments to the LRA, or on September 4, eve of the stayaway. Most protests took the form of demonstrations, in which workers sang, toyi-toyed and carried placards denouncing the Act, occasionally marching on company premises. Most protests involved losses of production time from 30 mins to 6½ hours. Two sit-ins and one go-slow were also reported.

Management at one factory closed the plant when work was not resumed after a lunch-time demonstration march followed by a meeting. Workers at two other Uitenhage companies were persuaded to leave the premises early instead of staging protests.

A Port Elizabeth manufacturer reported that workers who did not participate in a half-hour protest stoppage were assaulted. Management has instituted disciplinary proceedings. According to respondents, there were no other incidents of violence associated with the protests or the stayaway.

Employer spokesmen were also asked whether they had any evidence of intimidation related to the stayaway; 10 (22%) said they did. They alleged that "workers had been intimidated by fellow workers, sometimes shop stewards, or by unidentified township elements."

Of the companies which experienced protests, 63% said they had received advance notice of such action from workers or the union con-

cerned, while 80% of companies affected by the stayaway had received prior confirmation that workers would absent themselves. 85% of firms canvassed adopted a policy of no work - no pay - no discipline. Penalties imposed by the other 15% are outlined below. Workers who did not report for work at a Uitenhage company will all receive first written warnings, regardless of their absence records.

### **Bonuses affected**

Three Port Elizabeth companies will adjust or withhold attendance bonuses. One of these urged workers to apply for leave in advance to escape this penalty, and most of those who stayed away did. Another of these three companies links its financial assistance with an employee housing scheme to attendance, so workers face penalties on this score as well.

An additional four companies intend disciplining workers who were absent without leave. Penalties will depend on each individual's absence record. A spokesman for one of these companies said each of the more than 300 workers absent on the two days would be interviewed. The nature of any penalty would depend on the circumstances of each absence. The company would be lenient with African employees who stayed away because they feared intimidation or violence, he said, but coloured workers who lived in areas which did not experience a significant stay-at-home might be disciplined.

Respondents were asked what they



understood to be reasons for the stay-away, and 91% cited the elections, the LRAA or both. Several said they believed the protest was targetted primarily at disrupting the elections and giving expression to rejection of the tricameral parliament. They added that their perception was that the stayaway was pegged on repudiation of the LRAA to lend it legitimacy, given restrictions on political activity imposed on COSATU last year.

### Additional notes

- One of the companies in the sample laid off nearly 90% of its workforce on the eve of the stayaway because of a "downturn in the market". It expected to take these workers on again within about 10 days.
- A Uitenhage employer reported a "white backlash - 10 of our hourly-paid whites stayed away on the 6 September."
- A PE company, notified of the stayaway at lunchtime on September

ber 4, closed its plant immediately.

### 12 September 1989: anniversary of Biko's death

The eleventh hour decision by regional executive members of COSATU not to commemorate Biko Day with protest action resulted in normal attendance levels at Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage companies on 12 September 1989.

In a telephonic survey of 52 companies employing 36 193 workers, only one reported an abnormal absenteeism rate - between 10 and 15% higher than average. Employer spokesmen said workers were reluctant to sacrifice another day's pay so soon after the stayaway of 5 and 6 September, and added that there was a growing realisation that employers were approaching a tolerance threshold with regard to stayaways. According to the local press, the decision to call off any planned protest action was also prompted by differences within the union movement. ☆

### Aftermath of the stayaway

It seems only 300 workers were fired nationally because of the stayaway. However, bosses used other methods of 'disciplining' their employees:

#### □ The issuing of warnings

In many industries, final warnings were issued to workers, sometimes in writing. It seems that the majority of workers warned were from NUMSA. Others were from TGWU, NUM, FAWU, SAMWU, CWIU

and CAWU.

#### □ Suspensions of lock-outs

In a number of companies, workers were suspended and told to come back the following Monday. Many Barlow companies seem to have locked their workers out until the Monday.

COSATU's response to these measures was to say that the protest was not by individuals but by the whole community; not by one organisation, but by groupings throughout the country.