

“Struggle as usual” in the new South Africa?



SALB Writer ZOLILE

MTSHELWANE reports on the strike wave that rolled around the country in the wake of the elections.

Contrary to some analysts' expectations, strike action has not slowed down immediately after the elections. Over the month of May, there has been a wave of strike action across different sectors of the economy.

□ The auto sector has had its fair share of strikes:

About 6 000 Volkswagen workers in Uitenhage went on strike in the third week of May. The workers were protesting against racist practices by line management and the bosses' delay in processing grievances related to these practices. About 40 workers occupied the manager's office during the strike, and they are facing disciplinary action resulting from the occupation. The workers returned to work after negotiations with the union. There is, however,

dissatisfaction about pending disciplinary action against the 40 workers.

Nearly 3 500 Delta Motor Corporation workers went on strike in support of demands to withdraw from the company's medical aid scheme. The strike was suspended pending further negotiations.

The entire workforce of 6 500 at Toyota went on strike in protest against management's refusal to pay workers agreed production bonuses after, workers alleged, they had met their production schedules. Negotiations are continuing.

About 140 workers who were fired by Mercedes Benz in 1990 occupied the factory for four days. These 140 workers are part of the 500 who were dismissed by the company. The company was reportedly in the process of hiring new workers, rather than re-engaging those who were fired. The occupation was ended when

management called in the police who evicted the sit-in workers. Management has reportedly offered to make available R1 million to help the dismissed workers find other jobs. Meanwhile, 70 of the 140 workers appeared in the East London District court on June 15 on charges of trespassing.

□ The mining industry has also suffered a series of strikes:

About 14 000 miners at Goldfields' West Driefontein downed tools over racist remarks by a white worker against black workers. The five-day strike ended when management suspended the white worker concerned and agreed to start investigations on the issue.

Nearly 10 000 Kloof workers went on strike on May 5 over the dismissal of the mine branch chairperson. The strike lasted ten days. The NUM and management agreed to refer the matter to the Industrial Court.

6 000 Northam miners also downed tools for 11 days in support of a demand for the recognition of their union. The strike ended when management undertook to address all the workers grievances and started processing stop orders for the union.

1 700 workers at O'kiep mine in Namaqualand embarked on strike action demanding to become members of the provident fund. Workers were also demanding that management reverses its

decision to pay the wage increase as a bonus. The strike was settled after management conceded the workers right to join the provident fund and also reversed its decision to pay the wage increase as a bonus.

Lonrho's Eastern Platinum mines was hit by a seven day strike on June 1 over the dismissal of four shopstewards. The 3 500 workers returned to work after the union and management agreed to refer the dismissals to arbitration.

White mineworkers at JCI's Randfontein Estates gold mine went on strike in support of retaining racist practices in the usage of lifts taking workers underground. The strike ended when management agreed to start negotiations with the white Mynwerkersunie on the issue.



3000 journalists demand pay increases

Ninety percent of the

workforce of 1 400 at Richards Bay Minerals went on a five-day strike at the end of May. The workers were protesting against disciplinary hearings instituted against six workers who were accused by management of sabotage and neglect of duty. Management has suspended the hearings against the six pending a full investigation.

Pret Klerk mine in Nigel also suffered a strike as workers were demanding the recognition of the NUM and higher wages. Management fired all the approximately 700 workers after a day of strike. The union won a reinstatement of all the workers. The issues that sparked the strike will be addressed in negotiations with the bosses.

4 500 workers at JCI's Western Areas mine went on strike on May 8 in the wake of violent clashes amongst workers. Mine management attributed the clashes to tensions between two ethnic groupings in the mine. Eight workers have been killed since the fighting that started on April 17 when one worker was found dead. The NUM and management have negotiated a code of conduct that will regulate relations amongst workers. Peace monitoring structures have also been set up to enforce the code of conduct.

■ About 3 000 journalists at Argus

Newspapers voted in favour of strike action to back their demands for higher salary increases. MWASA is demanding a 15 percent increase, the SAUJ wants 13 percent, while management is offering eight percent backdated to April 1, or nine percent backdated to May 13. The two unions decided to take the dispute to mediation, saying that that did not rule out their right to strike should this process fail to satisfactorily resolve the impasse.

■ About 15 000 clothing workers around Durban and Tongaat embarked on a four-day strike in support of their demand to be paid for April 27, 28 and May 10

(i.e. the Elections and Inauguration days). All the employers agreed to pay the workers for April 27 and 28 immediately. However, May 10 will not be paid immediately, but an agreement was reached that this will also be paid not later than December.

□ Strikes erupted in the Commercial sector also:

SACCAWU members in 37

Shoprite/Checkers stores in the Eastern Cape and the PWV went on strike in protest against the dismissal of three shopstewards. Approximately 4 000 workers were involved. The dismissals have been referred to arbitration.

A wave of strikes hit Pick and Pay stores in the Transvaal. Workers were protesting against management's inconsistency in applying the disciplinary code of conduct. Over 1 500 workers were involved in these actions. Management has agreed to investigate the workers complaints and will inform the union of its findings.

Nearly 3 000 Joshua Doore group workers staged sleep-ins countrywide in protest against the imminent retrenchment of 750 workers. Another 2 000 workers marched to the group's head office in Johannesburg on June 11. The workers gave management an ultimatum to respond to their demand within two weeks.

Spar workers marched in Johannesburg in protest against the dismissal of 50 workers for staying away on May 10. A memorandum was handed in and workers are awaiting management's response.

□ And in Transport:

About 200 workers at one department of the Transkei Road Transport Corporation went on strike on June 2 in protest against corrupt managers within the department, whom the workers demanded be suspended. A company cheque of R700 000 was reportedly intercepted whilst in the process of being deposited in a personal account held in Cape Town.



Public sector workers struggle before April 27th: set to continue?

140 workers (reportedly TGWU members) at Jowell Transport in Port Elizabeth went out on strike demanding the reinstatement of two colleagues. Management agreed to reinstate the two, but fired the entire workforce who had embarked on strike action.

Unitrans faces industrial action after workers voted in favour of a strike to support the demand for centralised bargaining.

□ Public sector

The public sector also experienced strike action:

Nearly 500 civil servants in Mmabatho went on strike demanding pay parity with their South African counterparts. The workers were employed under the now-defunct Bophuthatswana homeland. Mmabatho is now part of the North-West province. The provincial government

encouraged the workers to appoint a committee with which to start talks on their grievances.

About 350 Telkom workers in Brakpan staged a one-day sit-in demanding subsidised transport. The workers agreed with management to start negotiations on the issue.

Nearly 350 Evaton council workers in the Vaal Triangle went on a two-week strike over the administrator's failure to implement last year's wage agreement. The administrator agreed to implement the agreement with immediate effect.

120 Embalenhle town council workers near Secunda went on a two-day strike over wage increases. Negotiations are continuing after the workers returned to work.

Bethal town council was hit by a three-day strike over wages. Approximately 350 workers were involved. Negotiations were

resumed after the workers returned to work.

About 96 Emjindini town council workers near Barberton went on a four-day strike over wage increases. Workers returned to work after management agreed to resume negotiations.

About 500 traffic officers in Brackenfell in Cape Town embarked on a three-day stoppage in demand of better working conditions. The officers are members of NEHAWU. A committee of five people each side was appointed to look into the officers' grievances.

■ Building industry

The building and construction industry had its fair share of strikes as well:

Nearly 400 CAWU members in LTA in the Southern Cape went on a four-day strike in May. The workers were demanding better pay and a provident fund.

Nearly 1000 workers in the brick and cement manufacturing industries in the Peninsula embarked on intermittent strikes in demand of better working conditions.

■ The food sector also experienced some strikes:

About 20 FAWU head office staff members went on a three-day strike from June 1 to June 4. The officials were protesting against salary deductions made for arriving late at work on a Saturday. The office-bearers of the union reportedly deducted a full day's salary from all those who arrived late. The issue has been referred to the NEC for a decision.

Approximately 120 Golden Lay workers at Roodepoort embarked on a one-day strike against management's decision to reduce delivery crew members from two per truck to one. The strike ended after an agreement with the union to negotiate the issue in terms of laid down procedures.

About 700 workers at Langeberg Foods in Boksburg downed tools over the retrenchment of 97 women workers. The strike started on June 7 and ended on June

9 after management and FAWU agreed to refer the retrenchments to arbitration.

TW Becketts in Wadeville was hit by a one-day strike in June 15 over the dismissal of two workers. The 120 -strong workforce agreed to return to work after their union and the company agreed to discuss the issue at a meeting scheduled for June 23.

Comment

These strikes are a pointer that tensions at the workplace are not going to be wished away because there is a new government in place. In fact, workers are demanding that the changes that are happening on the political sphere must extend to the workplace. Workers are no longer prepared to suffer silently in the face of lower and middle management's racist prejudices. Jeremy Daphne of SACCAWU commented that since the election workers' attitudes are hardening against management. Daphne said: "Workers are now more likely to oppose perceived racism and unequal treatment in the workplace."

Commenting on the wave of strikes in the auto industry, NUMSA's Gavin Hartford said: "Line management is not equipped to deal with workers' grievances." Hartford added: "For line managers, there is no such thing as a new industrial relations climate. For them it's business as usual. And for workers it's the struggle as usual."

If one notes that a number of the above-listed strikes are occasioned – still, in 1994! - by management refusal to grant trade union recognition, then it is not only line management that it is at fault, but their seniors as well. ☆

"Changes in the political sphere must extend to the workplace"
