

Truckers' strike

Truck loaded with old baggage

The mention of a truckers' strike invariably conjures up images of huge blockades in the streets of major European cities or closer to home, the high profile Turning Wheel strike of the mid '90s. The February strike by thousands of truck drivers made headlines when strikers demonstrated at their workplaces – the streets – causing disruptions. The **Labour Bulletin** reports on an IRasa workshop, which sought to assess the impact of the strike and lessons learnt.

The strike, which started on 26 February and lasted close to two weeks, arose predominantly over a demand for higher wages. Truck drivers who participated in the strike are covered by the road freight bargaining council. Negotiations between the Road Freight Employers Association and five to six unions party to the council started in September 2004. After four months of negotiations, the parties were no closer to a settlement. By February, unions such as the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) had begun to plan for a strike. By the time the strike started the union was demanding a 10% increase (a driver earns in the region of R437 a week).

CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

The road freight bargaining council has been a national council for a few years now. Employer negotiator Nico Badenhorst says that by 2000 a common pay structure existed and the majority of conditions had been standardised. However, another source said that was not correct and in fact there are two categories of workers in the council with different benefits

and privileges. Overall employment conditions appear to be in line with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act except for areas such as hours of work. Workers in the industry work excessively long hours and can work up to 90 hours a week. Whilst workers have to cope with working long hours and the impact on family life and health and safety, there is also concern that a reduction in hours could impact on income earned through overtime. This is according to Elmarie Fourie of the University of Witwatersrand who argued that employees work excessively long hours in order to increase their income.

EVENTS LEADING TO STRIKE

Satawu's first deputy president and chief negotiator June Dube said the union had originally tabled 22 demands, but knew from the beginning of negotiations that it was not going to achieve its objectives and that the negotiations would turn into a big fight. The union was demanding an 18% increase. Badenhorst said the employers could not contemplate such an increase after having agreed to increases ranging between 12%

and 14% for 2003/4. Employers had agreed to grant such increases in order to raise the minimum wage to more comparable levels and avert a strike. By January 2005 the parties had still not resolved the negotiations, but neither had they attempted to seek outside assistance. By this time strike talk was in the air. Dube said wages were absolutely central to workers' demands as drivers have very little else. 'They have very little rest time, while their jobs are high risk not only in relation to HIV/AIDS but also as a result of road accidents.'

Dube said the strike emerged against a backdrop of rising tension in various workplaces around transformation and employment equity. The negotiations clearly reflect the state of the industry. The employer negotiating team remains all white and male. Badenhorst said in response that transformation was not only about employment equity and black economic empowerment, but to whom parties address problematic areas in an attempt to ensure the future viability of the industry. Dube added that there were a number of other unresolved outstanding issues, which have been on the backburner for some time, such as existing night shift arrangements. Badenhorst said after having negotiated for five months with no agreement in sight, attitudes were hardened. He argued that the parties had to review their bargaining strategies, as positional bargaining would not have the desired results.

On the eve of the strike, a number of unions who organise 3 000 drivers in cash-in-transit reached an agreement with some employers on a 7% increase. One of the unions representing these workers indicated that this was done in consultation with the other unions and was not intended to undermine the strike. Badenhorst said cash-in-transit was considered a separate sector and therefore, the settlement did not influence the final outcome.



THE STRIKE

Violence erupted almost from the first day of the strike. Employers claimed that the turnout on the first day was not high. A unionist said that workers were not sure that the strike was actually going to take place. There were claims and counterclaims by both parties as to who was responsible for the violence. There was also some concern expressed by Satawu in relation to the actions by the police who were monitoring the strike.

Within days of the start of the strike the parties were back in negotiations with the assistance of the CCMA. It has been acknowledged that without their assistance the strike could have been more protracted. Badenhorst said that during this process the parties discussed settlement figures, which had been floated about in January. The parties finally signed an agreement on 8 March.

Andile Sizani, a representative from the Passenger Transport Workers Union said 'we have not actually won'. This means, he said, that there are going to be problems on the side of the unions 'if we continue losing and this will impact on our members who will lose trust in us'. In the aftermath of the strike, he asked, 'what do we have to do to gain the trust of our members?' He outlined what he believed were some of the problems around the strike:

- There was no unity between the unions in the build-up to the strike.
- On the day the strike notice was served, the unions were already on a demand of 10%, which did not leave much room to negotiate during the strike in order to unlock the deadlock.
- Employers were given 14 days notice of intention to strike instead of the legal requirement of 48 hours, which gave employers a lot of time to prepare.
- Before the strike some unions settled on 7%, which might have influenced the final outcome.

The final settlement was 7,5% on minimums

and a 2,5% allowance and on actual rates the increase was 7% and a 3% allowance.

LESSONS FROM THE STRIKE

Dube said during an internal union assessment of the strike, the view was that 'we have won the battle but not the war'. The union, Dube said, had agreed that there is a need to explore the following areas:

- Ensure proper planning for strikes and proper strike management. For example, why give employers a longer notice period of the intended strike?
- Address the conduct of the police.
- Go back to basics and ensure union structures are in place and working.
- Review the collective bargaining process and get the union as a whole to develop a common approach across the sectors around bargaining.

It is clear that this strike poses some serious challenges for the unions. There is no guarantee that the unions can achieve unity between themselves and retain a common position. However, when divisions arise within a union, which is driving the strike, then it is problematic. The following are the kinds of issues that unions need to consider when entering wage negotiations and/or a strike:

- Are union negotiators properly prepared for negotiations? Are negotiators receiving training and perhaps a refresher course on negotiating skills? Rhetoric alone cannot drive negotiations. Negotiators need to have a clear strategy and proper justification for demands.
- Is the negotiating team consistent? Is it constantly changing as well as the main negotiator? This can create problems and could cause tension within the union.
- Is the union supportive of the negotiator's

position and how he/she is handling the negotiations?

- Is the union negotiating team properly briefing strikers on the negotiation's process so that they understand that positions are changing all the time? In the middle of a strike, promising workers 10% when the parties are already on 7% is problematic and merely heightens tension and compromises the union when a settlement is signed.
- Once unions have signed agreements, they need to ensure they take ownership of it and ensure its implementation. Accusing management of non-implementation does not help if the union is a cosignatory to the agreement.
- What about the future viability of the council and union representation – this needs to be addressed.

What about on the side of management? It is clear that unity amongst the employers was problematic with the different types of

operations covered by the main agreement. The unions did indicate that during the strike some employers broke ranks and attempted to reach side deals. What appears to be more problematic than that is the attitudes on the side of the employer negotiating team, which is rather reminiscent of the 1980s. There



appeared to be elements of racism and paternalism, which does not bode well for any form of transformation in the sector. That paternalism and old '80s style of industrial relations will quickly disappear if employers are faced with a strong union on the other side of the table.

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