

Numsa disputes

The union most affected by the disputes is NUMSA, who were involved in more than 25 strikes involving more than 5 000 workers.

**Abedare Cables:** 850 workers at the company started striking on January 15 after deadlock between management and workers over wage negotiations. The company offered workers a 17c an hour increase in addition to the 56c an hour increase negotiated at a national level. Workers however demanded a 75c an hour increase across the board.

The striking workers were locked out. Mediation failed to resolve the issue and the company issued an ultimatum to workers to return on Monday, 5 March. Workers were dismissed after ignoring the ultimatum.

**Welfit Oddy:** The company dismissed about 500 workers in January after a two week strike. Workers were demanding that the company reimburse them the bonus deducted from workers after last year's two day stay-away (5 and 6 September).

According to a NUMSA spokesperson, the company at first agreed to pay the bonus, but later reversed their decision and dismissed workers who went on strike. The dismissed workers have been meeting regularly and police have taken action against them.

Mediation failed to produce any results. Both parties have since agreed to refer the dismissals to independent arbitration.

**Fry's Metal:** Two years ago the management of this company withdrew a policy whereby they had entered into in-house negotiations for a wage increase above that which was negotiated at the industrial council. Neither workers nor NUMSA were informed of their decision.

After getting nowhere in their attempts to have this decision reversed, workers embarked on a strike. Thirty seven workers were dismissed at the beginning of March and negotiations to have them reinstated are presently under way, but union officials say they have not made progress.

**Autumn Ray:** A two week strike by some 30 workers, who wanted to be paid weekly instead of fortnightly led to their dismissal on 5 March. Workers had started their strike after negotiations failed.

**Dorbyl Busaf:** Workers decided to return to work in March after a two week strike which was called to protest against a proposed retrenchment of 57 workers.

They had also claimed that six Portuguese artisans had been recruited to fill the posts of local artisans at high wages. The company maintained that local wor-

# Eastern Cape Disputes

kers were not skilled enough to perform the duties of the six foreigners.

Workers returned to work while negotiations between NUMSA and management continued.

**Dunlopillo:** Two hundred and fifty workers at the factory went on strike after the dismissal of a shop steward at the end of February. His dismissal followed a demonstration celebrating the release of ANC leader Nelson Mandela. Management claimed that some of the workers had intimidated others to join and as a result a disciplinary hearing against some of the workers was held. This led to the dismissal of the shop steward. The workers ended the strike after a settlement was reached.

**Volkswagen:** Volkswagen Uitenhage plant closed in September due to political unrest in the area. Workers returned to work after a week. At the beginning of March management closed the plant for an afternoon after a go-slow action in one section caused a bottleneck in parts and prevented production from continuing. Management told all 8 000 workers to go home.

**Resolved strikes were:**

- Armstrong Hydraulics (400 workers)
- Formex (250 workers)
- Sentech Ind. (50 workers)
- Guestro Wheels (unknown)
- Firestone (1500 workers)
- Repcos (300 workers)
- Goodyear (unknown)
- Burhead (47 workers)

**PPWAWU strikes**

**The Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union has also been involved in a number of strikes.**

**Federated Timbers:** Workers went on a short strike over their annual leave. Management agreed in the end to the extra 5 days they had demanded.

**SAPPI Adams:** There were work stoppages by about 380 workers over the dismissal of a worker who had been fired after being involved in conflict with a security guard. Negotiations are continuing between management and the union.

**SAPPI Waste:** Twenty one workers are involved in a strike over wage demands. Production is continuing after the company hired scab labour to do the work, most of which is unskilled.

The company was granted a court order locking out the striking workers.

**SAPPI Novoboard:** A total work stoppage by 450 workers started over wage issues in February. Not all workers continued with the strike and the company applied for an interdict restraining those on strike from interfering with normal company business. Workers went back after accepting a new wage offer on 7 March.

**Timber Industries:** A legal sleep-in strike by 150 workers which started in November last year ended early this year after they accepted an ultimatum to return to work. They won their wage increase. During the strike management called in the police and strikers were ordered to leave the plant. Two workers facing intimidation charges were not re-employed.

**EH Walton:** Industrial action was taken after two workers on maternity leave were dismissed. Workers slept in for three days after which they were locked out. The company's offer to pay-off workers was refused and the dispute was referred to the industrial court.

All PPWAWU workers out on strike have been dismissed.

**CWIU strikes**

**Two industrial disputes have involved the Chemical Industrial Workers Union.**

**Chemserve Colloids:** Forty workers at the company started striking on 23 January over unfair dismissals. Before the Christmas shut-down, workers had asked management to pay them early as they wanted to do their shopping, banking and other necessary things. Management refused and workers then decided not to continue working. Management told them that if they did not return to work, they would receive their pay and disciplinary action would be taken against them.

After the hearing three workers were given final written warnings while three were dismissed as they already had final warnings. Workers questioned the way in which the hearings had been conducted and went on strike after negotiations failed to resolve the matter. After a six week strike, management offered to withdraw the dismissals, and reverse the final written warnings.

**Pilkington Shatterprufe:** During the second week of February 1 800 workers went on a two day strike at the company over the issue of a new system of time keeping, which workers said monitored their every movement. Negotiations had failed to resolve the issue, but after workers embarked on the strike management abandoned the new system and workers returned to work. ☆



# Unions, employers and the MDM

There has been an increase in industrial conflict in the Port Elizabeth - Uitenhage region. Management has responded harshly on the shopfloor, while cultivating warmer relationships with the MDM. This has raised difficult questions of alliances in this period of negotiations. ASHWIN DESAI and PETER AUF DER HEYDE report.

While the spirit of political negotiations prevails throughout the country, employers in the Eastern Cape seem unwilling to extend this spirit to the factory floor and into the negotiation room. The new political climate however has made workers in the region more militant, and many disputes and strikes have broken out.

A list of disputes appears on the facing page.

## Management responses

Shop stewards and union officials interviewed were unanimous in their perception that employers were particularly hostile and uncompromising in their reactions to strikes. NUMSA's Gavin Hartford pointed to Fry's Metal as an example of this trend. Historically the company had always agreed to in-plant bargaining. However, this undeclared policy was reversed a short while ago,

without informing the workers or the union, thus "precipitating a strike". He felt that as the region's largest union, whose membership has a high political consciousness, NUMSA has become a particular target for employers.

CWIU shop steward, Phil Goduka, echoed Hartford's perception of employer intransigence. Goduka was involved in a six-week strike at Chemserve Colloids. He claimed that throughout the negotiations management was uncompromising. It was only after they realised that workers were determined to stay out that they agreed to meet worker demands.

Employers in the paper and printing sector have also been exceptionally harsh in their response to worker demands. PPWAWU has had to confront the closed shop established by SATU through the industrial council (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No. 5, for historical details). A



NUMSA's Gavin Hartford (top) and CWIU's Phil Goduka - employers are 'particularly hostile and uncompromising'

Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix



PPWAWU organiser felt that the bosses were determined to utilise the full arsenal of repressive tactics including court interdicts, victimisation of union members and lock-outs to ensure that PPWAWU does not gain a majority in the factories.

### Dismissals

Dismissals have been a popular option. At Aberdare Cables and Welfit Oddy, 600 and 550 workers respectively were dismissed. Many of the workers at Aberdare Cables had been employed by the company for over 20 years. Two other companies, Fry's Metal and Autumn Ray, dismissed 37 and 30 workers. At EH Walton, PPWAWU were in the process of organising the factory and had recruited 51 out of the 120 workforce. All 51 were dismissed.

### Dividing the workforce

A particular feature of the strikes has been for employers to bypass the union and get the workers to sign individual agreements with workers. At Aberdare Cables for example, individual workers were enticed to sign an agreement entitled "Management's Final Wage Offer". By signing workers would in the words of the agreement have to "refrain from partaking in any industrial action pertaining to wages and basic conditions" until the next round of national bargaining.

At Volkswagen's Uitenhage plant, management closed the plant shortly before lunch on 8 March, after a go-

slow action in one section of the plant caused an end to supplies in other sections and normal production could no longer continue. This could result in friction between different sections as all workers were sent home even though only one small section had embarked on action.

### Outside consultants

Management has turned increasingly to the services of industrial relations consultants. Particularly popular with employers in Port Elizabeth is Strategic Business Management (SBM), which incidentally also doubles as the Belgian Consulate in Port Elizabeth.

In a press release last year, NUMSA indicated that it was "alarmed at the growing number of self-styled industrial relations consultants plying their limited skills in the industrial relations market... these consultants are strongly anti-union" (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No.5). Unionists interviewed were unanimous that their experiences con-

firmed NUMSA's perceptions. They argued that it was not in the consultants' material interests to resolve a dispute quickly, as the longer it continued the more lucrative it would be for them.

### The racial factory

Management on numerous occasions threatened striking workers that they would be replaced with coloured workers. At SAPPI Waste the company replaced dismissed workers with only coloured workers.

### The police

Initially police seemed to keep a low profile. However where strikes seemed set to continue for a prolonged period and where workers were meeting regularly, police have intervened. This intervention has taken the form of arriving at meetings and arresting workers on charges ranging from allegations of intimidation to assault. Thirty four workers from Welfit Oddy and four workers from Aberdare have so far been ar-



Welfit Oddy workers who were all arrested after striking

Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix



rested. A striking feature has been the high bail set - many workers have been forced to pay R1 500. In some cases police have also approached individual arrested workers and told them they would be released if they signed an agreement to return to work.

### The law

Edwin Maepe, NUMSA's Eastern Cape Legal Officer, argued that employers responded to both legal and illegal strikes in similar ways. Legal strikes did not protect workers from being dismissed and employers, like Aberdare Cables, have been quick to use this option. Employers have also vigorously opposed sit-in strikes. Court interdicts have immediately been applied to institute lock-outs.

Union officials felt that the LRA, rather than creating the mechanisms for the peaceful and speedy resolution of disputes, made the situation more volatile and prolonged disputes.

### Management, unions and the MDM

A number of employers who adopted the hard line approach to the strikers are ironically known for their liberal political stance.

The Managing Director of Welfit Oddy, Mr. Bill Oddy, is a past president of the Midland Chamber of Industry (MCI). This body has a policy of no work, no pay, no penalty. The strike at Welfit Oddy however started when man-

agement penalised workers by subtracting two days from their annual bonus because they participated in the national anti-LRA stayaway on 5 and 6 of September last year!

### Management says COSATU out of step

Ian Miller, Human Resources Manager at Aberdare Cables, which dismissed some 650 workers after a strike, participates in the Consultative Business Movement (CBM). He has personal contacts with local MDM leadership and is at pains to express his anti-apartheid sentiments.

Miller did not see a contradiction between his public position and his hard line approach within the factory. The unbanning of political organisations and FW de Klerk's glasnost had created the conditions for free and open political activity. According to him the "political people" will sort out issues and workers and management can now get on with production and securing profits, without political struggles jeopardising this.

Miller also felt that COSATU was deliberately attempting to sabotage any rapport between business and the MDM and any moves towards a political settlement by embarking on "unnecessary strikes". The reason for this, according to Miller, is that SWAPO had ignored NUNW in the drawing up of the new constitution in Namibia. According to him

COSATU felt it would be "similarly betrayed".

In Uitenhage the bosses played an important role in the peace settlement between the UDF/COSATU and PAM. The constructive role played by employers was heralded in the local press. However, the employers felt that a just reward for their efforts was a conflict-free workplace. In a letter to NUMSA official Gloria Barry on 23 February, Goodyear expressed concern about frequent work stoppages.

Workers at the factory had walked off their jobs the day before. Earlier management had turned down a request by NUMSA shopstewards to hold a mass meeting between all shifts. The meeting was to give a report back on the MCI initiated talks between UDF/COSATU and PAM to end the violence in Kwano-buhle.

### Peace in community, peace on shopfloor?

The letter reminded NUMSA "that while the Uitenhage industry and community is attempting to facilitate a lasting peace settlement and thereby to minimise losses in earning and the threat to the survival of industry in Uitenhage, your members under the leadership of the shopstewards, are deliberately using the NUMSA union to further their aims."

On the same day, the MCI wrote to John Gomomo, Regional Chairperson of NUMSA, reminding him that the "Uitenhage branch of the



Chamber has been deeply involved in the process to stop the feuding in Kwanobuhle and to bring about a peace settlement that will be in the best interests of the community and the industrialists of Uitenhage."

The letter criticised the work-stoppages at Goodyear because it was "undermining the credibility and good understanding that has been built up by the Uitenhage branch industrialists and COSATU/UDF .. the action at Tycon Goodyear is totally unacceptable and is contrary to the spirit in which all the negotiations were conducted."

MCI appealed to Gomomo to "discuss the situation with Tycon Goodyear shop stewards to see how this type of incident can be prevented from re-occurring."

The common theme running through both letters is that because employers brought peace to Uitenhage townships thus saving black lives, the unions were obliged to bring 'peace' to the shop-floor, thus saving profits. For the employers the peace settlement was not limited to the feud between COSATU/UDF and PAM, but also involved a truce between capital and labour. For the employers the "interests of the community and the industrialists of Uitenhage" are similar - peace and profits.

The strategy pursued by

employers in the Eastern Cape appears to be to use the media's extensive reporting of the growing rapport between progressive political organisations and business at national level, to demand that unions deliver stability and harmony on the shop-floor as a contribution to this development. For the employers, workers who continue to wage struggles on the shop floor are out of step with the politics of the MDM.

### Unions and the UDF

Historically there have been tensions between the unions and political/community organisations in Port Elizabeth (see D. Pillay, 'Unions and Community in Conflict', *WIP* No. 35). The MDM has intervened in the recent wave of strikes. In some cases this has been initiated by management, who seem to have contacts within the MDM, at other times the call for MDM involvement has come from workers themselves.

In the case of the SAPPI Novoboard strike, the union approached the MDM and a joint delegation met the management. At Aberdare Cables some workers by-passed union structures and approached the UDF to intervene.\*

What appears to be happening is that UDF intervention is ad-hoc and COSATU and UDF do not

have a co-ordinated strategy in approaching the strikes .

The danger of ad-hoc UDF interventions and of negotiating with management without union involvement is that it could create the space for management to undermine the base of unions. Management already feels that their relationship with the UDF is much warmer than with the unions, and they feel much more comfortable negotiating with UDF leaders. It is incumbent upon the UDF that in their effort to build a closer relationship with business, they do not fall prey to widening the division between union and political organisations. The priority is not relations with business, but to hammer out a democratic, honest and accountable relationship with COSATU that is grounded in unified mass action.

However, a new organisational form has emerged to facilitate a united and co-ordinated response to bosses. A joint strike committee has been formed to build solidarity with dismissed strikers. Importantly, the committee provides for UDF involvement in proposed negotiations with MCI, both COSATU and UDF regional office bearers will be included in the delegation.

Both unions and the UDF are acutely aware of the need for a united front approach. UDF Eastern Cape Publicity

\* UDF and MDM has been used inter-changeably. Whilst the MDM was supposed to encompass COSATU, its leading figures were overwhelmingly from the UDF. The Eastern Cape UDF was 'resurrected' at the end of February.



Secretary, Mkhuseleli Jack, explains that when UDF and COSATU combine: "There is always, from the look of things, some sort of fear, or respect from the bosses because they fear the power of the two. If it is the UDF alone, or COSATU alone, the bosses have the tendency of applying delaying tactics or trying to use divisive methods."

Both NUMSA and CWIU officials expressed similar sentiments.

### Plan of Action

The joint strike committee, consisting of workers from Aberdare Cables, Welfit Oddy, SAPPI Waste and EH Walton has drawn up a programme of action designed to build solidarity with dismissed strikers.

The committee planned a joint general meeting of stri-

kers to draw up demands which they were to hand to the MCI after a march. Workers demands are that negotiations be re-opened where they have broken down, that dismissed workers be reinstated, and that all disputes be settled by 20 March. They also decided to hold a formal meeting with the MCI at which employers will be asked to put pressure on affected companies to resolve the disputes.

A solidarity rally organised by COSATU and the UDF is to be held on March 21, at which a report back from the meeting with the MCI is to be given. At this rally workers will be able to plan further action if no settlement has been secured.

In accordance with the principle of unity in action, the joint strike committee agreed to recommend to a

general meeting of strikers that a procedure be set up whereby any settlements between companies and affiliates during the course of the campaign will need to be approved by a joint general meeting of all strikers.

### The march

More than 10 000 dismissed workers participated in a march on 12 March, which was organised by the Joint Strike Committee.

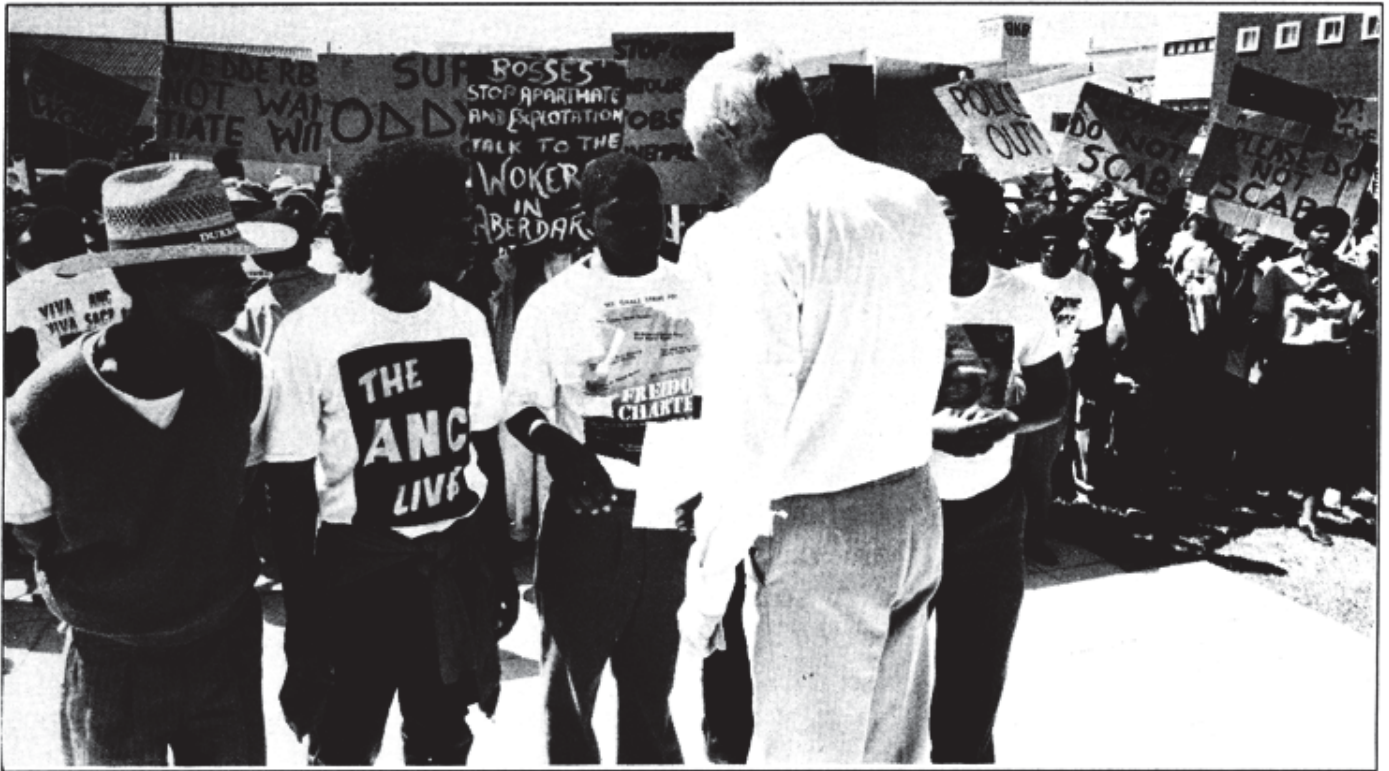
Strikers met at the Co-operative Centre amidst a very strong police presence. The police were equipped with two van loads of barbed wire and four caspirs. Undaunted by the police presence, the strikers marched on to the headquarters of employers, the Midland Chamber of Industries. Shop stewards presented a memo-



*Volkswagen workers gather after their plant was closed*

*Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix*





*After a march through the city, worker representatives hand a list of demands to a member of the Midlands Chamber of Industries*

*Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix*

randum to MCI representatives. This is the first stage of a plan to build unity amongst strikers and also with community based organisations.

The march indicates a growing trend for police to assume a greater interventionist role in trying to intimidate striking workers. Unions fear that the present strategic offensive by the police may precipitate violent confrontation.

Earlier on the same day VW in Uitenhage re-opened its doors and workers assumed full production.

### Conclusions

It would seem that the new political climate prevailing in this country has had an effect on the working class. On the one hand, employers have, to a large extent, joined the general trend towards an openness and

an accepting of previously unacceptable ideas and organisations. Recent industrial action taken by workers in the Eastern Cape, however, shows that this ends as soon as it leaves the overtly political sphere. Once profits are threatened, management reverts to the old way of thinking.

On the other hand, the current climate has meant that workers have become more militant in their dealing with employers. Whereas they would have previously accepted certain issues, they are now willing to go on strike to push their demands through. It is not surprising that the majority of strikes were over worker rights. As a result of the new climate, the space between the political activities of workers and their economic activities has become even more blurred than it was previously, and it is hardy

worthwhile to differentiate between the two. Management however has not moved along similar lines.

It has become imperative that a working alliance is built between community-based mass organisations and worker organisations, to defend the advantages gained on the political field and carry them through onto the factory floor. At times this might mean that community based organisations need to side with workers, even at the risk of upsetting broader alliances with management and capitalist organisations such as the Chamber of Industries and Chamber of Commerce.

**Stop press:** The joint strike committee has initiated a joint UDF - COSATU forum. This will meet every two weeks to co-ordinate strategy. The MDM is thus taking concrete form. ☆