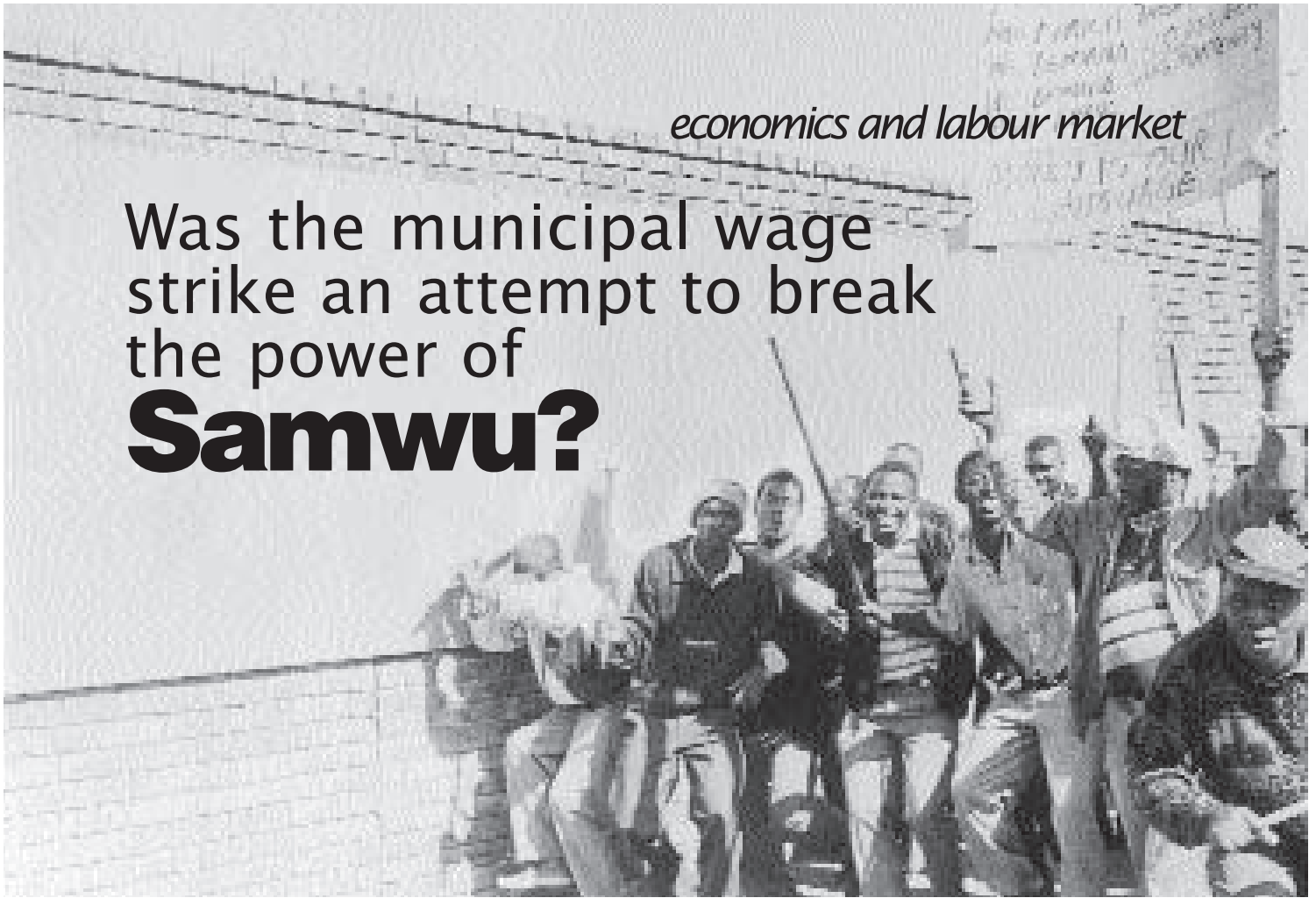


Was the municipal wage strike an attempt to break the power of **Samwu?**



*The **Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF)** explains the significance of the recent municipal strike and how, for many workers, it was a strike against government and its policies*

For the APF and many workers, the recent municipal strike was against the ANC government and its policies that favour capitalists. The South African Local Government Authority (Salga) represents and negotiates on behalf of municipal employers – the majority employer being the ANC. Anyone watching the strike unfold might have asked, ‘why doesn’t Salga pay what the workers want and end the strike?’ The reality is that the ANC in government wanted to break the South African Municipal Workers’ Union (Samwu) resistance. Breaking the strike would have

weakened the union’s ability to resist the ANC programme of restructuring and privatising local government.

Samwu has consistently fought privatisation and slowed government’s privatisation programme. Simply giving Samwu workers 9% and avoiding the strike, as the ANC government did in the public sector, would not have weakened Samwu resistance to their programme. Significantly the leading Salga negotiator is an ex-Nehawu general secretary and Cosatu central committee member, who learnt union bashing in the iGoli 2002 struggle against privatisation.

What role did top ANC ministers play during the strike?

The APF believes the role played by top ANC ministers supports our view that the strike presented government with an opportunity to weaken the union:

- *The Minister of Provincial and Local Government* said he would try and get Salga to the negotiating table following Samwu’s request for this. Remember, Salga consistently put off negotiations, hoping that workers would go back to work and that the strike would break. Are we serious that this top minister sat on the biggest strike in municipal



history but did not know what his lieutenants planned, or that he was not part of the attack on Samwu?

- *The Minister of Defence* was more honest, openly threatening and calling in the army to protect scabs during the strike in Durban.
- *The Minister of Labour* publicly rebuked Salga for not negotiating, but did he support the Samwu demands?
- *The newly appointed Minister for Safety and Security* seemingly took a back seat, whilst police viciously attacked, arrested and harassed strikers, including shooting at them.
- *President Thabo Mbeki* was embarrassed during the strike because the streets of Durban were dirty during the African Union launch. He openly accused Samwu leaders and workers of betraying their movement. His contempt for the workers' struggle and protection of bosses and their governments makes his kind the real betrayers.

As for the councillors ...

We never heard a single public voice of dissent. Instead, we only heard threats against the trashing of the streets. For us this was a legitimate weapon, clearly showing the daily dirt and rot that workers silently clean away every day. Undoubtedly councillors feared losing their jackets if they spoke out, as then Councillor Trevor Ngwane did, when the ANC suspended him for publicly criticising the iGoli 2002 privatisation plan of Johannesburg. Yes, we heard some changed their tune during the strike, but we never heard them publicly.

Strikes are wars, which draw a line between workers and the bosses. Politicians that sit silently on fences are not supporters of the workers' struggle.

The role played by the APF

The APF decided before the strike began that it was crucial that it was supported. We did this for three related reasons:

- Samwu has supported the APF and is a friend in the workers' struggle.
- We saw the strike was against the same ANC local government that cuts the electricity and water of millions, evicts and forcibly removes communities (for example Thembalihle and Mandelaville), privatises our services and fails to account and take our mandates.
- The APF supports working class struggles wherever it can and builds unity with unions and workers.

The APF embarked on various initiatives to support the strike in a number of areas including Alexander, Katilehong, Vosloorus. They ranged from mobilising members around the strike and discouraging scabbing; distributing pamphlets supporting the strike; picketing at depots; participating in Samwu marches and incorporating the strike into APF programmes:

- when marching against evictions and for a flat service rate to the Emfuleni Council;
- when marching in Alexandra against the housing department for demands to upgrade flats; and
- in Thembalihle during the struggles against forced removals.

The APF also sent a letter to the mayor of Ekurhuleni demanding a meeting to explain why he interdicted essential service workers to break the strike. Our attitude to court interdicts against essential service workers is that workers have a choice, and they can use their mass strength and unity to ignore the interdicts. Further strength to do this could have come if Cosatu was prepared to build federation-wide action against dismissals. Six out of ten Samwu workers do not have the right to strike because they are deemed to be essential

service workers. It is impossible to build a powerful municipal strike without reclaiming the right to strike through mass power. This is capitalist law. It affects the working class in communities through cut-offs, but stops the producers of these services from striking.

Conclusion

The three-week municipal strike was far more than just about wages. It was brought on by the organised attempts of Salga and the ANC in government to consciously weaken Samwu, rather than a narrow cost-cutting exercise. Salga unilaterally signed a wage agreement with the minority municipal union, Imatu, as an attempt to take away Samwu's right to bargain. It developed a consistent attack of court interdicts aimed at taking away workers' right to strike. There was a vicious and bloody police attack on strikers resulting in severe injuries, imprisonment and the situation where the army was brought in to 'protect' the scabs. The very organisation that workers have placed their hope in for a better life, the ANC in government has shown itself as the major obstacle to a living wage, and a government of privatisation, retrenchments and cut-offs. Its plans to achieve a shift in the balance of organisational and political power, away from Samwu. Fortunately, they were not able to achieve this due to the united mass action of Samwu workers. Samwu workers go back to work with some casualties, but their organisation and unity is broadly intact. They have built their own confidence for the battles ahead, but have also contributed to strengthening the working class everywhere in their battles against capital and the governments that represent it.

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