

Young blood runs hot as workers lose patience

The recent wave of strikes have revealed some important challenges for the labour movement. The **Labour Bulletin** attempts to explore some of these, which if not dealt with, could have severe ramifications for union leaders and how they engage with their members.

Promoting 'good news' stories about the economy, increased company profits, executive pay packages, the number of new millionaires created in SA coupled with their lavish lifestyles, has finally come home to roost. Workers - whether in the informal or formal economy have finally realised they are not the winners in the good news stories and are beginning to show their frustration - as are those in communities around the country who challenge poor service delivery. As one union official says: 'Workers are saying it is now time for us to have a piece of the pie'.

Workers across a range of sectors - not only the high profile mining, municipal, retail and airlines - have shown they are ready to strike, sparking off claims that the action is reminiscent of the militancy of the 80s. While it might be useful to conjure up images of a

vibrant, energetic and emerging labour movement, there are some subtle differences to the action of the 80s. One of the differences has been the extent to which 'traditional' white collar unions have begun to use the strike weapon to forward their demands. In the 1980s the sight of white workers participating in (and even) leading strikes was not a common occurrence.

A number of unions indicated that the militancy has emerged from younger (newer) union members and shop stewards who had, in some cases, embarked on strike action for the first time. Newer shop stewards tend to be more militant and less willing to compromise in order to settle strikes. This was evident in the case of the SAA strike (see p58) and in some regions on the mines such as the Free State, where a return to work was resisted. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) found that opposition was experienced in those regions where relative new shop stewards were in place. Aside from that there are marked differences between the SAA and miners' strike and for that matter the numerous other strikes, which have taken place over the last two months.

The mineworkers' strike - a first in 18 years - reflected the unions' maturity in strategically utilising the strike weapon to squeeze what it could out of the employers. The strike also revealed the way in which it was managed to prevent high levels of violence (as opposed to the violence and conflict which arose during the 1987 strike) while the union ensured constant report backs to members on the negotiation process. This was a main area of weakness in a number of the recent strikes where insufficient report backs were given to union members while the strikes were not properly managed. One union official said, insufficient groundwork was done with members and in some cases the public. A SA Municipal and Allied Workers Union (Samwu) official said that one of the weaknesses of the municipal strike was that

the union did not reach out sufficiently to communities before the strike. He said it was important for the union to build proper alliances with communities on an ongoing basis around the crisis in local government and how it affects the working class.

STRIKE LESSONS

The recent strike wave raises a number of questions around the state of unions. Do the strikes reveal union strengths or weaknesses? What victories were achieved when in the main, marginal improvements were made by employers to end strikes - for example, at Pick 'n Pay and SAA?

Another union official said: 'After long periods of organisational weaknesses, strikes tend to expose internal problems'. In the case of the municipal strike, the union's ability to exercise power on the ground was limited in a number of ways. The first was that the majority of its members are classified as working in essential services and are therefore, prohibited from striking. This problem was compounded by the fact that perhaps insufficient mobilisation occurred in some depots.

Municipal workers also face the problem of where they can picket whilst on strike. The streets are effectively their workplace. There is then of course the issue of trashing the streets, which the SA Communist Party has argued detracts from the real issues behind the strikes, and reduces the union's ability to maintain the moral high ground. One of the reasons workers trash the streets, a union official argues, is because their work is done by scab labour during the night.

Aside from these issues the strikes have revealed the following:

- Strikes in any part of government and/or parastatals require that unions have to take on the state and the parameters set by government, for example, in terms of inflation targeting and setting of a 6% limit. This strategy does not however,



appear to apply to the highest echelons. Hence, the only way that unions such as Samwu can 'win' strikes in local government is by winning the political battle. Ultimately, the union argues, SA Local Government Association (Salga) is not the real decision maker (as reflected in their 6% wage offer). Therefore, strategies need to be developed to influence national government. Part of that entails the building of a campaign and strengthening union organisation.

- Contestation and violence which erupted between strikers and police during a number of strikes raises concern around the role of the courts and police as well as the effectiveness or otherwise of picketing and strike rules. Did Cosatu question the role of the courts during the recent strikes in the same way it has done in the Zuma case?
- On the other hand, Samwu needs to ensure that renegade members such as those involved in the killing and beatings in Pretoria are dealt with.
- The need to educate and ensure proper induction courses for newly recruited union members. This issue was raised during discussion at the Cosatu CC. 'New members join the union with a different understanding of unions and trade union culture ... We need to look at what training and education we give new members ...'
- The need to ensure proper report back to striking workers and ensure the positions are correctly reflected.
- Are unions ensuring that wage bargaining is used more strategically to push a range of demands around transformation?
- An increasing number of so-called white-collar unions are beginning to show their muscle. Are the traditional blue-collar unions factoring this into their strategising around strikes?

18

Strikes, police brutality and the media

In recent weeks major strikes have hit the retail, airline and municipal sectors. **Martin Jansen** explores the media's coverage of the strikes which tended to focus on the 'hooligans' and 'unruly workers' rather than exploring the demands and reason for the strikes.

No attempts were made by journalists to acknowledge or accept that strikes are by their very nature disruptive to the production process, or in the case of the municipal strike - services supplied to the public. In the case of municipal workers, the streets are their point of 'production'. Refusing to work or trashing streets with litter strengthens a national strike. This is a most logical course of action for striking municipal workers who want to maximise the disruptive impact of their strikes. The media's disproportionate concerns about trashing the cities are hardly matched by their concern about the lethal toxic waste that gets dumped daily into our atmosphere, rivers and land by the captains of industry.

None of the established media had a condemning word to say about the police brutality meted out on striking and protesting municipal workers at the Johannesburg Civic Centre. Workers were attacked by police and fired upon with teargas canisters and rubber bullets without prior warning to disperse. Hundreds of striking municipal workers were arrested in Vryburg, Rustenburg and Vereeniging. So workers and their trade unions were faced with the formidable foes of the brute force of police and the brutish hostile public messages of the media.

The directors and CEOs reward themselves handsomely with millions of rands every year and simply pull their noses up and sneer at inflation figures, as their increases are often triple that in terms of their overall packages. The huge gap between directors' income and that of



workers is a major problem and reflective of the apartheid capitalist legacy of extreme inequality. According to the Labour Research Service's Bargaining Indicators, the ratio of the average executive's salary in relation to workers has gone up from 111 in 2003 to 150 in 2004. This means that executive directors of JSE listed companies earn 150 times more than ordinary workers with an average annual remuneration of R3.7-million. Executive directors' received an average increase of 38% or R1.1-million during 2004. This extreme inequality and the related grinding poverty that we've become used to is far more harmful to the majority of the South African 'public' than the undignified littering by striking municipal workers, the disruption of shopping in middle class suburbs and the delays in air-travel.

Is it perhaps possible that our journalists and the established media will view matters in this light and report more favourably towards labour and the working class generally?

18

This is an edited version of an article by Jansen, the director of Workers' World Media Productions.