

Our Union is interested in the lives of the workers. We want our workers to live like decent human beings, not like animals. We know that if the workers will be given higher wages, better housing, recreation facilities and hospitals, drunkenness will diminish. From our experience with workers in the Cape Western Province we know that as a result of the higher wages our workers have become sober and we therefore do not agree to the proposals made by the employers. Give the workers higher wages and give us a chance to discuss matters with the workers and we will soon convince them that drink is no way out of their present difficulties. We will help them to see the finer things in life. We will educate them. What responsibility can employers expect of workers when they pay them 3d. per hour, when the bosses do not care what happens to their workers? You use them when you need them and then you chuck them away like dirt. In today's 'Cape Times' there is an appeal for the distressed of Namaqualand. You realise that a large number of the distressed are your workers who helped you make large profits? You employers are not included in the distressed. It is high time that those who possess and rule should stop talking fine phrases and give the workers what they are entitled to."

And so the argument continued during the whole year. The Union had been pressing for a Wage Board investigation into the fish canning industry. Finally when the Minister of Labour ordered a Wage Board investigation the employers agreed to an increase in piece-work rates to be effective from January 2nd, 1944.

The Wage Board investigation represented another victory in the Union's long battle for more adequate wages for food workers. It was the first Wage Board investigation into the fish canning industry and Madeley had appointed Ray a member of the Board to represent the workers.

The Wage Board Recommendations were made a Wage Determination with effect from February 19th, 1945. The fish workers' wages were fixed considerably higher by this Determination.

Mr. Lee's forecast had been wrong. The West Coast workers had been successfully organised and now that they were Union members and their wages had been increased there were already signs of an improvement among them.

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Life does not consist only of large events. A Union has its strikes, its big clashes of interests between the bosses and their workers, its crises and crucial points, times when every effort is made, every nerve strained towards some vital objective. These are the highlights of the struggle, the moments of drama upon which depends the future.

But that is not all. The daily work of such an organisation is with smaller things: collecting subscriptions, recruiting new members, committee meetings, shop-stewards' meetings, general members' meetings—and complaints, dozens and dozens of individual grievances.

Into the office of the Union in Cape Town, letters come in ceaselessly. Letters from employers, from the Labour Department, from local authorities, acknowledging the Union's letters, politely phrased, regretting this and putting off that, admitting one point, disputing another, agreeing to a request; always in the polished phraseology of the educated, so different from the workers' letters.

Factory workers are not great letter writers. They have not had the education. They write in English very often, which is not their language. Their letters are full of phrases which they only half understand, mis-spelt words, badly formed writing. But they are often direct, to the point.

The sawmill workers at Groot Drakenstein had heard of the Food and Canning Workers' Union. They also wanted to be organised. One of them sat down with a pen and some ink and a sheet of pad-paper and wrote to Ray Alexander:

"I beg to ask this the people which are outside the canning factory where are they belongs . . . I ask with respect how can we come under the union . . . We did go in Paarl to go learn about union and they say we must wait and we did wait and we are still waiting that why I ask advice . . . "

From the branches, on the light green letterheads of the Union, come details of the complaints and grievances in the factories.

"We are having lots of difficulties at present", says the secretary of one branch. "Here's a man who is the actual Jam Boiler, but the boss doesn't want to recognise him as the Jam Boiler, the first week they put on his envelope 'stirrer' and they paid him £1 11s. 8d. weekly . . . "

It is a long letter: people not getting their correct wages, workers being put off for no reason, promises of increments

for particular sections in the factory not implemented, and much more.

From another branch it is cloakrooms, overalls, caps, clogs, having to produce time cards when the workers go to the lavatory, girls having to pick up heavy boxes, no first aid equipment.

All petty, nonsensical grievances in the eyes of the factory managements, but important to the workers, and important for them to know that every complaint receives the attention of their organisation.

And the Union committee for its part goes ahead to build workers in the factories as Union leaders. Upon its shop-stewards depends the Union's strength in a factory. Ray writes many circulars to the shop stewards telling them how to work, what to do:

"As shop-steward you are the elected Union representative of the workers in your factory or department. As such you must always be in close touch with the workers and if they have any complaints they must let you know. . . . It is your duty as shop-steward to collect the subscriptions from the members in your factory or department. . . . When you receive money from members . . . you must give . . . a 3d. or 6d. stamp in return for the money and initial the member's card. . . . Every shop-steward must know the agreement for the Food and Canning Industry and must be able to reply to questions asked by the members . . . "

Many get tired of this voluntary work. For some the temptation is too great and they keep some of the money. On these the Union is hard. They must return the funds and be expelled from the organisation. If big amounts are involved they are prosecuted in the courts. For nothing destroys confidence in a Trade Union as much as the knowledge that the 3d. or 6d. per week the members pay is going into someone's private pocket.

But the best of the shop-stewards stick to their job. And by their daily experience of Union work they learn. They are branch committee members. They become elected central committee members where they discuss and help formulate the policy of the whole organisation. The best of them rise to the leadership in their powerful organisation that numbers a membership of thousands and their efforts are directed towards the Union's goal: a better and happier life for the workers.

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