

## The P.E. Motor Strike

For most of July and August over 10 000 motor workers in Port Elizabeth have been either on strike or locked out of their factories. Thousands of workers trying to return to work had the gates locked on them, riot police have been called and over 500 workers at Ford were retrenched. The events are too many to count. Here we will try to highlight only a few of the most important and comment on some of these

The motor industry in PE has seen intense struggles between workers and management over the past few years, but this strike has raised crucial questions about worker organisation and management strategies in the Eastern Cape.

On July 15 more than 10 000 workers at Ford, General Motors and Volkswagen downed tools after wage talks at the Industrial Council (IC) between the union and the employers had reached deadlock. The workers are all members of the FOSATU affiliated National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU).

### NAAWU and the Industrial Council

Naawu is one of the few independent unions that sits on an IC. While the union is aware that other independent unions prefer negotiating outside the IC system, they say this IC is different from most others. Naawu is one of two unions sitting on the IC. The other union is a white union representing mainly skilled workers. The three motor companies - Ford, VW and GM - are the employer parties to the IC.

Naawu represents the majority of the workforce in the three factories. This means their power on the IC is not diluted as it would be if they were one union out of 13 sitting on an IC - as is the case with the IC for the Iron and Steel Industry.

After each IC meeting, which shop-stewards attend, there is a mass report-back meeting. The union is well organised on the shop-floor and says it negotiates from a position of organised strength.

### The Strike Begins

At the start of the wage talks with the employers, Naawu workers were demanding R3,50 an hour. They are presently

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earning R2 an hour in terms of the IC Agreement negotiated two years ago. However, employers said they were not prepared to offer more than R2,15 an hour - a 7,5% increase.

After hearing of the deadlock in the negotiating chambers, workers became angry and, without the union calling for it, went on strike.

After two days the workers decided at a mass meeting to return to work because their strength would be better felt by management inside the factory, than outside.

During the strike, they had also modified their wage demand to R2,50 an hour starting wage with regular increases to keep up with the cost of living.

Workers at mass meetings said they needed a 'decent living wage'. Many said they were fighting to raise the standard of living for themselves and their children who would one day go to work in the motor factories.

Many workers said that if they won their battle for a decent living wage it would pave the way for other workers in their struggles for higher wages.

However, the employers held out at their original offer of R2,15 an hour - an increase which Naawu's mother body, FOSATU, condemned as not even keeping up with the increase in the cost of living.

#### Employers Lock the Workers Out

When the workers decided to return to work after a two day stoppage they found the gates locked. Those workers not on strike - the white workers and the workers belonging to the Motor Assembly Component Workers Union (MACWUSA) - were issued with pink slips to distinguish them from the Naawu workers. Although no-one was able to work because the plants were at a standstill, workers who were not part of Naawu were allowed into the factories to clock in on some days.

On Thursday 22 July VW opened for production, while GM workers went back on Monday 26 July. At Ford, however, only the two Struandale plants were opened, while the Neave and Truck plants remained shut. Most of the workers at Struandale belonged to MACWUSA and they kept the factories running for two days.

Macwusa has not supported the strike by Naawu workers, mainly because Naawu sits on an IC. Macwusa leaders believe rejection of ICs is a 'non-negotiable' principle and consider it a waste of time to talk to the 10 000 Naawu workers until they too reject ICs on principle.

Other reasons they gave were Naawu's reluctance to support Macwusa strikes in the past year and the fact that N workers only observed a 5 minute stoppage to mourn Neil Aggett's death, instead of the called-for half an hour.

#### Industrial Council Negotiations Resume

Meanwhile, in the IC, the deadlock over wages continued until the end of that week (July 23) when an official dispute was declared.

When a dispute has been declared in the IC, settlement can take months. Often the dispute is referred to arbitration. This means an outside body - usually a government body - make a decision, which has to be obeyed by the workers and the employers.

But workers in the factories were unhappy about this. So far, the workers had accepted the union conducting negotiations through the IC because they had been able to play an important part in the negotiations. However, at this stage, it seemed the union would get tied down in long-winded bureaucratic dealings that would exclude the majority of the workers from participating. The workers were also unhappy about letting a government -appointed arbitrator resolve the dispute with the employers. The workers and Naawu stated their position firmly: that collective bargaining was a matter for employers and workers; it was not a matter for a 'neutral' third party. They were not prepared to accept arbitration.

#### The Workers Hit Back

Workers at all the factories decided on a 'go-slow' until management agreed to in-plant negotiations. In response to the 'go-slow', management at VW closed down their plant again on August 5 putting 6 000 workers back on the streets. The Ford Truck plant closed down and so did the Assembly plant Section at General Motors. GM and VW re-opened their plants a few days later.

At the IC meeting scheduled for August 5 Naawu announced it was withdrawing from wage negotiations on the IC. Union spokesmen said the employers were stalling on the workers and the drawn-out dispute procedure would be used to bureaucratise negotiations and weaken the workers' position.

After Ford had fired six workers, including a shop-steward for allegedly fighting with other workers who continued working when some had wanted to walk out, most of the workers at the Neave Assembly plant downed tools in

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sympathy with the sacked workers. Naawu denies strongly that their members were involved in any 'brawls' and considers it a fabrication by Ford management to enable them to victimise the workers.

On August 10 Ford management said they were closing down all four plants for ten days.

Three days later on Friday 13, when workers went to collect their wages, Ford retrenched 507 hourly paid workers. About 330 were from the Neave plant. Riot police were present at the Neave plant for most of the day.

Although the motor companies claim to have lost about R42 million in the 1st month because of the closures and strikes, and the workers have lost about R2 million in unpaid wages, the motor companies, especially Ford have closed down their plants on the slightest pretext rather than negotiate with the workers. Many people in PE are in fact saying that the closing down of the Ford plants has not hurt the company very much. In fact, it is even thought that the strike suited Ford, coming at the time it did, because it gave them an excuse to lay off workers and close down their plants without having to negotiate with them first.

And although morale among the workers has been generally high, they realise the difficulties of having gone on strike at a time when economic recession is setting in and retrenchments are the order of the day.

But it is also clear that the strength and unity of 10 000 workers cannot be ignored. VW and GM have shown signs of wanting to negotiate with the workers and have even said they are willing to conduct in-plant negotiations. But they are tied down by Ford. Because VW and GM sit on the IC with Ford it is difficult for them to make decisions independently of Ford.

Most recently the motor companies have proposed to the unions that they will negotiate with them outside the IC - but they have specified that they want to negotiate jointly. Naawu has not accepted this as it demands individual negotiations at each factory.

#### Naawu's Problems

For all its previous confidence in the IC for the Motor Industry in the Eastern Cape, Naawu found itself trapped in some of the pitfalls that affect all ICs. Once a dispute was declared, the way in which further negotiations could be taken out of the workers' hands was obvious to both the workers

and the union.

Naawu is also suspicious that this hard-line attempt on the part of employers to 'hold-out' is part of a co-ordinated plan on the part of all motor employers in South Africa to crush Naawu. The union has said that in companies like BMW or Datsun in Pretoria, where the union is weak, workers have been offered substantial pay increases, sometimes of more than 100 percent. This, they think, is to prevent the growth of workers organisation. But in companies where Naawu is strong the employers have refused to reconsider their offer of R2,1 an hour.

Another major problem for the workers, particularly in Ford has been the disunity among them.

Macwusa's refusal to support the strike is rooted in the history of the relationship between Naawu and Macwusa (See Social Review 11, 1980). Macwusa grew in the Ford Cortina plant in Struandale out of dissatisfaction with the Fosatu unions Numarwosa and the UAW (as Naawu was called then).

One of the reasons why Ford has taken a much tougher line than the other two companies might be because workers are most divided in Ford. There are few Macwusa members in either GM or VW, but a large number in the two Ford plants located in Struandale.

When employers saw they could keep the Cortina plant running with Macwusa members, even though the other plants were closed, they might have thought they could afford to take a much tougher line to break the Naawu workers.

The sacking of 507 Ford workers may have helped bring the workers together. Macwusa decided that they would work with Naawu in trying to get those workers reinstated. Immediately 400 Macwusa members at Ford struck work in solidarity with the sacked workers. Up till now the divisions between Naawu and Macwusa have hampered the development of worker unity in Port Elizabeth and it is hoped that Macwusa's new initiative is an encouraging development.

The results of the strike are as yet undecided, three months after it began. However it ends it will be seen as a major event in the workers struggle in South Africa especially because of the way it tested the IC system and the system failed to accommodate the demands of the workers.

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