

SATS STRIKE

# Is a Showdown inevitable?

Softening its "unyielding" stance in the six-week-old rail strike, Sats said after the Easter break that it was prepared to talk to "representatives of the striking workers."

In effect, this meant agreeing to meet the 17-man "negotiating team" elected from the ranks of the SA Railway and Harbour Workers Union (Sarwhu), which Sats has steadfastly refused to deal with.

Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) general secretary Jay Naidoo said Sarwhu, a Cosatu affiliate, had taken up the Sats offer and had duly sent in the team. The two sides were meeting as the *FM* went to press on Tuesday.

Although the union went in with an "open mind" hopeful of some kind of resolution, says Naidoo, it wants "a commitment from Sats in writing that they are prepared to enter into *bona fide* negotiations on our recognition demands. Without this commitment, there can be no Solution." Sats attempts to attach preconditions, or any dismissals, he adds, could lead to an escalation of the strike.

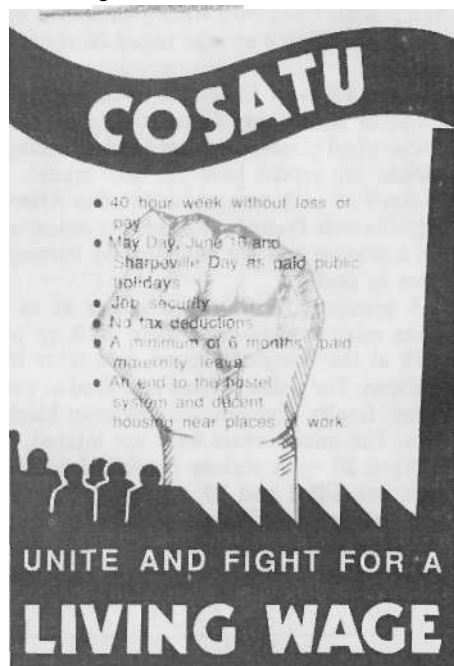
However Sats' position appears to be that it was using the meeting merely to warn strikers of the consequences of not returning to work on Wednesday.

Sarwhu has repeatedly stated its willingness to meet Sats. This is hardly surprising since the union is seeking full recognition. Herein lies the core of the dispute, which grew out of the dismissal on March 12 of a Single worker, Andrew Nedzamba, over an alleged "cash irregularity" of R40,40 that had occurred 13 months previously.

Round one in what has become the biggest strike in the public

on the Rand — a point that a Blatu spokesman appeared to confirm in a television interview last Thursday.)

However, Grove seemed to present the strikers with an Ultimatum. He warned that although Sats would talk to the strikers, if by Wednesday morning (April 22) workers had nottetumed to their posts, he would have to reconsider his options in 4er-ms-of the law. According to the law, strikes at sssential



coaches. Damage costs are estimated at around R25m and the action resulted in transport chaos affecting thousands of commuters. Two weeks into the strike, Sats said striking workers had lost "in excess of R5m in earnings," a rate that suggests they've forfeited far more than R15m by now. While management conceded last week that some 19 000 workers had come out (it said 12 000 were on strike initially), the union puts the figure at 22 000 following large support from workers in Blöemfontein and other parts of the Transvaal.

Last Saturday, Sats called in the army and had troops stationed at all its depots and railway stations. Grove claimed many of the strikers were being intimidated. Intimidation by Sarwhu, he added, had also become a threat to Sats passengers, cargo and property and could no longer be tolerated. The union, Grove charged, had become part of the "revolutionary strategy" against the country:

For its part, the union has denied charges of intimidation and any knowledge of who might be involved in the torching of railway coaches. Cosatu has also said "the climate created by police aggression and Sats' paternalistic attitude is not very conducive" to resolution.

The critical issue in the dispute, says Naidoo, is the workers' right to the representatives of their choice. This, he points out, is a fundamental tenet of industrial relations practice in the private sector. The Sats dispute mirrors, he adds, the kind of struggles unions waged in the private sector in the Seventies when the in-house works and liaison committee systems

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## Sats' Grove

sector in SA seems, therefore, to have gone the union's way. This is despite comments by Sats GM Bart Grove on radio on Tuesday morning, that there was "no way" Sats would talk to two unions. (Sats recognises the in-house staff association Blatu, which Cosatu maintains does not substantially exist

## Torched trains ... hitting Sats financially

services. Like Sats are illegal, and Sats would be within their rights to fire them.

Grove's deadline appeared to extend the one given before the weekend by Transport Minister Eli Louw. His warning last Thursday was that although no action would be taken against the strikers over the weekend, things could change if they were still out on Tuesday.

The strike has resulted in injuries, attacks, apparently carried out by township militants, on 75 Sats passenger and engine

## Cosatu's Naidoo

tera-was replaced. Naidoo maintains other essential industries like Escom and Iscor negotiate with Cosatu affiliates such as the National Union of Mineworkers (Num), so why not Sats? "Sats cannot in this day and age foist staff associations on the workers," he says.