

# Durban's bread strike

HUDDLED in cardboard boxes to keep out the cold, some 800 workers at the B B Bread Bakery in Durban's Sydney Road kept up their night-long vigil to prevent the company sneaking in scabs.

Their week-long occupation of the biggest bakery in the area effectively cut off the supply of standard bread loaves to Durban.

The B B Bread workers, together with about 1 200 workers at six other bakeries, went on strike on July 22 in support of their demand for a living wage.

The bread strikers were demanding an across-the-board increase of R23. However, their employers were only prepared to offer a R11,40 weekly increase.

For the first time, the power of worker strike action was brought home to every Durban household.

The only bread available for the duration of the two-week strike was that baked by the small bakeries in the major supermarkets. And this was not enough!

Lengthy bread queues became a common sight in most supermarkets and by lunchtime most of the bread and rolls had been snapped up by shoppers.

Some traders even trucked in loaves from as far as Johannesburg and sold the standard bread at prices way above those laid down by the government.irate shoppers said they were paying as much as R1,10 for white and 90c for brown loaves.

But, in the local townships and hostels, where the strikers had managed to get support for their struggle, the standard loaves of bread were boycotted.

One unfortunate hostel dweller made the mistake of buying a rare standard loaf. Discovered by fellow workers on his way home, the loaf was taken from him and then was stamped on.

At the outset, the four unions involved in the Durban/Tongaat bakeries — the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (FOSATU), the Food and Beverage Workers Union (CUSA), the Black Allied Workers Union and the Natal Baking Industry's Employees Union — presented a united front against the employers.

At the industry's industrial council, the unions agreed to put forward joint demands and when the wage talks deadlocked they jointly decided to call a strike ballot in which 70 percent of the workers voted for strike action.



Clover Dairy's workers and the B B Bread strikers meet at the factory gates

But cracks in this unity began to appear when three of the unions signed an agreement with the employers to vacate the premises when the strike began.

Only SFAWU members, at B B Bread and at Blue Ribbon, occupied the two bakeries to prevent the employers bringing in scabs to break the strike.

It was only after the employers took Supreme Court action at the end of the first week that the workers marched out of the premises.

53-year-old, Mkhulumiseni Zulu, who has worked at B B Bread for 33 years left the bakery only once during their week-long occupation and that was to give his family some

money.

'I was terribly sick because of the cold, but I was determined to stay inside as long as I could. I was fighting for the survival of my family,' he told FOSATU Worker News.

In an interview with FOSATU Worker News, a group of B B Bread strikers told of how they had initially

used company bags to cover themselves at night but these were taken away by management and they were forced to use cardboard boxes.

'The company also closed the canteen. Management thought that they could starve us off the premises,' one striker said.

However, strikers' families brought food to the factories and workers at the nearby Clover Dairies donated crates of Amahewu.

One of the highlights of the period of occupation for the B B Bread workers was when during one lunchtime the Clover workers marched singing down Sydney Road to the bakery's gates.

Similar solidarity demonstrations were held at the Congella brewery and Dunlop (both on Sydney Road) and also at Universal Mills, Forbo Kromenie and Metal Box.

In the second week, it became obvious that the other three unions were not prepared for a lengthy strike.

Their members began to drift back to work and the union officials started to push for a settlement.

At the end of the week when mediation did not bring an improved offer from the employers, the other unions signed a return-to-work.

With the crumbling of the united strike, SFAWU members decided at a meeting on the Saturday to return to work the following day and continue the fight for a living wage from within the factory.

The decision was to accept the employers' offer as the minimum for the industry but to push for an improved increase at plant level.

However, when the strikers went back to the bakeries, the management refused to let them in until the workers signed an undertaking stating that they accepted the employers' offer and that they would not raise the issue of wages for another year.

This the workers refused to do, so they were locked out by management.

On Monday August 5 after a mammoth six-hours of negotiations, SFAWU managed to get the employers to agree that wages and conditions of employment could still be raised at plant-level. The workers then returned to work.

The experience of the Durban bread strike has shown once again the importance of having only one union per industry. Had there been only one union, the division among the strikers would not have occurred.

A HAUNTING voice singing 'Zithulele Mama, Noma sengifile ngiyobe ngifele lona, Izwe lakithi, Izwe leSouth Africa' (Don't cry Mama, even if I am dead, I would have died for my land, the land of South Africa) immediately strikes home the horrific reality of this country.

Everyday people are being killed in the townships — close on 500 in the last 10 months. But, had the new FOSATU record just carried that song which is sung by the Simba Quix Choir, it would not have presented the whole picture.

Workers in South Africa have begun to organise and in this there is hope, as the K Team from Kelloggs sings, 'But now we have a representative.

## FOSATU's worker choirs now feature on new record

It is FOSATU.

And the Durban bus drivers' choir sings, 'We call on you workers, Unite so we can conquer.'

As FOSATU unions move into more factories and with each new struggle, new songs are being sung.

Different music traditions have influenced these new worker songs.

Some of the choirs like the Sizanani Bantu Transport Choir (the Lucky Stars) sing in the style of the Isicathamiya music of the Mbube

competitions.

These choirs consist of only men as the Mbube tradition started in the men's only hostels in the cities. An important part of their performance is the intricate dance steps which they do while singing.

Most of the popular songs sung in almost every FOSATU meeting use tunes from songs sung in church with the words changed.

At the end of the FOSATU record, workers from the Braitex textile factory sing many of these songs. These

songs were recorded during a lunchbreak at the factory.

One of the most memorable of these is 'Thula Sizwe', which in one part of the song says, 'FOSATU will fight for us, The freedom is ours, We shall get freedom, FOSATU is yours'.

Under the influence of church music, many choirs have sprung up in FOSATU factories which involve both men and women singers. Dancing is also an important part of their performance but it is not the complex steps of Mbube but the bold, strident stamping of

traditional tribal dancing.

The Frame choir is one of these choirs which at last year's Education Workshop impressed people as much by their dancing as their singing. On the record they sing 'Can we please come together and build a union, The employers are making us fight amongst ourselves.'

All in all, the record is a celebration of the newly discovered power that South African workers are beginning to feel — the power of an organised working class.

The FOSATU record is available at R6 (and tapes at R5) from the union offices in Germiston or from the FOSATU Printing Unit, P O Box 18109, Dalbridge 4014.