

EDITORIAL

ON the 9th and 10th April FOSATU will send a worker delegation, consisting of representatives from all the federation's regions and affiliates, to a meeting in Cape Town to once again discuss trade union unity. There is no doubt that this meeting of unions will be crucial for workers in South Africa.

Unity is at the very heart of the workers' struggle as it is only if they can achieve unity of organisation and political direction that they can build a society of equality and justice for all.

Workers understand this well and ever since the rebirth of independent non-racial trade unions in the early 1970's there have been moves to build a wider trade union unity. In 1979 FOSATU was formed and CUSA shortly after that. However, outside of these two federations there remained other independent unions and new unions began to emerge.

It was clear that the task of building a wider unity had to continue. Faced by new labour laws an important step towards unity was taken by the independent union movement at the Langa meeting in Cape Town in August 1981. This was followed by further meetings in April and July the following year held in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth.

But, so far no wider unity has been achieved and in fact at the Port Elizabeth meeting talks deadlocked when seven unions attempted to set down seven non-negotiable principles which they wanted to apply to any new federation.

However, all has not been in vain. Since the talks there has been a great deal of rank and file discussion on the question of unity in many unions. And in many cases a better understanding has grown between the unions.

In building trade union unity, FOSATU believes there are two basic principles which should guide our actions and between which we have to reach a workable and acceptable position.

Experience has taught us that on the one hand trade union unity will only truly benefit the worker movement if it is based on UNITY of PURPOSE and POLITICAL DIRECTION. We need an organisational structure which will allow us to take effective common action at all levels - local, regional and national. We also need a common political direction since all trade union activity is political and wide differences prevent common worker action.

On the other hand, FOSATU knows that to achieve these things we have to deal with the histories and problems of the unions involved. It is impossible to build unity if any one union or group of unions insists on dictating the terms of unity.

Within FOSATU there has been detailed discussion on how to balance these two basic principles in a way which will acceptably advance unity.

However, FOSATU believes there are two crucial policies which we can never sacrifice if we are to remain true to the worker movement - WORKER CONTROL and NON-RACIALISM. It is our belief that both should be carried out in word and deed.

FOSATU has other important policies but we accept that they will have to be fully debated with other unions committed to unity. It is our strong hope that out of this we will achieve a unity truly beneficial to the worker movement.

FOSATU remains committed to the building of such unity - a task which daily becomes more urgent and cannot be neglected by those committed to the worker struggle. We need unity to face the anti-union attack of employers and the State and it is needed to deal with the new challenges created by increasing international interest in South African workers.

ALL TALK AND NO ACTION IS A DANGEROUS GAME!

VOLKSWAGEN BACKS DOWN

SHOP Stewards at Volkswagen in Uitenhage have forced the company to back down on its earlier decision to retrench more than 900 workers - as a result only 183 will be laid off.

Volkswagen Branch chairman, John Gomomo said when the company had approached the shop stewards with its retrenchment plans 'we told them straight that we don't believe in retrenchment.'

'We told management that to retrench that number of people would only add to the high unemployment,' he said.

Brother Gomomo said the company had been told to look for alternatives, 'after all they are not the ones who suffer during a recession, it's the workers who are always the losers'.

After more than a month of intensive negotiations, VW backed down on its earlier plan to retrench 900 workers and agreed to only lay off 183.

The company also undertook 'not to engage applicants other than those retrenched...until they have been all re-employed.'

In another crucial part of the agreement reached between the National Automobile and Allied Workers Unions shop stewards and the company, VW stated that 'employees who are re-

employed before August will retain their original service date' - meaning that the time the retrenched workers are out of work will not be considered as a break in service.

NEW WAGE AGREEMENT AT FORBO KROMMENIE

WAGES at Forbo Krommenie at Mobeni in Natal are now amongst the highest in the province thanks to an agreement negotiated by the Metal and Allied Workers Union.

The interim wage agreement pushes wages in the factory up to 16 cents an hour, taking the minimum starting wage to R2,22 an hour.

The company also agreed to negotiate a further increase in mid-year to become effective on July 1.

A MAWU spokesman said 'We are satisfied with the increase and the manner in which negotiations were conducted. This is an example for other companies.'

ALFA TRIES TO KILL UNION

ALFA Romeo is attempting to push workers at their Johannesburg Warehouse and Repair shop into accepting a works committee in a bid to block the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union.

It has also dismissed key union members under the guise of retrenchment - a clear attempt to squash the union.

As a result NAAWU has instructed its attorneys to proceed against Alfa on an unfair labour practice case.

After the union had organised 40 out of the approximately 70 workers at the warehouse, NAAWU approached the company for recognition earlier this year.

Since then the company has brought in a black personnel officer in an attempt to 'persuade' workers to accept a works committee rather than the union.

A NAAWU spokesman said 'It was clearly not acceptable that management should set up a works committee at the very time that workers have elected to join the union.'

'Even now the largest department at Alfa, the stores, has refused to bow to management's pressure to elect a works committee,' he added.

More recently, the company retrenched 16 workers - among them were two key union members who had been instrumental in raising workers' grievances and informing the company that workers were not interested in a works committee.

NAAWU said it was clear that Alfa had used the 'retrenchment' to dismiss union members and that it had embarked on a systematic campaign 'to kill the union'.

R16 000 PAID IN RETRENCHMENT SETTLEMENT

ON the eve of an industrial court case where the National Union of Textile Workers planned to claim that SA Fabrics' retrenchment of 46 workers last year was an unfair labour practice, the company paid out R16 000 to the ex-employees.

NUTW's claim is believed to be the first brought against a South African employer during the current wave of retrenchments.

The union alleged that the retrenchments were unfair because they had been done without proper consultation with the union, the workers were selected on a basis other than Last-In First-Out and the retrenched workers received no severance

pay. After lengthy negotiations between the NUTW and the company, SA Fabrics agreed to settle the matter out of court and 'in order to foster better relations' paid the union R16000.

At worker meetings held shortly after the settlement, workers decided to give the money only to the 33 union members among those retrenched. As a result they will receive between R100 and R1000 each according to their length of service.

The settlement is an important landmark in FOSATU's battle against employers who randomly retrench workers without any consultation with the representative union.

STUBBORN FIRM TAKES BACK FIRED WORKERS

IN a major victory for the Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union, Vleissentraal - a hide and skin factory at Cato Ridge in Natal - has agreed to take back workers dismissed in a stoppage last year.

This tough nosed management dismissed the workers when they stopped work after five key union members had been fired.

The manager told workers at the time that he had 'cut out a sore which has been hurting my back and if it should re-appear, I will cut it out again'.

When the workers refused to go back to work until their five colleagues had been taken back, he dismissed them all and within two hours had trucked in new workers.

The SFAWU felt that the

workers had been unfairly dismissed so it was decided to take the company to court.

However, just before the case was to be heard in the Maritzburg Supreme Court, Vleissentraal and the workers' lawyers reached a settlement.

The company agreed to take back ten key union members immediately and to take the rest back within three months when posts become available.

SFAWU organiser, Jay Naidoo said it had been a difficult struggle against a hard-line management but 'one in which we felt we had a just cause'.

'There has been many lessons learnt by both sides and we hope in future that managements will be prepared to talk to the representative union,' he said.

Brown Lung Campaign spreads to PE factory

THE National Union of Textile Workers' major campaign against 'Brown Lung' has spread to the Eastern Cape with the testing of workers at a Port Elizabeth factory.

Brown lung is a potentially fatal disease of the lungs which workers who work for long periods in cotton dust can get.

Overseas hundreds of claims are made annually by people suffering from Brown Lung, but here in South Africa only two workers have ever applied for assistance in spite of the fact that it is possible to claim under the Workmen's Compensation

Act. Employers are quick to suggest this is because no-one is suffering from Brown Lung but this seems highly unlikely, as the campaign is beginning to show.

The Brown Lung campaign was initiated last year at a Transvaal cotton factory and at the end of last year more than 1000 workers were tested at a Mooi River factory.

The union's general secretary, John Copelyn said the campaign had unearthed numerous workers who were permanently disabled and the union would be making claims for Workmen's

Compensation for them. He added that a number of workers had been found to be suffering from lung disorders which would heal if they were moved to less dusty areas of the factories.

As part of the campaign NUTW would be negotiating for these workers to be moved, he said.

Brother Copelyn said it was crucial that workers have their own doctor to test them in order to prevent management firing workers when they found traces of Brown Lung.

He said a Transvaal company had tried to dispute this and wanted workers to be tested by their own doctor but the majority of companies had co-operated with the union in its campaign.

'It is important for the union to build up medical records of its members even if they have clear lungs when first tested, so that if five years later the worker finds he has lung disease, the union will have proof that it was caused by the factory,' he said.

Brother Copelyn said the campaign also attempted to prevent cotton dust disease by encouraging workers to consider reasonable demands for reducing the dust levels in the factory.

Previously this had always been the unchallenged prerogative of management.



Worker being tested at Mooi River.