

LABOUR FOCUS

Fighting fires for low wages

MOST Capetonians were deeply concerned at the recent fire which devastated parts of Devil's Peak and Table Mountain. They were concerned at the destruction of fynbos and trees which left such ugly scars on the mountain side.

But how many people spared a thought for those workers from the Parks and Forestry Department whose job it is to extinguish fires?

Dangerous

Fire-fighting can be a very dangerous business. High up on the mountain there are no clearly defined paths, so workers have to cut their way through the bush.

The intense heat dislodges large boulders and fire-fighters are showered with burning cinders from trees. Thick clouds of smoke make breathing difficult and sting their eyes.

Wages

Wages paid to the fire-fighters are low. As employees of the City Council, labourers are paid from R44.16 - R58.42 per week. The wages of attendants range between R48.76 and R64.86 while lumbermen receive between R61.64 and R75.90 per week.

The minimum hourly wage for council employees is 96c per hour.

This does not compare well with workers in the automobile industry, for example,

who have a minimum wage of about R1,75 per hour.

Over the last few years wages and conditions of employment have improved for the employees of the Parks and Forestry Department.

This is not, however, because of the generosity of the City Council. It is a direct result of the struggle for workers rights fought by the C.T. Municipal Workers Association, which represents some 11 000 workers.



WORKERS WIN PENSION CHANGES

RECENTLY the Metal Industries Pension Fund Board approached a number of independent unions to get their views on the pension fund operating in the Steel and Engineering industry.

This is the same condition as the proposed Pension Bill which was withdrawn last year as a result of many strikes all over the country.

The Metal Industries pension fund has been a major source of worker dissatisfaction. The fund is an industry-

wide scheme, and workers have to be members.

A major grievance is the 'preservation clause' which up until recently has meant that if a worker left the industry he could not get his pension payment back until he was 65.

This is the same condition which was proposed Pension Bill which was withdrawn last year as a result of many strikes all over the country.

Workers would like their own and management's contributions paid out when they leave a factory.

With high unemployment workers often

don't get new jobs easily and they need this money to survive during this period.



Another grievance is that the pension age of 65 laid down by the scheme is far too high. The average life expectancy of Blacks is 57.

The workers also felt that the benefits are too low as the total assets of the fund are nearly R290 million.

To overcome these grievances workers would like to see new rules drawn up in consultation with worker representatives.

In the meetings with the Board workers representatives were told that the preservation clause had already been changed to six months.

However, workers feel that to wait six months for their money is still too long.

The Board has also indicated many other changes including the

choice of retirement age between 55 and 65.

It is through the pressure of workers in the Steel and Engineering industry factories, particularly those organised into the independent trade unions that these changes have been made and further changes are being considered.

It is also a result of the increasingly strong organisation of these workers into unions of their choice that the bosses and their organisation are beginning to consult its workers over issues that affect them.

This has been won as a result of the bosses realising that workers

will no longer put up with no channels existing for them to voice their demands.

These workers are increasingly demanding control over their own lives which in our society is generally denied to them at work and outside of work.

But there are still many millions of workers in the Metal industry and outside it who are not yet organised.

It will be the job of the independent unions to establish firm grassroots organisation on a much larger scale to increase the voice of the worker all over the country.

Retrenchments can be fought

WITH the economy slowing down, it is clear that 1982 is going to be a tough year for workers.

However, despite the economic slowdown, retrenchments are not inevitable. Many workers believe that once employers have told them they have to be retrenched, this is inevitable. But this is not true.

Ways and means have been found to avoid retrenchment. At Kelloggs, workers had a stoppage last year when six of their colleagues were given retrenchment notices.

Negotiations between the union and management followed and the union was given the right to investigate the manning levels in the plant.

The shop stewards found six empty spaces, and all workers were taken back at the same rate of pay and with no change in conditions of service.

The Kelloggs example highlights the need for negotiation between workers and management over retrenchment.

Stoppages can be avoided if only management would talk to the

union beforehand.

At Sigma, where the National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union (NAAWU) is recognised, discussions on retrenchment started two months before they happened.

Negotiations were about the possibility of avoiding retrenchment. Discussions also took place over an acceptable retrenchment procedure. The NAAWU proposals were as follows:

* The union should be given at least one month's notice of any retrenchment.

* Proper planning of production should take place to ensure that account is taken of downturns in the economy.

* Retrenchments should be on the principle of (Lifo). This means that the oldest workers who have worked the longest in the plant should be the last to be retrenched.

* Severance pay should be paid to workers on the basis of a month's wages for each year worked.

As a result of these negotiations Sigma workers were retrenched only after two months

of deliberations and some jobs were saved as a result of union pressure.

In addition, it was agreed that the workers be retrenched on the "lifo" principle.

The severance pay agreed to was one month's pay for workers with between two and five years' service, and three months' pay for workers with over five years' service.

Also, retrenched workers will be given first choice when Sigma recruits again.

NAAWU's Sigma branch secretary, Mar-

tin Ndaba, has described the negotiations as a "mixed victory".

He said: "On the one hand we lost the retrenchment battle as 507 workers were retrenched. However, we were at least able to get them increased retrenchment benefits."

Mr Ndaba went on to point out the necessity of a union to negotiate a retrenchment procedure. At Datsun, 150 workers were retrenched. They received no severance pay and were not protected by the "Lifo" principle.

Management could simply dismiss older

workers whom they saw as unproductive. Datsun management gave as the reason for retrenchment the fact that too many workers returned to work after the holidays.

A union spokesman said the union rejected this explanation. "Datsun should have planned properly," he said.

"This shows that, in the absence of a strong union at Datsun management can do what they like with workers and give unacceptable reasons for doing it.

He called on all workers to join a union to prevent management decisions like this.