

Motor Workers Unite - First IMF African Auto Conference

The first International Metalworkers Federation African Auto Conference, as noted in the keynote speech delivered by the IMF General Secretary, Herman Rebhan, gave concrete expression to the economic reality of an African auto assembly industry. Approximately 50 delegates representing 12 unions from 10 countries met in Maseru, Lesotho, on 14th November 1984, to discuss their various conditions of employment, negotiating strategies and general problems.

By 1982 546,001 motor vehicles were being assembled in seven African countries stretching from the Mediterranean to the Cape. (Figures for Africa are difficult to come by. These figures are based on statistics provided by the IMF at the Conference.) 71 226 workers were involved in the actual assembly of these vehicles, and this number would increase considerably if workers involved in the components and service industries were to be included.

The establishment of an automobile assembly industry creates some common conditions and problems. Assembly plants are generally relatively large and integrated production units, universally giving rise to working conditions which have spawned militant unions. The automobile industry is also perhaps the most internationalised and monopolised of industries with about 10 multinationals accounting for total world production. Workers in developing countries therefore immediately find themselves up against highly sophisticated production and industrial relations practices developed in Europe, America and Japan. Against this background, the first meeting of auto unions in Africa was an important and historic occasion.

A major feature of the conference was the comparison of conditions of employment, not only between the various African countries, but also with conditions in Europe and America. Present at the conference to give insight into

the European car industry was Lief Bloomberg, newly elected President of the Swedish Metal Workers Union, a significant presence given the major assistance of Swedish metal workers to workers in the developing countries.

Arising out of the discussions it was clear that multi-nationals take advantage of their trans-national status by trading off conditions in one country against those in another and using the lack of worker organisation in one country as a threat against more highly organised workers. Clear examples came from the comparison of wages between companies, as well as productivity figures. In one case it was found that a company had misinformed a union about productivity figures in another of its operations in another country in the course of negotiations. Such misuse of information will clearly be more difficult in the wake of the contacts made at the meeting.

South Africa accounts for 70% of the vehicles produced in Africa and well over half the total of auto workers. The South African industry is also the oldest, with the first plants being established in Port Elizabeth in 1924. A considerable amount of discussion therefore revolved around the experiences and problems of the South African unions. By virtue of size, penetration and age, representatives of the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union were able to share their considerable experience with the other African unions.

As a one day meeting, the conference could only touch the surface of many of the important concerns of all African car workers. Its significance lies in the fact that this first contact has been made, bringing together in a manner not possible in many other spheres of international activity, organised workers with common interests and adversaries. At the end of the conference the following declaration was adopted:

We, delegates to the first IMF African Auto Conference, meeting in Maseru, Lesotho, November 14, 1984:

1. Declare our strong fraternal solidarity with auto

workers in Africa and South Africa in particular, in their great struggle to win political, social and economic justice for all workers regardless of race, sex, creed and religion.

2. Although there are more than ten million vehicles registered in all of Africa, of which we assemble only a small fraction at the moment, we affirm the fact that we should be able to own the product of our labour. Therefore we call for a decent living wage for all African auto workers.
3. Aware of the urgent need to find more industrial jobs and training for the unskilled and semi-skilled, we call for development, financial and trade authorities to study where and how auto assembly operations with access to large integrated regional markets could be established in co-operation with unions, companies and governments.
4. Where assembly operations already exist, we pledge ourselves to the development and growth of free democratic unions capable of defending and advancing the interests of workers and their families, without government and employer intimidation.
5. We call on all 3.5 million autoworkers, members of the IMF-affiliated unions in the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Pacific to militantly support in words and deeds the need to organise, educate and raise the consciousness of African auto workers in their struggle to harmonise wages and working conditions on a world-wide basis.

(Taffy Adler, NAWU, January 1985)