

BCAWU: Building Union Organisation

In December 1985 members of the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union established a shop stewards council for the building industries in the East Rand, covering the area from Germiston to Olifantsfontein. One hundred shop stewards, representing a dozen factories and sites attended the first meeting of the council on January 19. The following programme was adopted for 1986:



- (i) to concentrate resources against stubborn employers;
- (ii) to provide education for workers in the region;
- (iii) to organise jointly with youth and community organisations;
- (iv) to organise on a door-to-door basis.

Workers warn that the shop stewards council will be a body that not only barks, it will also have a bite.

In a sector which has traditionally been difficult to organise, this achievement is an important breakthrough. It comes after a series of bitter, and sometimes protracted battles with stubborn managements. The most important of these was the four-year long struggle for trade union rights (1981-1985) at the Olifantsfontein plant of Johnston Tiles. (This will be the subject of a separate article in the future). But there are many other instances where union members have faced mass dismissals and daily harassment in the struggle to establish the union.

Sterkfontein Brick Works

When the union first started to organise the 135 workers of Sterkfontein Brick Works (Olifantsfontein) in 1984, the plant manager, workers say, used to "manage" with a gun on his hip. When workers struck to protest against bad conditions - work is dusty, heavy and hot - they were all dismissed. The union took the case to the Industrial Court, and after 7 months secured an out of court settlement. The workers were re-instated and received back payment.

During 1985 bad relations with management persisted, as the union members continued to resist poor working conditions and fought for a recognition agreement. At the end of the year all five shop

stewards were suspended and subsequently dismissed for allegedly organising a work stoppage. The issue here had been non-payment for a public holiday. In November the entire workforce struck in protest against the dismissals, and stayed out for 1 month. On December 4, the union agreed to an out of court settlement by which all workers except the 5 shop stewards were reinstated, the shop stewards received compensation, and the firm undertook to immediately negotiate a recognition agreement with the union.

Concor Roads

In September 1985 the union began to organise at Concor Roads. By November over 80% of the 260 workers had signed up. Management, when they got wind of the union's presence, started interrogating workers. The workers would not be intimidated. They demanded higher wages and took strike action. The company then undertook to enter a recognition agreement, but immediately broke the spirit of the undertaking, unilaterally making decisions which affected union members, as when when 68 workers (union members) were re-trenched on December 13. The first they knew of it was when they opened their pay packets to find a retrenchment notice.

When the union challenged this the company responded that since there was no recognition agreement there was no obligation to consult. They soon changed their tune, however, when the union applied to take the issue to the Industrial Court under Section 43 of the Labour Relations Act. The company undertook to reemploy all dismissed workers, and in future to consult the union.

Glamour Rock North

The union began organising at Glamour Rock North (Germiston) in August 1985. By September the majority of the 44 workers were signed up. However, management refused to deal with the union, and never responded to letters from the union. Eventually a meeting was arranged. The BCAWU presented its registration certificate and constitution and requested stop order facilities. In December the union submitted stop orders for verification and implementation. Also, the union drew up a draught recognition agreement. On December 20, the company responded by retrenching the entire workforce. When the union tried to discuss the issue, the director refused to meet them. The union has now applied to take the case to the Industrial Court under Section 43 of the Labour Relations Act.

In all these cases workers have taken industrial action where necessary. They have also used legal channels where these exist, to further their struggles. But in the end it is the self-organisation of the workers themselves and the exercise of their collective power that has begun to push back the frontiers of management control, and to win better conditions. The formation of a shop stewards council for workers in the building industries on the East Rand is another sign that this is happening. And on February 9, the BCAWU is to launch a national shop stewards council. (Reports from Narius Moloto, BCAWU)

EMI: You've Got to Show Some Respect

A new policy has been introduced into EMI South Africa concerning the way people must address each other at work. From now on it is company policy that people will be addressed by their surnames. It is only by mutual agreement that a person can be addressed by the first name or nicknames. People who contravene this policy will be subject to disciplinary action which can involve dismissals. This means that the days when management and whites could call black workers by offensive nicknames are now over in EMI. Changes such as this are an important part in the struggle for workers to be treated with respect.

This new policy came about thanks to the shop stewards taking management to task over the way CCAWUSA (Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union) members were being addressed. The policy also covers all offensive, abusive or derogatory language. EMI shop stewards will keep a sharp lookout for this form of racism.

The right to strike

The EMI negotiating team have also won a major new right for the first time in CCAWUSA. As part of the dispute procedure the team have won the right to go on strike for ten working days with a guarantee that they will not be dismissed. Once the grievance procedure is exhausted and a dispute is declared the workers must hold a ballot. If over 50% of the workers decide to strike then they can do so for ten working days without fear of dismissal. This is the first time CCAWUSA has achieved this right. The negotiating team are now involved in a hard struggle to get the best possible recognition agreement. (CCAWUSA News 1.9, December 1985)