

General Motors strike update

Glen Adler's article in the last edition of the Bulletin analysed some of the dynamics leading up to the GM strike, its wider significance for the disinvestment debate, and developments during the early days of the strike. Since then, of course, the strike has severely weakened, although for 460 of the 1,900 workforce still on strike - including most of the shop stewards and union activists - the struggle is not yet over.

Two weeks into the strike, on Monday November 17, GM management issued a final ultimatum to the effect that workers who did not return to work the following day would be dismissed since they were engaged in an illegal strike. At a mass meeting on the previous Friday, support for the strike had seemed firm enough; why then did the majority of workers respond to management's dictates?

Union sources offer the following reasons: firstly, the police attack on picketers on the Monday morning, and prior to that the eviction of workers from the plant during the previous week; secondly, the fact that workers had received no strike pay; also, the negative coverage given to the strike by the media; and most importantly, the very high unemployment levels in the area and the fact that large-scale scabbing could be expected.

From the start local GM management has simply refused to negotiate over the union's demands:

(i) that the pension fund money should be paid out, with actuaries appointed to determine the amount due to each employee based on (a) employee's contribution, (b) employer's contribution, and (c) profits accrued from investments of the pension fund. Employees would then choose between receiving a lump sum and transferring the funds to a provident fund - the fund to be decided jointly by management and workers, after workers had received the necessary information to make the decision;

(ii) for severance pay of one month per year of service;

(iii) and for a representative on the new board of directors.

The company has also refused to cooperate in industrial council

- GM strike -

settlement procedures or to nominate a mediator. GM has preferred to apply to the Industrial Court arguing that the demands of the strikers constitute an unfair labour practice. NAAWU is still contesting this.

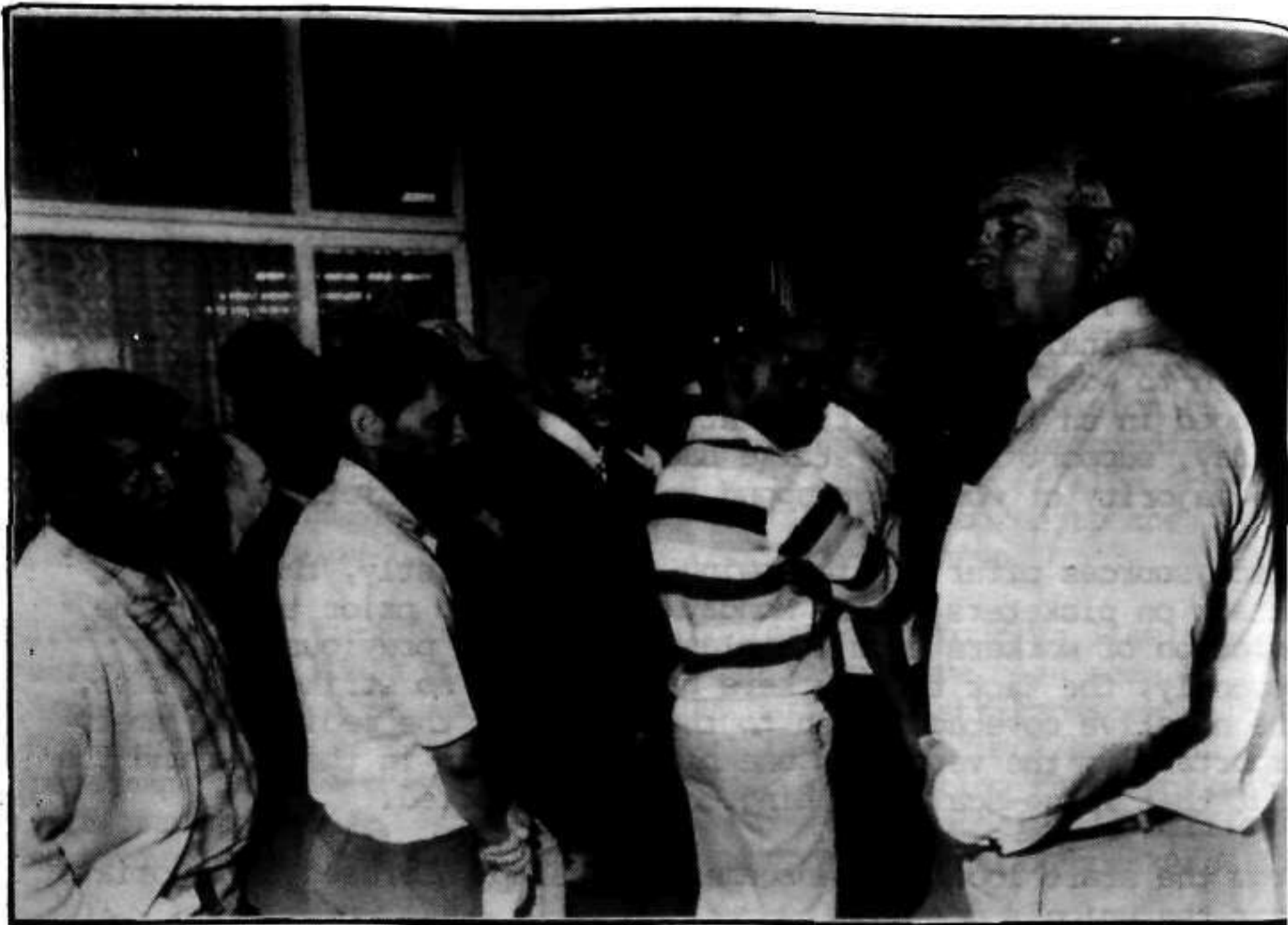


photo: management screens the workers who slept in the plant.
(Afrapix)

The present situation

The 460 workers still on strike have received no money since the funds of the support committees dried up early this year. They continue to meet weekly, and have stated that they are willing to negotiate their terms of reinstatement with no prior conditions. The company, however, which has employed replacement scab labour, denies all responsibility for these workers: they have dismissed themselves and their shop stewards now represent nobody, the company says.

However the settlement of this dispute is still very much on NAAWU's agenda. The union is meeting to discuss the problem and to decide what support other factories can offer. The issue is also being taken up by the COSATU local. Most important is the fact that whilst much of the shop floor leadership remains outside the plant, returning workers are by no means antagonistic to the union (which still represents them) and many are returning to make contact with the union offices. Striking workers, although initially bitter towards those who returned to work, have now realised the importance of working for unity with these workers.

Lessons

The GM strike was the first occasion that workers within COSATU have taken action to determine the terms of disinvestment. The union stresses that the action taken did not represent an attack on COSATU policy of support for the disinvestment campaign. Rather it should be seen as support for COSATU's position that where such disinvestment occurs the wealth created by South African workers should not be allowed to leave the country. In the future the issues raised by the GM workers will form part of a broader set of demands around the terms for disinvestment.

A significant gain of the GM struggle for auto workers in the region has been the cooperation and unity developed between the two unions - NAAWU and MACWUSA - despite a history of antagonism.

For the trade unions one of the biggest problems during the strike has been the hardline attitude of management and their refusal to negotiate meaningfully. Whatever the longterm implications for industrial relations, the onus is now on trade unions to develop strategies appropriate to these new conditions of struggle.

(SALB correspondent, February 1987)