

RECENT STRIKES IN DURBAN.

In the last month there have been seven strikes in Durban at the following factories; Balatum Pty Ltd, Acme Timbers, Escom Power Station, Tayclo Pty Ltd, Sandock Austral and Reckitt and Coleman.

BALATUM PTY LTD.

At Balatum Pty Ltd, a linoleum factory, 180 african labourers went on strike. This constitutes the entire african work-force. The average wage at Balatum is 30c an hour for a 46 hour week; that is R13.80 per week. The workers stopped work after management refused to consider their request for a wage increase to 50c an hour (that is, a 66% increase, raising wages to R23.00 per week). One worker said, "We think we must earn at least 50c an hour just to keep our families in clothing and fed" (Daily News 27/6/74). The strike was shortlived, the workers returning to work the next day. Management made an offer of a 2c per hour increase, which means a weekly wage of R14.72. Workers said that they were dissatisfied with this, "but there is nothing we can do. The management told us if we did not like it we could leave and we all need our jobs".

The strategy of returning to work in order to negotiate seems to imply that the workers perceived the strike as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction rather than as a means for negotiation. They returned to work before management had responded to their demands. This strategy could have been chosen either because the workers merely wanted to draw the attention of management to their grievances or because they correctly perceived the limits of their bargaining strength. The workers were unskilled labourers with presumably a heightened sense of job insecurity, given the reserve pool of labour. Hence the threat by management to fire the workers was sufficient inducement for them to accept the unsatisfactory offer made. In the absence of a bargaining situation in which workers have the power to force management to compromise, the management at Balatum was able to force workers to accept a token increase. However, by striking the workers were able to extract this from management.

ACME TIMBERS.

The strike at Acme Timber industry - a subsidiary of the Anglo-American group - involved 90 African and Indian workers from the Timbrik Model Homes Division. This represents 93% of the work-force; the rest are monthly paid workers who did not strike.

The workers who were labourers or semi-skilled were receiving an average weekly wage of R17 - R18, there being no differentiation in wages between Africans and Indians doing the same job, and no differentiation in the nature of their jobs. They demanded a 25% increase, R3 a week. Management reported that on pay day the workers received their fourth wage increase since the strike in 1973. This is said to represent a 10% increase of the wage bill, with the lowest paid workers getting R1 added to their R14 - R15 wage, and more skilled workers receiving larger merit increases. Management also said that the workers had been promised a review of wages on

the basis of cost of living increases in November.

On Monday after clocking in, the workers refused to start work. Management offered them an ultimatum - return to work by 9am. or be fired. The workers chose the latter, signed themselves off, and were told to collect their wages later in the day. Management agreed to re-employ some of the fired workers on a selective basis only, because it believed the strike to have been initiated by a small group of workers who, it is said, threatened to assault anyone who returned to work.

The reason management gave for firing the workers was that "it could not bow down to threats". It is reported that the Managing Director said, "We do not object to the workers asking for more money because everyone has that right, but they should not have threatened us by striking without first negotiating. We could not give way to threats". There is a works committee at the factory formed in 1973, the members of which tried to persuade the workers not to strike but to use the works committee as a negotiating channel. Their strategy was unanimously rejected by the workers. The workers must have chosen to strike because they perceived this as a more effective means of achieving their ends. A strike is potentially a more powerful basis from which to negotiate, whereas a works committee has no power behind it to force acceptance of its demands. Having no power it cannot negotiate successfully. The workers obviously had little faith in the ability of the works committee to satisfy their desires. And this distrust is validated by the fact that management perceived the strike, a bargaining situation as a threat; a threat to its monopoly of decision-making powers.

The next day the entire work force returned to work at the original wages and on the basis of the existing 10% blanket increase and of promises of a further 10% increase in November. This was arranged at a meeting held between the workers and the Department of Labour. In South Africa the effectiveness of strikes is limited by the fact that there is a reserve pool of labour. If unskilled, african workers strike, there is no protection against mass firing and this leaves the workers powerless, and with no alternatives other than leaving the job or accepting the conditions determined by management.

Acme management seemed to be surprised by the strike. It saw itself as pursuing a 'progressive' wage policy and as having an harmonious relationship with the workers. But the workers hadn't participated in determining the structure of wage increases. There is no such thing as a 'progressive' wage policy determined unilaterally by management. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that workers resorted to striking to express their disapproval. Management's perceptions of an harmonious relationship between them and the workers is expressed in the following statement;

" It was a friendly strike - the strike was caused by a few instigators - the workers are getting a fair deal". Management's application of the 'agitator thesis' to explain the events is a function of their perception of industrial relations at the firm as harmonious and connected to this, of their perception of themselves as 'progressive'; workers were assumed to be satisfied with their wages.

ESCOM POWER STATION.

The strike at Escom Power Station, the first since its formation in 1954 arose out of a demand for wages and a demand for the reinstatement of Mr. Khumalo, a member of the works committee. The committee, consisting of 6 members, was established in October 1972 before the introduction of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act. In December 1973 management granted a yearly service increment of 2c an hour to the average basic wage of R66. The workers instructed the members of the works committee to demand an increase since the effects of inflation had negated the increases given in December. In May, the works committee informed the workers that the manager had said that he, in consultation with the Director in Johannesburg, would consider the issue.

Between the time of the demand and the firing of Mr. Khumalo, the workers report that he was given double the amount of work and told to work every Sunday. Previously he had been working only two Sundays a month, but was now expected to work a seven day week. The manager is alleged to have said that if Mr. Khumalo was not prepared to do this, then he must bring his reference book to be signed off. Although such a demand is illegal, Mr. Khumalo did work that Sunday so the workers felt that there was no reason other than victimisation behind his firing the following Tuesday. Mr. Khumalo was the one who had expressed the worker's demands at the works committee meeting.

In response to this the workers struck. The labourers, who gathered outside the plant premisses to await the arrival of company officials from Johannesburg, said that they would return to work only on the condition that management agree to a wage increase and agree to re-employ Mr. Khumalo. When the manager asked the workers to return to work until he had discussed the matter with his Directors in Johannesburg, they replied that they "had no faith in him because we appealed to him in February to give us more money but he told us that he was not going to give us more money since what we are earning is 10% above the bread-line".

The workers went to the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund to which most of the workers belong. They made a statement, which included a request for a statement from Mr. Khumalo to be used in a charge against the employer for wrongful dismissal.

Mr. L. Roberts, the Personnel Manager flew down from Johannesburg to speak to the workers. He promised to convene a meeting of

company officials on 3rd July to discuss a cost of living increase and to meet with the works committee the following day to discuss the fate of Mr. Khumalo. He agreed that the workers were low paid. Although in material terms they had not achieved more than they had when the works committee had asked for an increase, they had achieved a more binding promise by management to consider a wage increase due to the publicity received and the fact that they could expect another strike if the promises were not kept. Their effectiveness in this aspect was demonstrated on the 3rd July when management granted a R7 blanket increase a month. The workers however, did not translate their needs into money terms, did not make a specific demand. Thus they couldn't use the strike as a means of negotiation. They used it to pressurize management into making a decision.

Management refused to re-instate Mr. Khumalo. This can only lead to an enhanced sense of alienation from and mistrust of works committees by workers. Without trade unions to provide protection, such bodies intrinsically allow for victimisation, the occurrence of which generates worker unrest. It could be asserted that works committees are counterproductive and contrary to the aims of those behind their establishment.

TAYCLO PTY LTD.

The strike at Tayclo Pty Ltd is interesting in that it focuses attention on the workings of the Industrial Conciliation Act and on the subtle distinctions between a lock-out and a strike.

Tayclo is owned by the largest Indian employer in the Garment industry. The 80 Indian and Coloured workers involved in the dispute were machine operators in two shirt departments. They were expecting a R3 increase laid down in the Industrial Council Agreement which was gazetted on the 24th May 1974. Prior to the Agreement Tayclo workers were receiving a weekly bonus of between R1 and R3. They were expecting, and management had promised them, that they would receive the increase plus the bonus. However, management did not pay them their bonuses over and above the new rate of pay so that the Agreement had not resulted in any material improvement. The continued payment of bonus schemes was not included in the Agreement, this being only tacitly agreed upon. Most employers in the industry continued to pay them.

On Monday 14th June, the workers refused to start work after having clocked in, demanding that the bonus scheme be re-established. The shop-steward was sent by the workers to inform the manager that the workers wanted to speak to him. He told the shop-steward Mohan, and the shop-stewardess, Joyce Chetty to wait in his office while he met with the Director, Mr. Amod Lockhat.

Meanwhile the director and the manager went to speak to the workers telling them that they could choose between working without a bonus or clock out, collect their wages and cards and leave. The direc-

or insisted that the chargehand clock Mohan's card out, which he did. When the workers heard of this, they decided to leave. They allege that the chargehands clocked out their cards and that the director refused to have the cards of those workers getting above the rate clocked out. He then told them to leave the premises. Mohan was asked by the workers to inform the director of their wish to speak to him. He was told that the decision made was final; the workers must leave. The workers report that he advised the wage clerk to make up everyone's notice.

The workers then marched en masse to Bolton Hall where the Garment Workers' Union is situated. A meeting was held with the union organisers and the agent for the Industrial Council. That afternoon the workers went to collect their wages. It is alleged that when the agent went to speak to Mr. Lockhat he claimed that the dispute was not a lock-out as the workers claimed but a strike, because it was only after the workers had refused to start work that they were told to go. That is, they had caused their own dismissal. He said that he was prepared to re-employ all the workers without a 'penalty' being imposed on them with the exception of six 'agitators' (among whom was the shop-steward). It is alleged that he agreed to pay them for the time worked plus holiday pay, and would issue them their cards. However there would be no notice pay; termination would be mutual.

The agent agreed with this interpretation of the events. The workers and trade union organisers however felt that the dispute was a lock-out. The manager had told the workers to leave because they would not accept a change in the conditions of employment, and he had refused to re-employ all the workers. Thus the workers demanded a weeks pay in lieu of notice. They also felt that re-employment on a selective basis was victimisation and refused to return to work on this basis.

On Monday, 17th June, the workers once again congregated at Bolton Hall. They wanted their cards and holiday pay in order to find other employment. Previously Mr. Lockhat is alleged to have said that the workers returning to work would not be penalised but in a complete reversal, said on Monday that those workers wishing to leave would forfeit all benefits. It is said that the reason for this change of attitude was the attitude of the trade union organisers and of a Natal Mercury Reporter both of whom interpreted the dispute as a lock-out. Mrs. Bolton, Secretary of the Garment Workers' Union said that on the contrary without publicity some workers could have also been fired as management wished to weed out the 'ringleaders'.

On the 19th June the Industrial Council met to consider the issue but no action was taken. They felt that the dispute was a strike, that the workers had caused their own dismissal and therefore were not entitled to protection by the Industrial Council. Mrs. Bolton criticised the way the agent had handled the dispute.

Firstly, the manager should have been told that victimisation is illegal. But the agent seemed to support it. Secondly, after failing to arrive at a mutually acceptable settlement the agent should have declared a dispute and called a meeting of the Industrial Council. The organisers too failed to press the legal aspects of the case with the result that the employer was able to break the law, without retribution.

At the Industrial Council meeting some employers offered to employ the Tayclo workers at the increased rate plus bonuses. Although not legally obligated to do so, there is a shortage of labour in the Garment industry and an excessive amount of work. Mrs. Bolton thought that the only reason why employers agreed to pay another increase in spite of the fact that they were already paying above the rate, was the present nature of the industry where a competition for labour exists. If this had not been the case, the worker unrest in the industry could have spread.

About half the workers rejected offers made by other employers, choosing to return to Tayclo without a bonus. The others have found employment elsewhere, benefiting materially from the increased rate.

RECKITT AND COLEMAN.

The strike at Reckitt and Coleman, manufacturers of household and pharmaceutical products, involved the entire work force of 400 Africans and Indians. They were dissatisfied with the increase announced by management on July 9th which was to be effective from July 2nd. In terms of this increase the minimum wage of R21 would be raised by R1 and those earning more than this amount would receive a blanket five percent increase. The workers were dissatisfied with this as they expected a R5 a week increase. They said that this was promised them in December, R1 to be received immediately and the remaining R4 over six months. That period had expired and when management announced the new scale of increases the workers went on strike. They refused to accept it and demanded the R5 promised them.

The manager said to the workers that he would only negotiate with them when they returned to work and if they did not do so they would be fired. The Bantu Labour Officer attempted to persuade the workers to return to work but was unsuccessful. The following day, the workers congregated on the company's football field and were addressed by Mr. Solomon Ngobese, Urban Ambassador for the Kwazulu Government who had been called by the manager. They were also addressed by the company's vice-chairman who had flown from Cape Town. One of the grievances voiced by the workers was the lack of communication. They found the liaison committee inadequate. The manager then promised the workers that if they returned to work, two works committees, one for Africans and one for Indians would be established. He is reported as saying, "Previously I have explained to workers personally the nature of wage increases

It now seems necessary to approach the matter in a more formal manner". He saw the issue as being one of improving the channels by means of which management informed the workers of its decisions rather than one of permitting workers to participate in decision-making. Management again reiterated its ultimatum that if the didn't return to work they would be fired. 60 workers returned to work after these discussions. Some said that they are underpaid and were determined not to return to work. Others said that they wished to return but feared intimidation from other workers. It was management's threat to fire the workers which broke their unity. They said they deliberately assumed a 'hard line' attitude to get the workers back to work because production had been brought to a standstill. The strikers were told to fetch their pay packets the next day. They waited outside the factory gates, watched by the police in riot vans before returning home.

The following day July 12th, 160 workers returned to work, the rest collecting their pay packets. Mr. Ngcobese and Department of Labour officials again addressed the workers. They said that they would return to work on Monday, which they did, on the basis of a promise that works committees would be established, that there would be no victimisation of the leaders of the strike and that they would be paid for the four days they were on strike. But they would not get the wage increase they expected.

The 4 day strike cost the firm R10 000. Management obviously preferred to bear the costs rather than agree to a R5 a week increase which would in one month have equalled the costs of the strike.

SANDOCK AUSTRAL.

350 african labourers at Sandock Austral shipyard went on strike on the 15th July. They demanded a R1 increase over the basic hourly pay of 32c an hour (that is, R14.40 per week). Their grievances included the following;

1. They worked a 45 hour week but were often called upon to work up to 12 hours continuous overtime on any single day without being given reasonable notice. Management's reply to this was that the nature of the ship repair industry demanded unusual working hours but that no-one was forced to work overtime. Given the low wages in fact the workers are forced to do overtime to compensate for their wages.

2. They resented the attitudes of certain white overseers who called them 'Kaffirs' and other derogatory names. Management claimed to know their feelings better than they themselves saying, "Our supervisors have close liaison with the african workers and the majority are very happy".

3. They had no confidence in their liaison committee which was elected by management. They said that liaison committee members did not represent their interests and workers who complained to

the liaison committee members were usually fired. Management denied this.

4. Workers compensation was often not paid to workers injured on duty.

Management said that new workers would be employed if the workers didn't return to work immediately. The workers however refused to return. Management then said that although no new workers had been employed, they would only re-employ the workers on a selective basis. The workers wishing to return would get a 7c per hour increase effective from the 1st July and management would consider a further increase later. This increase was intended to become operative only in August but management had decided to bring it forward to induce workers to return to work. They were unsuccessful however, their offer being rejected with jeers and catcalls by the workers. The next day management said that if workers didn't return to work that day they would be fired. They all returned to work receiving the 7c per hour increase offered them by management.

Management were surprised by the strike saying that "labour relations at the yard have been considered good until now". But given the inadequate means of communication, management could have had no idea of the nature of the workers' feelings. They call labour relations good when there are no strikes but fail to take into account that the strike is a culmination of resentment and ill-feelings which germinate in a situation of bad labour relations, a situation where the workers have no viable channels for laying complaints and making demands.
