

Free State Shopworkers Take Action

Many of the daily struggles of workers on the shopfloor go by unnoticed and unrecorded. Official strike statistics and press reports are only the tip of the iceberg. Below are examples of such struggles, involving members of the Orange-Vaal Branch of CCAWUSA (Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa), in the Free State during the month of June.



Police harrassment

On the 19th of June at Frasers Wholesalers, Bloemfontein, a CCAWUSA shop steward was approached by two security policemen and his manager. The manager pointed him out and he was taken away by the police. The other shop stewards at the establishment went to the manager and asked him for the reasons why the shop steward had been taken away. The manager replied that it would be better if the shop steward in question were thrown out of a window as he is a "politician". The shop stewards then stated that if he were not brought back to work within the hour they would stop work.

After an hour had passed all the workers (approximately 110) stopped work and went to the canteen. The workers demanded that the manager phone the police. After another two hours the police brought the shop steward back and the workers went back to work.

It transpired that the police had asked the shop steward why Frasers workers demanded a R54 increase during wage negotiations and why he went to union meetings in Johannesburg. Many questions about CCAWUSA were also asked. The police also asked why the union had not answered a smear letter that is being circulated around Bloemfontein. This confirms the union's suspicion that the police are responsible for the letter. The union is also under the strong impression that there is close collaboration between Frasers management and security police in Bloemfontein. This is one of the many examples of security police harassment of union officials and members in the area.

- shopworkers -

"Give them hell"

On the same day at a Checkers Store in Bloemfontein a short work stoppage occurred involving all the black workers (approximately 48). Workers in the store have had an ongoing problem with the manager over his poor attitude towards them. On Wednesday the white floor manager was instructed by the manager to give the black staff hell. The floor manager did not agree to this and an argument resulted. The floor manager said he was leaving and walked out of the shop.

The workers then stopped work and went to the regional manager's office, which is in the same premises. Their demand was to remove the manager from the store and to reinstate the floor manager. As a result the manager was demoted and sent to another store and the floor manager returned to work the following day.

More police harrassment

Another short stoppage occurred at the Pick n Pay Hypermarket in Bloemfontein on June 12. The Hypermarket has a large union membership and the police have made a habit of standing outside the store on a regular basis and demanding pass books from the Pick n Pay workers specifically. This has only occurred since the workers have been unionised.

On the 12th, riot squad police attempted to enter the store canteen to apprehend a worker relating to a demand for a pass book. All the black workers stopped work and went to the canteen where they prevented the police from entering.

A week earlier, on June 6, all black workers had stopped work at OK Bazaars, Sasolburg, over the arrest of a fellow worker by the police. That morning a black worker walked past a till and playfully touched the white cashier on the shoulder. She moved forward while he was doing this and it resulted in him touching her cheek as well by mistake.

Two of the customers, who are local policemen, immediately left the queue and arrested the worker, accusing him of assaulting the white cashier. The cashier stated that she had no problem with the black worker touching her but this did not deter the police.

The police eventually left after some discussion with management. A meeting was then held between the shop stewards and management and the matter appeared to be resolved. However an assistant manager then phoned the police and the same two policemen returned and took the worker away.

All black workers then went on strike for most of the day demanding that management organise the return of the worker as they had called back the police. Head office management then became involved and the worker was eventually released on bail. The police are continuing with their charge of assault and have made the cashier become a state witness.

In spite of harrassment and intimidation by police and management CCAWUSA is making significant inroads in the Free State. In addition to the Vereeniging branch office, a second office was opened in January at Bloemfontein and an AGM, attended by 2,000, was held in Welkom during June. The level of organisation is rising rapidly with membership increasing from 400 to 3,000 in the last 18 months.

(Free State correspondent, June 1985)

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