

Postal Workers Victory

Postal workers on the Witwatersrand recently scored a major victory after nearly five weeks of strike action. The outcome of final negotiations between their union, the Postal and Telecommunications Worker's Association (POTWA), and management saw nearly all of the demands put forward by the 8 000 workers on strike being met. Moreover the outcome of the strike, together with the SATS dispute, is seen as a major challenge to labour relations in the public sector which defines all strikes as "illegal".

Shortly after the resolution of this dispute POTWA scored a further victory when a strike by 350 workers in East London also ended successfully. The East London workers who came out on the 27 April had presented a very similar list of grievances as workers on the Reef. According to the union most of their demands, including the primary demand that all racist structures and practices within the Postal and Telecommunications sector be removed, have now been wholly or partially met. For the relatively young Potwa the immediate period ahead will be marked by consolidation and further organisation so that issues of national concern can be addressed.

At the talks, held on 30 April, management agreed to pay workers in full for the first two weeks on strike. East London workers will be paid for the period on strike from the 8 to the 11 May. All canteen and toilet facilities will be opened to all races. The Post office has also agreed to buy new microbusses to transport the PowerPark workers. The transport issue had initially sparked the strike at PowerPark. All workers dismissed are to be reinstated, in some cases workers were dismissed three years ago. In future all cases of dismissal will be reviewed with workers allowed union representation at these proceedings. A major victory for Potwa is management's agreement for full union representation at all disciplinary proceedings. The union also views the right to hold weekly meetings at the shopfloor and regular monthly meetings with management as a major breakthrough.

Strangely management refused to allow workers the right to wear Potwa T-shirts at work. Management has also agreed to guarantee the job of arrested member Yannie Malevu, and to pay him in full for the period spent in prison. Malevu and another Potwa member

were arrested during the strike on "intimidation" charges.

The detention of Malevu and another Potwa member delayed the resolution of the dispute as the union was forced to include as a precondition for talks that management agree to secure their release. This was initially met with refusal. Talks scheduled for the 21 April broke down when it became clear that management had no intention of intervening to secure their release. One worker was subsequently released but Malevu had in the meanwhile been charged and sentenced to three years imprisonment with one year suspended. Thereafter the union was forced to set new preconditions for talks; viz that his job be held open, that all benefits entitled to the workers be extended to him, and full payment for the period spent in prison. The dispute was finally resolved after the fresh preconditions for talks had been met.

The reasons for the resolution of the conflict within the Postal and Telecommunications sector are no doubt varied and quite complex. The union acknowledges that the simultaneous strike by over 18 000 SATS workers provided an important context for the resolution of their own stoppage. Nevertheless Potwa makes it quite clear that there was no collusion or "conspiracy" between their own strike and that of the SATS workers, and that the joint timing of the strikes was purely coincidental. This can be seen clearly by a detailed analysis of the events leading up to the dispute.

The immediate pre-history to the dispute dates back to the 1 December 1986 when a meeting was held between the Regional Director (Wits Region) and Regional representatives from Potwa. Amongst the grievances raised by workers at this meeting the primary one related to the question of transport for the PowerPark workers. Workers at this engineering yard wanted transport between Soweto and PowerPark. They also wanted to know why there was no transport for the black workers whilst transport was provided for colleagues from the other "racial" groups. The transport issue is of importance to the workers because they have experienced muggings, they have been assaulted, molested and robbed by thugs on paydays.

Subsequent meetings were held with the Regional Director on the 5 March 1987 and with the Chief Technician at PowerPark on the 27th March. According to the union none of these meetings ended successfully as it appeared that nothing could be done about the transport issue. The Regional Director had in fact suddenly left

- postal victory -

one meeting when the issue was raised leaving the impression that he did not want to discuss it. By 1 April workers decided to take matters into their own hands, and demanded that management address them directly the next day. At 09h00 the next day a certain Mr Links and Mr De Lange came to address workers assembled in the yard outside. They said they had no power to provide transport for the workers. On hearing this workers demanded to be addressed by a higher authority. By the afternoon police had moved in, serving only to fuel workers anger.

On the 3 April the plant was again occupied by uniformed policemen. The gate was locked thereby preventing workers from entering. These events clearly indicate that management had unilaterally decided to "lock-out" the workforce, thereby forcing them on strike. (see SALB Vol 12/4 for more details)

It is also clear that management's recognition of Potwa as the legitimate representative of the majority of workers, as opposed to the lack of recognition of Sarhwi in the case of the railways workers, played a major role in easing tensions during the dispute. Whereas Potwa acknowledges that differences in "management style" may have played a role in the successful resolution of their own strike, the union nevertheless feels that this was a secondary rather than the primary contributory factor for their own success. Any gains made, including the recognition of Potwa, has largely been the outcome of worker struggles in this area. The union feels that the outcome of the present dispute is firstly a victory for the workers, that it is a clear reflection of worker power on the shopfloor in spite of the relatively small numbers of workers involved.

According to Vusi Khumalo, President of the union, black workers have reached the stage where they form the backbone of the entire Postal and Telecommunications sector. This is largely because of the nature of the work done by many Potwa members. "In many cases workers are sent for training by the Post Office. For the more skilled categories this training lasts three years. Each year the Post Office sends 200 recruits to training centres where as much as R20 000 per annum is spent on each worker", says Khumalo. In addition Khumalo points out that the work of even the lowest category of labourer, that of assistant telephone worker (ATW) involves a degree of skill and on the job training which takes years to master. "These workers, involved in connecting telephones and cable laying are not easily replaceable. To connect a telephone is

a complicated process, you must know how to run wires from the exchange". Khumalo points out in addition that the loss of more skilled white technicians to the private sector has forced the Post Office to rely increasingly on blacks. "As fewer white workers are concentrated in the more advanced jobs so the lower ranks of skilled work have opened for black workers. Nowadays the installation and fixing of telephones is done almost exclusively by black workers". In essence Khumalo argues, "each worker for the Post Office is an investment which they cannot afford to lose".

potwa sees the correctness of this assesement as proved by losses suffered by the Post Office during the strike. "Although the belt which runs between the main Post Office and the railway station saw replacement by scab labour, these scabs were clearly not efficient. The delivery of mail was still affected, even though it did not stop completely, it was nevertheless severely hampered. For the first two weeks mail destined even for the white suburbs had to be physically collected. The banks were complaining that their computer networks were going faulty. Work slowed down as they started using less lines".

Racism

The union feels that in spite of improvements won as a direct result of the strike a number of central problems still remain. Seperate unions for each "racial" group still remain. They argue that the merit system presently in use at the Post Office remains problematical. There is also a quota-system with regard to job opportunities and access to training facilities. Seperate training facilities according to the union results in unnecessary duplication and is more costly. "The existence of seperate facilities also strenghtens our belief that the training facilities are not equal. Racism and the salary structure which is based on this could not be addressed in this strike because the strike was seen as a 'local' issue. As far as parity goes there have been developments along this front since the Minister's address in Parliament. Besides the 12% increase in wages the Minister also announced that there would be parity in future for certain wage categories. The union is presently studying what this means and plans to hold discussion around this throughout the country once details are known after July 1", says Khumalo. Clearly these issues must be addressed on a national basis.