

STRIKES AND THE AFRICAN WORKER

We have chosen in this edition to focus on three case-studies in industrial conflict. We have done this because we believe that these strikes demonstrate most clearly our central criticism of the industrial relations systems in S.A. viz. the unwillingness of management or the state to enter into negotiations with independent African trade unions.

Two introductory points need to be made about strikes and the black worker. Firstly, strikes are not new among African workers. In an article published in the S.A.L.B. (Vol 2, No 8) Warwick wrote "Organised industrial action by black workers can be traced back at least to the turn of the century, when a series of protests by black workers on the Rand took place". However, even this does not seem to go back far enough as the brief obituary to John Smalberger published in this issue indicates. The whole area has only been researched relatively recently. Of course, the pattern is not uniform - there have been periods of sharp industrial conflict, and there have been periods of relative industrial peace. For example, the number of Africans involved in officially reported strikes does not seem to have risen above 2000 per year between 1960 and 1969. However, industrial conflict re-emerged in the 1970's. It began in Durban in April 1969 when dockworkers struck in support of a demand for higher wages. 13 000 Ovambo workers went out on strike at the end of 1971 in Namibia. Again, in Durban in October 1972, 2000 dockworkers struck. The climax was the mass strike in the Durban metropolitan area in January - February 1973 when nearly 100 000 workers went on strike.

The second, and related introductory point, is the view that the African labour force is essentially passive, and consequently, if they strike, their action must be the result of 'agitators'. At the expense of being repetitive, it needs to be emphasized that to point to agitators is not an explanation of strikes; one cannot agitate successfully without widespread grievances. These grievances

range from low wages, unfair treatment in the workplace over such issues as victimisation or unfair dismissals, lack of recognition of worker representatives, dangerous and strenuous work conditions, crude racial discrimination and bad treatment from supervisors and managers. Where situations are likely to lead to conflict there will generally be leaders to organise it; the ability of such individuals to *create* conflict in the absence of circumstances that would induce it anyway seems to be highly unlikely. Of course this does not mean that in certain circumstances 'agitators' do not perform a significant role in articulating these grievances. For grievances to take on a collective character in the form of a strike, it is usually necessary for someone, initially at least, to give expression to workers' grievances. To attribute strikes to 'agitators' is therefore, at best, to point to the instrument of conflict rather than its cause.

Since our inception in 1974 we have carried numerous reports on strikes. If we exclude the mines, we see the following pattern. Firstly, workers do not perceive the Department of Labour officials as their representatives although in terms of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Act they are formally so. To allow Africans to attend Industrial Council meetings, but to deny them a vote, is not a solution. To amend the legislation to allow Africans to sit on the Central Bantu Labour Board, to become Bantu Labour Officers or Assistant Bantu Labour Officers, as the present Draft bill does, is not a solution either. What our reports reveal is the serious lack of communication between the African workers and their official representatives - the Department of Labour. Secondly, these reports reveal management's intransigence and their unilateral power to ignore both officially approved worker representatives such as works committees (see Duens Bakery, S.A.L.B., Vol.2, No. 9 & 10 & Vol. 3., No. 2) and democratically elected trade union leadership (Report on Leyland, Vol. 1, No 3, & vol 2, No. 5). Thirdly, the workers used the little power they are able to exercise in reformist rather than violent or revolutionary ways.

The demands for higher wages, better conditions, more rights are all expressed in quantitative terms and are understood by those demanding them to provide a 'fair' share, or equal rights within the system. These demands represent the immediate self-interest of the workers involved - usually workers in one factory. In general the demands are sectional in nature, being limited to the sector covered, and do not connect up with the non-wage earning poor. They tried to negotiate through the channels that were open to them, but management failed to respond in a creative way to the demands made on them.

This edition provides further evidence of the general pattern in previous reports. The Heine-mann and Natal Cotton strike reveals management's intransigence and the workers' preference for trade unions. Armourplate underlines the fact that without the right to picket and the recognition of unions the cumbersome provisions which provide for a 'legal strike' are meaningless. However, all these case-studies reveal a more central pattern - the tendency for management to rely on the police - both the criminal and the security section - to settle disputes in the factory.

Clearly the Minister of Labour is now aware of the failure of the system of industrial relations for Africans, yet his response remains confused. On the one hand, he proposes a draft bill whose central purpose is to turn the liaison committees into the key bodies where negotiation take place, with the power to negotiate legally binding agreements. Yet with no criminal sanctions (eg. with an Industrial Council Agreement contravention of the Agreement is a criminal act) no role for the trade union and confined to the factory, they are a recipe for disaster. The engineering industry alone could have at least 3000 agreements operating at the same time. On the other hand, the Minister announces the appointment of a commission of inquiry to investigate labour legislation. Professor Wiehahn is chairman and has apparently gone abroad to study industrial relations in other countries. While not necessarily opposed to

the importation of foreign ideas, we suggest that the commission begin with an examination of these and similar case studies in the failure of our industrial relations system. He will find in them the cause of industrial conflict - *management's intransigence* - and the solution - *independent unions for all workers*. We agree with Wiehahn that the present Industrial Conciliation Act is inadequate - the legislation reflects the dominance of employers' interests and has involved the creation and sustenance of a bureaucratic hierarchy of officials, distinct from the rank and file members, whose lifestyle, work and outlook has more in common with employers and state officials than with workers. We are not in disagreement with his publicly stated position of the need for more plant-based bargaining and grass-roots participation. But an analysis of industrial relations in Western Europe will show that works committees are seen *as an extension of trade union rights*, not, as in S.A., *a replacement for these rights*. As a guideline for the Commission we suggest Wiehahn take his own statement to the *Sunday Tribune* when he took office. "When I take office I would like to see South Africa moving towards an extension of the rights to bargain and organise for workers. This is necessary if this country is to be readmitted to international labour circles. We have to come back to the basic principles of labour democracy."

"The realisation of this is beginning in South Africa and the idea is to work towards basic rights for all workers through a gradual integration of the two existing systems". (23:1:77).

The question is whether we can afford a "gradual integration" when to workers this appears as intransigence in the face of reformist demands. Is it wise for employers to continue to seek confrontation rather than negotiation with independent African trade unions?