

SACWU: The Struggle at Triomf

Early in 1981, the South African Chemical Workers' Union (SACWU) started organising Triomf workers to become members. After gaining substantial membership, the union approached the company for a recognition agreement. Triomf delayed until mid-1982, when it went on a recruitment drive to the Ciskei to sign on contract workers. On November 1, 1982, the company re-trenched workers who had become members of the union, including the entire branch executive committee. This happened just seven weeks after employing workers from the Ciskei.

SACWU then took up the case with the Industrial Court. The company asked that it be settled out of court and the union agreed. Thereafter, a recognition agreement was signed on September 30, 1983, followed by wage negotiations during late November 1983. The negotiations ended in deadlock after a court finally asked the company to increase its wages from R180 a month to R350, which the company flatly refused. A Conciliation Board between the two parties was set up, paving the way for a legal strike which took place early in 1984. The company's director, Louis Luyt, intervened by promising workers a year-end bonus - if the company produced good profits. The company finally increased its wages from R180 to R260 in the lowest grade. The relationship between Triomf and SACWU deteriorated from this time.

On the morning of April 12, 1984, workers were subjected to a breathalyser test. Not all the workers were tested. According to the policeman carrying out the test, he was told by his supervisors to test the workers who start work from 8.00 am. Most of the local committee members fall into this group. Solly Matthews, one of the committee members asked that his head of department be present during the test. This was the usual procedure. The supervisor told Solly to stand aside. Eight workers came and joined him. Their supervisors never responded to their requests to be present. At about 10.00 am. the workers in the company, seeing their leaders outside, stopped work and appointed three workers to go to management and ask them to listen to the request of those outside. Management answered that those outside could wait there until Xmas if they wanted to. Thereafter, police arrived and work-

ers inside the company were given an ultimatum to start work which was read out by a policeman. The workers then left to hold a meeting. It was agreed to return to work the next day.

On April 13, when workers came to work, police were everywhere. Three workers were arrested. At about 7.30 am. four committee members went to management concerning the return to work. They were met by a policeman who asked them what they wanted. The local union chairman replied that they wanted to speak to a management representative. Instead a man from the security police came and instructed the policeman to take away the chairman, Mr Moumakwa. More members were then arrested and a charge of "victimisation" was laid against about 19 workers. The case was later dismissed because there was no evidence about who was victimised, where, when and by whom.

On April 14, 1984, SACWU approached Triomf to reinstate the dismissed workers. The company said that it could only take back 300 out of 463 workers and that the rest had to go (including the branch shop stewards). SACWU then took up the matter with the Manpower Department, which also justified the company's mass dismissal.

The union still tried to persuade the company to reinstate all the workers and a meeting was then arranged with senior management for January 18, 1985, but there was no agreement at the meeting. The company stated they could only hire 33. The meeting was then postponed to January 24, where Triomf came with a new proposal of selective re-employment on the basis of performance record, disciplinary record and personality. SACWU opposed selective re-employment of workers because the action taken on April 12 was not an individual, but a mass, action.

The number of workers employed by Triomf was 523. The company dismissed 463 workers of which 462 were union members. The company's strength consists of 111 urban workers and 412 contract workers. Scab contract workers are now being employed and SACWU members have now been out of work for over a year. The union is exploring means of mobilising local and international pressure on the company to re-employ all the workers.

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