

# SAAWU in the Western Cape - The Continental China Strike

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On Monday 25 March 1985, 450 jubilant Continental China workers at the Blackheath plant returned to work ending their two week strike for a wage increase and recognition of their union, the South African Allied Workers Union. The strike was the second to hit the Continental China Group - the first was in October 1984 at the Rosslyn plant 22 km north of Pretoria. (1) The strike was a traumatic experience which Bill Paverd, managing director of the Continental China Group, characterised as a "baptism of fire". For the majority of the workers the strike was the first prolonged industrial action in their working lives - they were traversing unchartered territory.

The strike was part of an ongoing acrimonious battle between SAAWU and Continental China which started in September last year. The successful action by Blackheath workers has established a new "balance of power" in the company. The strike is interesting for several reasons. It heralds SAAWU's arrival in the Western Cape. In this instance, it marks a clear attempt by SAAWU to organise along national industrial lines, in contrast to their traditional style of general unionism. The strike was also in solidarity with the Rosslyn workers who were dismissed after a strike in October last year; as such it represents united action by so-called Coloured and African workers against a common management.

## Continental China

Continental China, the major ceramic tableware manufacturer in South Africa, was established in April 1959. Initially it started with 80 people at the Blackheath plant producing 20,000 pieces per month and with know-how supplied by the world famous firm, Rosenthal Porzellan of Germany (2). Capital was provided equally by German and South African sources. The company expanded in the 1960s establishing 3 more plants: the Huguenot Porcelain plant at Rosslyn in the Transvaal, a border area development which produces 1.5 million pieces of crockery

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per month and originally employing 700 workers, now dramatically reduced since the strike; Grahamstown Potteries plant which manufactures approximately 1 million pieces per month of cups, saucers and coffee mugs and employs over 100 workers; and the Continental Stoneware plant in Atlantis, a decentralised area north of Cape Town, established in 1978, taking advantage of the decentralisation incentives, the plant has the capacity to produce 300,000 pieces of stoneware per month and employs 250 workers. The four plants now yield a total of close on 4 million pieces per month with a workforce of approximately 1,700. The Continental China Group is now wholly South African owned, a subsidiary of Federale Volksbeleggings with the only other shareholder being the Industrial Development Corporation, although it still maintains links with Rosenthal for technical know-how, research and development. (4)

The product range offered by the 4 plants includes dinnerware for everyday use as well as more sophisticated ware; custom designed caterware for international hotels and restaurants well as more functional caterware for catering and industrial uses (eg. hospitals and military). (5) The monthly production of 4 million pieces covers 14 complete ranges of dinnerware, 5 different shapes in cups and saucers and coffee mugs and accessories - in total more than 500 different articles.

Most of the production is for the local market and Continental China is the leading supplier with a small export range to Australia, Greece, USA and United Kingdom among others. Although it is the major South African producer and supplier it does not have a monopoly of the market. Bill Paverd, managing director for the past 8 months, explains:

Japan, Taiwan ... the east generally produce crockery much cheaper than we do and flood our local markets with commodities. Dumping has taken place on a large scale, and although we can compete it is at a disadvantage.

The ceramic tableware industry is very small in South Africa and Continental China's major competition is from imports. The company has, however, been able to secure a third of the market with the vast majority of its products directed at low to middle income brackets.

### Blackheath plant

The Continental China Blackheath plant is one of the largest

factories, after Leyland, in the Blackheath industrial area, 20 km outside Cape Town. The workforce of 460 is predominantly female, virtually all "Coloured" with an African male force of about 50. All the workers are drawn from the nearby townships of Strand, Kuilsriver, Bellville, Stellenbosch and Blackheath.

The industry is labour intensive and employs mainly skilled and semi-skilled workers. According to Otto Kramer, technical director of Continental China, the dominance of women in the industry is accounted for by the nature of the work: "production requires careful handling, dexterity and nimbleness. Women have proved far better in this type of work, acquiring the ceramic skills, than males."

There are three production departments: cups; flat and round articles, and casting. The factory is divided into two plants for raw production and whiteware production - each having different compartments in the manufacture of crockery. The division of labour in the production process is extensive and very specialised. Decorators, for example, would only perform certain tasks in a range of decorating skills as compared to a designer-decorator employed in a factory in Europe, where an apprenticeship has to be served. (7) Here the tasks are simplified to routines requiring only limited skill and experience.

Production is mechanised or automated depending on the range of the products and the quantity required. Research and development are constantly undertaken to evaluate trends and patterns of ceramic ware production. In this regard Kramer stresses that the basic infrastructure of the plant, flow of production, and individual work places are equal to and virtually the same as enterprises in Europe and elsewhere. Plants are designed by German engineers to the same standards.

### Working conditions

The industry is labour intensive. Although work is not too heavy, it is extremely tiring and monotonous as workers spend hours doing the same tasks, eg. fitting handles or flipping a saucer. Injuries do not often occur but in certain areas there are hazards, eg. in the sorting and grinding compartment workers complain of chips flying around or articles breaking during handling. (8) Breakage is a major loss for the company and because enormous care is required in the handling of products,

supervision is extremely close. Supervisors are abusive, say the workers:

All they want is production and more production. They keep us on our toes. And very often they use foul language when they talk to us.

Blackheath's staff turnover has not been very high. The majority of workers have over 5 years' service; some have up to 20 years, with the average service being 8-10 years. Wages have been the major source of dissatisfaction. The minimum rate is R1,40 per hour. One worker who has worked 19 years at the company explains the paltry wages he receives:

I started in 1966, when I was 19, in the casting department. I'm still working there today. I started with R7,00 per week. Today I earn R86,00 per week. After deductions it is sometimes as low as R62,00. How are we expected to survive? I have 6 children!

Workers' complaints brought little improvement, mainly because they were dominated by a liaison committee, a management creation, which acted as a rubber stamp.

#### The strike at Rosslyn

SAAWU had successfully organised the Rosslyn plant by September 1984, after workers rejected the company's liaison committee. Until the end of 1983 workers received regular increases and bonuses. In July 1984, under pressure from workers, management granted an increase in hourly rates. To offset this, the management reduced the working week from 45 hours to 40 hours, thus maintaining the total wage bill at its original level. Any increase in demand was to be met by overtime working. From reports workers were extremely annoyed with the measure but at least felt that there was no immediate wage drop.

In September 1984, a new managing director, Bill Paverd, was appointed and came to the company with a reputation for a more aggressive style of management:

When I came here this company was in a mess. We had already lost R6 million and something had to be done if we were to save the company and the industry.

One of the first measures introduced was to revert to a 45 hour working week. According to Paverd, "the fight for survival was explained to every worker throughout the company. Our

personnel managers explained to the workers how the free enterprise system worked." This meant workers were working more hours for the same wages. In addition, the workers were informed that no Christmas bonuses or any other increases would be given, until the company's financial situation improved.

With the festive season approaching and management inundated with orders, workers were under pressure to intensify production. Meanwhile SAAWU's organising efforts were directed at securing recognition, and workers, as a pressuring tactic, refused to work overtime until the union was recognised. SAAWU met the Continental China management on 16 and 23 October. Management's explanations of the company's difficulties did not satisfy the workers. Instead it set the stage for a protracted period of stoppages and strikes. Workers at the Rosslyn plant drew up a petition demanding:

- \* a return to a 40 hour week
- \* a wage increase in December 1984
- \* a bonus in December
- \* a minimum wage of R2,00 per hour (9)

To enforce these demands workers staged a work stoppage on October 29. Continental China's refusal to accede to workers' demands immediately transformed the work stoppage into a strike which lasted until 31 October. Management responded by dismissing the workers. Although negotiations took place no settlement was reached on the demands. Instead Continental China agreed to reinstate the entire workforce without prejudice on the following conditions:

- \* workers accept the working conditions of September-October (ie 45 hours) with a minimum rate of R1,38 per hour
- \* no wage increase in December
- \* no bonus
- \* to work overtime when absolutely necessary in consultation with shop stewards (10)

Virtually all the workers agreed to go back on November 5 although they were not happy with the state of affairs. High unemployment and generally workers' financial commitments played a role in their decision to return. What could also have affected this decision was the fact that they could wield more effective pressure during November when the company would be hard-pressed to meet delivery deadlines.

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For the first week production was normal, although workers' organising efforts were intensified. Continental China then received an urgent order and requested the decorating department to work one hour overtime, every night, for a week. Their request went unheeded because workers felt that the procedure of consultation with the shop stewards was not followed. On Friday November 16, management again requested workers to work overtime on Saturday 17 to meet the deadline for the order. Again workers ignored management's request. On Monday November 19, the 120 decorating workers received a final warning and were again asked to work overtime. Their refusal led to dismissals on November 20. In solidarity with the 120 workers the rest of the workforce also refused to work, demanding unconditional reinstatement for their comrades. This show of support and shop floor unity posed a major challenge to the management who issued an ultimatum to workers to return to work by 7.30 am.

The return-to-work deadline was ignored and by 8 am. all the workers were summarily dismissed. The union was informed that the factory was to be closed. The work stoppages and strikes of the previous 2 months had caused major disruption to the flow of production. Orders and deadlines could not be met resulting in the company losing millions. According to Paverd serious thought was given to reducing Continental China's operations. The strike had severe repercussions for both the union (ie. organisation was virtually smashed) and Continental China, which conducted a feasibility study on the re-opening of the Rosslyn plant with a reduced workforce.

The feasibility study envisaged a staff cut of over 150. Negotiations between SAAWU and the Continental China dragged on for a month. Management suggested that before the plant was re-opened and workers re-employed, objective tests had to be conducted in order to identify the most efficient and productive workers. The National Institute of Personnel Research skill tests were used to "insure no victimisation" took place. Under the guise of technical objectivity was a hidden management agenda. Firstly the test would be a process of grading personnel and only those with the most skills would be re-employed. Long service to the company would not be taken into consideration. Secondly, because the union had no control over the tests there was no guarantee that the most active union members and shop stewards would be given employment.

Management informed SAAWU that they intended opening the plant on 2 January 1985 and that staff selection would take place between 17 and 22 December 1984. (11)

SAAWU, already complaining of police intimidation, objected to the tests on the following grounds:

- \* tests should not be the sole criterion of selection
- \* there was no provision for monitoring tests
- \* the tests were based on educational level.

Instead SAAWU demanded that Continental China reinstate the entire workforce and then consider retrenchment of workers they did not require. Exactly what SAAWU's rationale for this demand was remains unclear. Workers on the whole seemed generally reluctant to take the tests. Continental China decided, after informing SAAWU, that if workers did not respond, they would start employing on the open market. Eventually the new labour force comprised 34 workers who did not join the strike, 106 who returned, 69 new recruits and the rest workers who had previously, at one time or other, worked at Continental China. (12) Over 300 workers were not re-employed. The employment of scab labour made possible the re-opening of the plant. But it also added a new dimension to the ongoing struggle between SAAWU and Continental China. (13)

It is against this background that the Blackheath strike should be viewed because it forms part of a national industrial struggle against Continental China. The initial closure of the Rosslyn plant affected the Blackheath workers in that they were under enormous pressure to intensify production and meet orders which Rosslyn could not.

#### Organisation at Blackheath

SAAWU moved down to the Western Cape in September last year, a measure explained by Zuzile Ramncwana, branch organiser, to "organise the unorganised in the area." (14) Continental China was one of the first factories they organised in Cape Town and is presently the strongest one. SAAWU's move to the Cape was viewed with some scepticism in some trade union circles. But they were determined to establish a base, whatever. Albert Whittles, education officer for the Western Cape explained:

When we came down here we heard from everyone that it is difficult to organise "Coloured" workers, they were not very aware and lacked militancy. Our Continental

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China strike has proved that Coloured workers are not passive but very conscious.

From union reports it took them 1 month to recruit the majority of the workers at Continental China, although workers initially were cautious of the union. "The majority of us were new to unions and did not know what SAAWU could do, but just went along with the rest. Many were very scared. But there was a core who were very committed and encouraged the rest of us," said one worker.

The first major struggle of the workers was against the liaison committee which management had established in 1979. One worker expressed the common view as follows:

It is a "ja baas" (yes boss) committee. It did nothing for workers. If there were changes for us it was mainly for the benefit of the management. The committee had no teeth to fight management.

Successful organising resulted in the establishment of a shop stewards committee of 11 workers from the following work compartments: workshop, mould making, sorting and grinding, bisque sorting, glazing, under glaze, on glaze, set packing, millet and clay, flatware, cups, platter press and silkscreen. Elected from the shop stewards was a workers committee of 5 to directly negotiate with management.

Throughout the organising drive, organisers tried to link the struggle of Rosslyn workers with Blackheath and arranged meetings where Rosslyn shop stewards addressed workers. At one meeting on February 25, attended by 350, a decision was taken to support the re-instatement of the Rosslyn workers. In addition the meeting demanded the scrapping of the liaison committee and the recognition of SAAWU; the immediate return of the Blackheath worker who was sent to Rosslyn to train scabs and lastly, the R2,00 per hour minimum wage demand. From reports, spirits were high at the meeting - singing, chanting and solidarity were evidence of worker determination.

On 28 February 1985, SAAWU presented these demands to management and an answer was demanded by March 4. Management's reply, that they could only meet one demand, the scrapping of the liaison committee, did not satisfy workers and it became the "talk of the lines what should be done." On Monday, March



4, a small incident occurred which was possibly the initial demonstration of defiance by workers. When Keith Hulse, factory manager, conveyed Continental China's response, it was done only in English and Afrikaans. When he told workers to go back to work, the African workers stood still and told him they did not "understand". He then promised to repeat what he had said the next day in Xhosa.

On Tuesday 5 March, Hulse again addressed workers and explained the financial problems of the company. But workers were not interested in this elaborate explanation. Instead they shouted that he should stop lying and stop making promises. One worker explained the exchange that took place at the meeting:

Hulse kept on repeating about financial difficulties. He said the company had no money. We then asked why they buy new machines and combis everytime if they don't have money. We were angry. We said why don't they use that money to pay the workers. Instead they only pay large bonuses to foremen. They also told us Rosslyn's dispute has nothing to do with Blackheath. But we replied ... an injury to one is an injury to all ... that shocked them!

Hulse was, from all reports, clearly upset at the slanging match in which he came off second best. The courtesy usually accorded management was discarded. Instead a militant mood developed and the shouts of, "jy lieg!, jy lieg!" (you lying; you lying) echoed in the factory. The extent of workers anger and their unity was a shock to management who had, to date, never contended with any major industrial action at Blackheath. When Hulse told workers to go back to work, the majority ignored him. Some even shouted back ... "we won't!"

"That is how the strike started. After lunch no-one went back to work. We told the supervisor to switch off the machines," said one worker. Enquires by foremen were met with the terse reply, "the management is lying, they always lie." Workers assembled at the clay compartment and just stood around. Second-line management and Hulse were milling around pleading with workers to go back to work, but were ignored, while others, more courageous, retorted, "why don't you do the work!"

With no machines running the situation became desperate. Bill Paverd, managing director, then intervened: "It was the first

time we saw this man ... we've always heard of him. He asked what the problem was ... he said the company had no money ... he said we should go back to work ... we ignored him," was the way one worker described events late in the day.

The union was called and addressed workers in the plant at 4.00 pm. But the workers were clear. They would not return until their demands were met. A meeting was arranged for the next day between the union, the workers committee and management. The day's events were a test for both parties. Workers felt threatened that they would lose their jobs. But because the mood was so militant no-one dared step out of line.

### Wednesday

On 6 March workers came to work as usual, clocked in and went to their work benches, but refused to work. The meeting between the union and the management lasted the whole day with no agreement reached. (15) The report-back meeting to the workers by the union and management was a rowdy affair. If anything it was a display of just how confident workers had become since the previous day. The union's report was greeted with shouts of "amandla" (power). But Paverd received a hostile reception. An excited worker explained what happened:

Paverd said we should think before we do anything. We should not be like sheep that stand in deep water. We replied that we were sheep before - to have taken all his nonsense! - but not now! We told him our eyes were opened, and we know what is right and wrong. The workers shouted at him, "Jy lieg! Jy lieg! Talk the truth" - but Paverd merely smiled and shook his head.

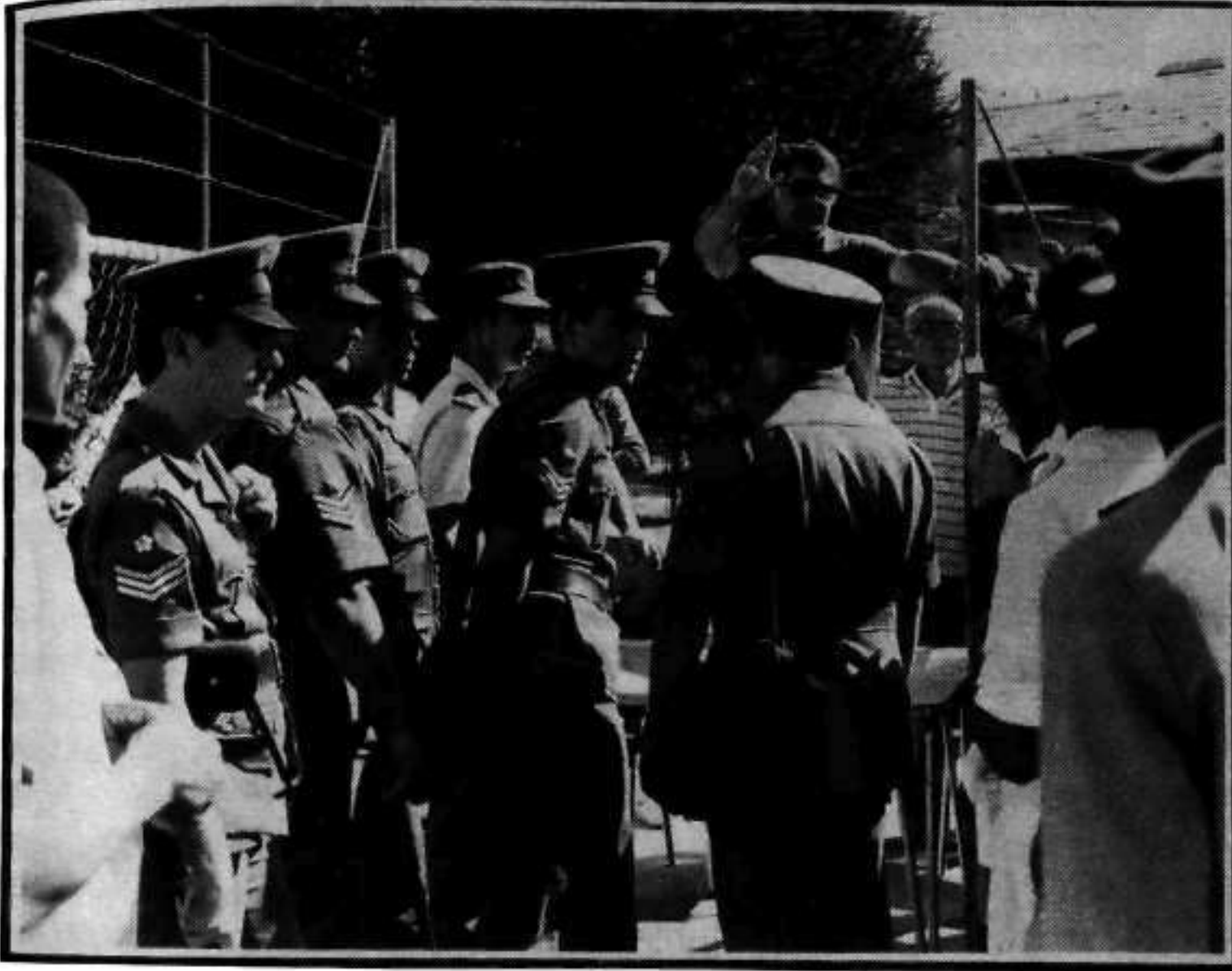
The chant "Jy lieg!" had become a war cry symbolising everything management stood for. Tension developed amongst the workers - especially towards those who were not union members. One worker, for instance, was almost beaten up for asking publicly, "where her children would get food if she lost her job". One worker explains why they responded in this fashion:

How could that women ask such a question in front of the bosses. We all have children and we are all workers. We are all suffering while on strike and we need to stand together.

Although management tried to use the situation to increase the

divisions it did not succeed. With no settlement on the first full day of the strike, the stage was set for a two week battle which was characterised by threats to close the factory.

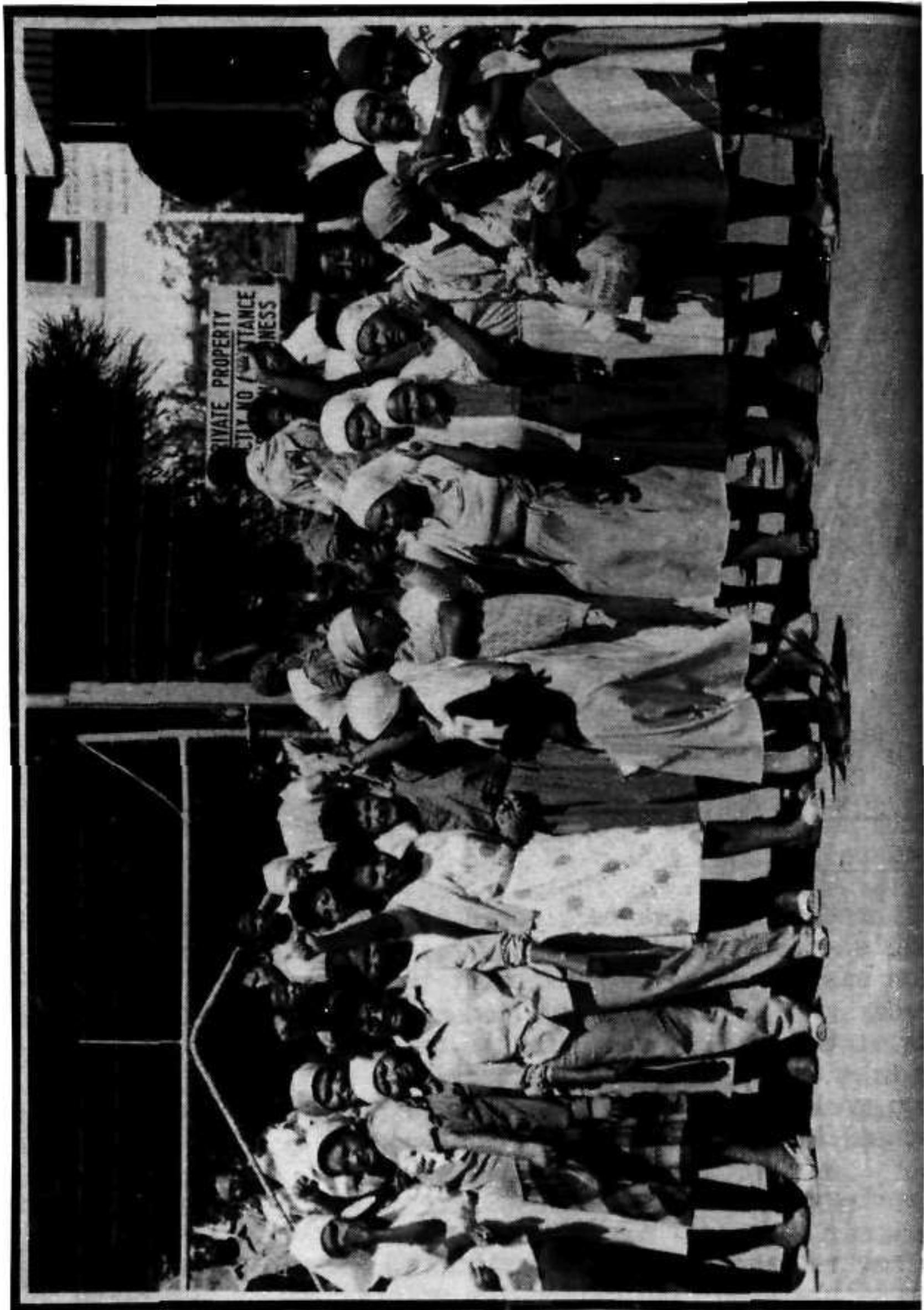
photo: police arrive at the factory gate



### Dismissal

On Thursday 7th, workers clocked in but again refused to work. SAAWU's attempt to talk to the shop stewards failed and the union was requested by management to leave. (16) Throughout the day groups of workers milled around discussing the progress of the strike; management's intransigence and the growing tension between union members and the minority of non-union members. At lunchtime, workers held a mass meeting to discuss the rumours of mass dismissals.

As workers left the factory they were handed notices terminating their services. Already visible were the security police who hovered around the factory gates. The management released a press statement indicating its preparation to negotiate wages, but stressing that the company could not meet the R2,00 per hour SAAWU was demanding. The statement added that the re-



employment of Rosslyn workers, previously dismissed because of strike action, could not take place under the present economic conditions. Lastly, they had decided to close the factory because of workers' refusal to work until their demands were met.

### Lockout

On Friday 8 February workers arrived for work, but were not allowed through. Police in private cars watched the scene closely. By 7.30 am. all the workers had arrived; the majority standing near the gate while the rest sat on the opposite side of the road. The lockout by management was designed to pay off workers with the objective of possibly selectively re-employing or recruiting entirely new staff. By 1.00 pm. the workers were joined by a large contingent of uniformed police, carrying teargas and batons. Management called them, "to enable the pay out, scheduled for 3.30 pm, to proceed smoothly."

Workers demanded to see Paverd but he did not make an appearance. Instead they were told to collect their pay packets which included a pamphlet informing them that the Continental China factory was closing and where they could be contacted if the factory decided to re-open. One or two strikers went to examine what the pay out entailed. According to their reports each worker was given 2 packets, one containing the wages and holiday money, and the other containing their unemployment card. (17) They decided not to collect their money. As far as they were concerned, they were still employees of Continental China: "We explained to the workers why they should not collect their wages, but some - mainly non-union members - insisted on taking the money," said a worker.

They were, however, in the minority (about 50), but it certainly exacerbated divisions between those committed to the strike and the 4 demands, and those who sympathized, but were not prepared to take the risks. Police tried to silence workers who were giving advice to those who were uncertain of what to do. But workers quickly turned the tables and started questioning police and their role in the strike: "They told us if we don't take our money we should go home or else we were going to get hurt. If we did not listen we would be teargassed," said one agitated worker. And it seemed the threats were serious. On the advice of the union, workers left at 5.30 pm. after deciding to meet the next day to evaluate developments.

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On Saturday the 9th, 400 workers held a meeting at Mfuleni Stadium. They were addressed by veteran trade unionist, Oscar Mpetha, who "encouraged workers to continue the fight for their rights." The purpose of the meeting was to reassure those who were worried about the future and the general uncertainty which prevailed. It was drummed home that "unity was most important at this time." On the whole the meeting was successful in raising spirits again; the mood was confident from the tone of the songs and chants. The song which became a part of the strike reflected workers bitterness at their exploitation, their desire for non-racial worker unity and a better deal. Sung in Afrikaans it was filled with anger:

Daai geld, daai geld is onse geld,  
maar die boere verdien dai geld.  
Hulle sit op hul gat, hulle maak die wette,  
Die "swartes" and die "bruines" werk ewe hard,  
maar die boere verdie daai geld.

[That money, that money is our money  
but the whites (bosses) are earning the money.  
They sit on heir backsides, they make the laws,  
The "Africans" and the "Coloureds" work just as hard  
but the whites (bosses) are earning the money.]

On this high note workers entered the second week of the strike, although anxious to reach a settlement because many were already beginning to feel the financial pinch at home. But everyone was suffering and to complain would only assist the bosses.

On Monday 11 March, negotiations between SAAWU and Continental China were re-opened but according to a SAAWU official, Whittles, "nothing constructive took place ... discussions were up in the air." According to the management press release, SAAWU refused to negotiate before all the workers were re-employed. On the other hand, management was not prepared to re-employ without an agreement that, once re-employed, the people would work. Throughout the day workers sat at the factory gates to ensure that no scab labour was employed. After the negotiations the union reported back to the workers.

The deadlock necessitated much more pressure on management than hitherto, and SAAWU decided to approach prominent community spokespeople like Oscar Mpetha and Allan Boesak to phone or send telegrams to management requesting a speedy settle

ment. But Whittles emphasised that, "we did not rely on them to bring a settlement, but only to add pressure. We could only rely on the unity and strength of the workers." (18) Also approached was the Western Cape Traders Association (WCTA) who threatened the company with a boycott of its products if workers' demands were not met. (19) The initial meeting between Paverd and the WCTA, where the Continental China's books were scrutinised, resulted in Cassiem Allie and Mr H Eshack being asked to act as mediators in the dispute. The WCTA had previously been involved in the Fattis and Moni's boycott, Simba Quix and also Dairy Belle. The organisation, comprising 2,000 small and big traders, is an affiliate of the UDF and according to a spokesperson, "the involvement in boycott campaigns is to flex our buying power in order to drive some sense into the managements' minds."

On 13 March, SAAWU, Continental China, with WCTA as mediators, re-opened negotiations. Pressure on SAAWU to settle was evident as complaints were streaming in to the workers committee: "no bread, no milk ... no food ... my baby needs this or that urgency of the situation but wanted to see how far they could push management. Their hostility was however clear as they refused to accept management's offer of tea and sandwiches because "our brothers and sisters are starving outside." To break the deadlock management made an offer of R1,80 per hour with a 15% minimum increase, but they were not prepared to negotiate on the Rosslyn issue. (20) They insisted that the Blackheath dispute and Rosslyn strike were different and that the issues should be separated. The increase was a significant departure from their previous stance. At face value the wage increase seemed reasonable, but the workers committee first had to report to the workers.

Meanwhile the workers gathered at a Catholic Church Hall in Eerste Rivier where they ironed out differences amongst themselves about the strike. At the meeting were also the non-union members who tried to justify why they took their wages. This discussion and criticism session, followed by union songs, assisted in consolidating unity and brought the non-union members nearer to the rest of the workers. Workers were not happy with management's offer and instead proposed that the wage demand be R1,90 per hour plus 15% minimum increase backdated to 1 March and that strike pay be paid to the workers. They also insisted on the reinstatement of the Rosslyn workers. (21) But

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management refused and no settlement was reached on 14 March.

Paverd was throughout the strike in close contact with the Continental China Group chairman and shareholders, but denies he was under pressure to settle. SAAWU met the workers again over the weekend. Although workers wanted all the demands met, the financial pressures at home, the fact that a wage increase was given and the fact that the Blackheath worker sent to train new employees at Rosslyn was to return shortly, were all given serious consideration. Moreover a settlement was imperative if they were not to suffer the same fate as the Rosslyn workers. When negotiations re-opened on Monday 18 March, with WCTA again as mediators, a settlement was reached. The major points of the agreement were:

- \* Re-employment of all employees dismissed on Thursday 7 March with effect from 25 March without loss of pension or service benefits
- \* A minimum rate of R1,80 per hour with a minimum increase of 15% from 1 April 1985. The company undertook to negotiate a further increase to a minimum of R1,90 per hour during August, providing that profits permit
- \* No strike pay will be paid
- \* Workers undertake to work on return
- \* The management and SAAWU agree to negotiate the Rosslyn issue at Rosslyn
- \* Management undertakes to bring back the Blackheath employee from Rosslyn by 25 March. (22)

### Assessment

The strike was not a wholesale victory for the workers. But neither was it a defeat. With 2 of their demands met and the re-instatement of the Rosslyn workers still to be negotiated, they made considerable advances. In recessionary conditions, with high unemployment and rampant inflation, unions involved in strikes require enormous flexibility in their tactics. Protracted and unresolved strikes present management with an opportunity to smash unions. SAAWU's defeat in Rosslyn is a case in point. To adopt a hardline before fully consolidating courts disaster. Under the prevailing conditions pragmatism is necessary to protect and consolidate organisational gains and so as not to discourage the unorganised from joining unions. From reports, many workers in Brits are very cautious of unions since the SAAWU strike at Rosslyn.



Although strikes have not subsided in the recession, the possibility of outright victory for workers is reduced. Concessions are inevitable - as at SASOL and Bakers (25) - as managements try to maintain profit levels and use every excuse to retrench staff. Similarly, SAAWU's handling of the strike at Blackheath was more realistic and sensitive, probably reflecting the sheer pressure from workers - financial commitments, unemployment etc.

The Bakers' Biscuit strike, earlier this year, had two lessons that are relevant here. In a recession particularly, workers' extended families are under greater financial pressure. They need to be informed of the reasons for the action taken, and involved by the union in order to minimise domestic pressures on strikers. Nationally strikes are becoming longer and more bitter. (24) However, it seems that there is a cut off point for workers in terms of the hardship they can endure; and for management the point is reached where costs are such that a more fundamental reorganisation is contemplated, perhaps involving rationalisation beyond the particular plant. In other words a point may be reached where it is essential for the union to reach a compromise if it is to prevent its organisation in the plant being smashed completely.

Whether the threatened boycott by WCTA of Continental China was really a major issue is unclear. Management lost an average of R40,000 per day during the strike. At that rate it meant severe problems for the Group as a whole. A settlement was necessary. Engaging an entirely new workforce would have involved high training costs and would have probably reduced output for months. Had management remained intransigent, it could very well have meant the closure of the factory.

SAAWU has already started organising the other two Continental China plants in Grahamstown and Atlantis. Atlantis and Blackheath have mainly "Coloured" workers and their organisation by SAAWU represents an important departure. SAAWU's strategy in this case - its national organisation of workers in a particular industry - is a major shift from its usual strategy of regional general unionism. Whether this is the exception or the beginnings of a more sustained process of industrial demarcation remains to be seen.

Footnotes:

- 1 Memorandum 1: "Major events in relationship between Continental China and SAAWU", 1984
- 2 Continental China Group, History of growth and company structure, January 1981
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Otto Kramer, "Continental China shapes up for the future", Brief: Industrial Ceramics Vol 2, 1984, pp6-8
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Continental China, Leaders in the tableware market, brochure 1984
- 7 Interview 22.3.85: Otto Kramer, industrial engineer, technical director of Continental China Group
- 8 The Management disagree that the work process has any major occupational or industrial hazards
- 9 Memorandum 1
- 10 Ibid
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Interview 22.3.85: Bill Paverd
- 13 Continental China, press release 6.2.85
- 14 SAAWU is organising generally and this is likely to cause problems later especially if they move into industries organised by the "unity unions"
- 15 Continental China, press release 7.3.85
- 16 Memorandum 2: "Major events in the relationship between Continental China Blackheath and SAAWU"
- 17 Cape Herald 11.3.85
- 18 Boesak did send a telegram
- 19 Interview 22.3.85: Cassiem Allie, secretary of the WCTA
- 20 Memorandum 2
- 21 Ibid
- 22 Continental China, press release 18.3.85 and Cape Herald 23.3.85
- 23 See SALB 10.5, March-April 1985
- 24 RDM Business Day 11.3.85

Postscript: On April 10, police arrested 241 dismissed workers picketing outside the Rosslyn plant. They are to be charged with intimidation. SAAWU organiser, Mrs Tshini Mlondo, said the campaign against Continental China had been postponed earlier this year after management indicated a willingness to negotiate the reinstatement of the sacked workers. A boycott campaign is now contemplated.