

SACWU in the Western Cape: the Plascon Strike

The South African Chemical Workers' Union has firmly established its presence in the Western Cape. A measure of this union's strength can be found in its recent protracted strike over wages at Plascon Paints in Cape Town. Four Plascon plants in the Transvaal and two paint factories in Cape Town, one a Plascon subsidiary, came out in support of the strike, which lasted six weeks.



The strike at the Cape Town plant also indicated the union's past successes in its battle to protect workers on legal strike. Unlike the national legal strike at AECI two years ago, where workers were driven back to work by threats of dismissal, the Cape Town Plascon workers, whose strike was legal, not only kept their jobs after a six week strike, but gained significant wage increases, albeit substantially lower than their initial demand. Their success was an indication of the way in which not only SACWU, which is affiliated to the Council of Unions of South Africa, but other unions as well like the National Union of Mineworkers and the Metal and Allied Workers Union, have fought to protect workers on legal strike from management reprisals.

A total of 141 workers at Plascon Paints in Epping went on strike on February 7 this year, the day after they held a ballot. Wage negotiations had deadlocked on December 20 last year, with the company offering a R50 a month across the board increase and the union demanding R200 a month. The union followed legal channels, and when the Minister of Manpower failed to appoint a conciliation board in January, the way for a legal strike was clear.

SACWU has been organised at Plascon in Cape Town since September, 1983 and has 141 members out of about 200 factory workers. The total workforce at the Epping plant in Cape Town is about 300.

A further attempt at mediation on February 23 failed when the workers refused to accept a revised wage offer by the company of R65 a month. At that stage, the union had reduced its demand to R150. However, the workers decided to suspend their strike and returned to "consider other methods of winning their demands", according to SACWU branch secretary, Patricia de Lille, who is

also a laboratory assistant at Plascon.

National solidarity

SACWU has majority membership at five out of seven Plascon plants; four in the Transvaal and one in Cape Town. The COSATU affiliated Chemical Workers' Industrial Union is organised at the Plascon plants in Port Elizabeth and Durban.

Against SACWU's wishes, annual wage negotiations at Plascon are carried out on a plant and not national level. Although negotiations were going on around the country simultaneously, the Epping workers were the only ones to declare an official dispute and then embark on a legal strike. However, shortly after the legal strike in Cape town started, workers at the four Transvaal Plascon plants, and one Cape subsidiary decided to take solidarity action and express their demand for a similar wage increase. In addition, about 60 workers at Vadek paints, a Cape Town factory organised by SACWU but not connected with Plascon, demonstrated briefly in support of Plascon workers' wage demands.

Three days after returning to work and suspending the strike, the Epping workers heard that 462 workers at Plascon Parthenon in Luipardsvlei near Krugersdorp had been dismissed following a stoppage. The workers had been staging a go-slow in support of the Cape Town workers until a shop steward in the warehouse was suspended. The workers downed tools in protest and after ignoring a two hour ultimatum to return to work were dismissed on February 25. About 90 workers at Polycell, a Plascon subsidiary in Alberton also downed tools and were also dismissed. On Thursday February 27, the Plascon workers in Epping began a go-slow and the following day "downed tools completely" in support of the dismissed workers, according to de Lille. By March 2, a total of 5 factories had come out in support of the dismissed workers of Luipardsvlei and Polycell in Alberton. Apart from Epping they were Plascon Evans, Doornfontein, Inmont SA (a Plascon subsidiary) in Johannesburg and Cape Town and National Importers and Packers in Wadeville, Germiston.

"We explained to the management that this was a sympathy strike and had nothing to do with our (legal) wage strike, which we had suspended," said de Lille. However, the management at Plascon was initially not keen to separate the issues. "When we returned to work on March 3 we were locked out. The company said we must first sign a wage agreement before allowing us onto the premises. We

said they were mixing the issues and we refused to do this," said de Lille.

Workers from Vadek, a relatively small company staged a march at this time in support of the locked-out workers. Inmont who, in spite of being a Plascon subsidiary, held separate wage negotiations, stayed out with the Plascon workers until March 18 when they had negotiated a settlement.

Settlement

The Plascon workers in Epping at this stage, then, had two major demands: the one revolving around wages, the other around the reinstatement of the dismissed workers in the Transvaal.

On March 9 a conciliation board, with a chairman appointed by the Department of Manpower, met again in an attempt to resolve the primary wage dispute. The union was somewhat taken aback, according to local organiser Sizakele Mahluthshana, when it was informed that in terms of an amendment to the Labour Relations Act, the board was not empowered to discuss wages or hours of work. However, as a result of the meeting, the union entered direct negotiations with Plascon.

"The whole thing then became a bit tricky," recalls de Lille. "The management said that if we in Cape Town resolved the wage dispute then they would reinstate the Transvaal workers. They also came down in their offer of R65 to R52. It was clear they were trying to use the situation in the Transvaal to pressurize us into accepting their wage offer. We then came down in our demand to R60 a month from January and a further increase of R30 a month from July. We couldn't agree and the workers decided to stay out."

The ten days between that failed meeting and actual settlement of the strike saw intensive community and political support for the strike in the Western Cape. According to SACWU, the United Democratic Front was at first a little wary of assisting the workers because of their ties with CUSA but subsequently changed its position after appeals from the workers. The tiny Clothing Workers Union produced pamphlets, the Media Workers Association helped provide food for the strikers and the Call of Islam, the Western Cape Traders' Association and the Western Province Council of Churches also provided aid.

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On March 18 new negotiations began and a settlement was reached. Workers finally agreed to a R52 wage increase and a R24 travelling allowance per month, making a total of R76 which will be implemented in full from July 1. The Transvaal workers were reinstated and they too won a R76 a month increase, although the division between the travelling allowance and increase was slightly different. The Plascon workers in Cape Town also negotiated five days extra leave after five years of service, improved maternity benefits and better overtime rates.

From July 1, the minimum wage for Plascon workers will be R513 a month. "We felt this was a very big achievement for us," said de Lille. "With wage negotiations and fighting dismissals, we manage to satisfy our members." Asked what she thought had contributed to the solidarity during the strike, de Lille said that shop stewards had said "only a worker could free a worker."

SACWU, with a membership of about 1,500 in the Western Cape, aims to consolidate its position in the paint industry in the region by the end of the year, said Mahlutshana.

There are five major paint factories in the Western Cape, four of which are organised by SACWU. The union also has a strong presence at nine chemical factories, including the giant AECI explosives factory at Somerset West and the AECI cyanide and plastics factory. "Our aim is also to start negotiating on a national level in companies where we have national representation," said de Lille

The only other major independent trade union in the chemical industry is the COSATU affiliate and former FOSATU affiliate, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, which has a strong presence in the Eastern Cape, Natal and the Transvaal. The Plastics and Allied Workers' Union operates in the Western Cape, but has only about 500 members. It has been co-operating closely with the SACWU branch in the Western Cape. Evenso, PAWU has decided to merge with CWIU and thus join COSATU.

(Pippa Green, May 1986)