

BCAWU: On Site



As well as organising in factories producing building materials (see SALBs 10.5 and 10.3) the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union also organises building workers in construction. This is a notoriously difficult sector to organise due to the seasonal and economic fluctuations in the industry and to the fact that there are no fixed workplaces - sites close after the completion of a job and workers move on. In South Africa the high number of construction workers who are migrant contract workers adds a further dimension to the picture.

Concor Construction

Some 7-800 Concor construction workers - employed on the Matimba power station near Ellisras in the north-western Transvaal - stopped work on Saturday April 19 to protest at the dismissal of a shop steward. The management responded with mass dismissals and repatriation of the workers to the various "homelands". Some of the workers took their protest to the head offices of the company in Johannesburg - using for transport the very buses provided by the company for their deportation!

Prior to these events the workers had started to organise into a union - the BCAWU which arrived on site earlier in the year - and had elected 5 shopstewards to represent them. The principal grievance was wages - the basic rate is 97c an hour. The workers formulated the demand for an increase of R2,00 an hour across the board and the shopstewards approached management. The workers' demand was rejected - according to management because workers had already received an increase of 7,7% in March. At this stage, say the workers, one of their shop stewards was dismissed. A stoppage ensued - but it was on a Saturday when the workers felt they had every right to withdraw from overtime working. Management's response was to dismiss workers. They were instructed to report on the Monday to receive outstanding wages. On the Monday the police were present, seeking to break up the workers into small groups in order, according to the union, to intimidate them back to work. At 4.00pm the buses arrived and the deportations commenced. But management had not considered that workers might have their own feelings on the matter: "workers control" was established on some

of the buses and the drivers instructed to make for Crown Mines where 400 workers spent the night outside the Concor headquarters. At this stage union officials also became involved in order to represent the workers. However, the company did not respond positively, say union officials.

Since then the union has continued to press the workers' case. Many of the dismissed workers have now been re-employed. The union, however, says it was not possible to contact all the workers dispersed to the homelands. Moreover, they say that Concor is re-employing selectively, and they fear that union activists will not be taken back.

Murray and Roberts

The building industry has been hard hit by the recession. But when Murray and Roberts Transvaal Services (Elandsfontein; employing 300) and Murray and Roberts Engineering (Carltonville; employing 250) decided to retrench 57 workers they did not even consult with the workers' union, the BCAWU.

At the time the union was still negotiating for a recognition agreement - and there were no laid down procedures. The union nonetheless prepared an action against the company under section 43 of the Labour Relations Act. At this point the company asked for an out of court settlement. The retrenched workers were re-instated and the company subsequently signed a recognition agreement. The union views this as an important victory which will ensure greater respect for workers' rights.

David Beckett Construction

The David Beckett Construction Company (Bryanston) which employs about 70 workers, dismissed 9 when they arrived late to renew their call-in cards in January this year. The BCAWU charged the company with failing to take account of the problems associated with the contract labour system. Workers receive leave once a year, they return to the "homelands", and sometimes there are matters which have to be attended to immediately - since they cannot be at home for the rest of the year.

The union took the matter to the Industrial Council but were not satisfied with the outcome. Initially the company had seemed ready to settle. But after the Industrial Council members hearing the

case had caucused separately with the company, according to union representatives, the atmosphere changed. The company's attitude hardened and they refused to address the issue of re-instatement.

This attitude did not surprise the union which has already been refused a place on the Industrial Council which is effectively governed by an alliance of conservative employers and conservative "craft" union. The employers' response, said one union official, "was in line with usual practices in construction of dehumanising workers."

The union has since made an application to the Industrial Court under section 46 of the Act for permanent re-instatement. The company has since requested an out of court settlement, paying lost time to the dismissed workers and re-instating them. A union official warned that building employers should "respect workers' rights while time still allows. Workers are getting impatient over prevailing conditions."

Bilhard Construction

In 1984 two shop stewards were dismissed by Bilhard Construction (Kempton Park; employing 220 workers). When the workers committee tried to get the two re-instated, a third shop steward was sacked. Workers responded by striking in solidarity. The police were brought in and another 8 shop stewards were arrested for trespass. The management refused to discuss the matter with the workers and the shop stewards remained in custody for 1 week.

From there the BCAWU pursued the matter through their lawyers. During 1985 the company requested an out of court settlement which involved compensation and re-instatement for the dismissed workers. The union is currently negotiating for a recognition agreement.

Postscript: In the last week of May 290 Concor workers at sites in Amalgam, Johannesburg and Westonaria were dismissed after an illegal two-day strike. Workers demanded a minimum wage of R2,30 an hour (presently R1,56), an additional 70 cents across the board, and free protective clothing. The company's position was that no increase would be considered before September. Meanwhile union members at Concor concerns in Klerksdorp, Olifantsfontein, Welkom and Carletonville threatened solidarity action. After meeting with the union, Concor offered workers their jobs back, and agreed to provide free protective clothing.