MWASA – trying to set the deadlines

Media Study Group

The defeat of the recent national strike by members of the Media Workers' Association of South Africa (Mwasa) has valuable lessons for all labour-based organisations in this country.

Although it has been argued that Mwasa was the actual victor in the two-month struggle, at best it achieved no more than a moral victory: the Union is in a far weaker position than at the start of the strike, its leading activists (in the Transvaal and Natal) have been banned, and the country's two biggest black newspapers have been refused re-registration. In this article we have attempted to do no more than examine the problems arising from Mwasa's tactical and ideological positions during the strike.

We have distinguished between the strike by *Cape Herald* Mwasa members and workers, and the resultant national strike by Mwasa members. We have done this because the tactics adopted were markedly different, although the two strikes were seen by many as one and the same.

On the eve of the *Herald* strike on October 24, 1980, Mwasa, journalists and media workers generally were in a far stronger position in relation to their bosses than they had been for years.

- Two months previously, media workers at *Post* had won substantial pay improvements for journalists and non-journalists alike, after a week-long strike. Management was moving, however reluctantly, towards formal recognition of Mwasa on the Union's terms. This victory and the decision to transform from the black-journalists-only Wasa into the industry-wide Mwasa had sparked substantial support and interest from journalists and non-journalists in the media industry.

  In addition, the Union felt confident enough of its strength to plan a conference in June (this year) of all unions organising black employees in the media industry, with a view to forming an umbrella union.
- The non-racial Southern African Society of Journalists had recently won substantial salary improvements for journalists in an arbitration that also enforced, for the first time, mandatory, across-the-board increases. The SASJ also successfully eliminated, through the arbitration, formal racial discrimination in job gradings for journalists. Since the arbitration, membership of the SASJ had increased and, for the first time, white journalists began to recognise their bargaining power.

- In April, 1980, Allied Publishing, the distribution wing of Argus and SA Associated Newspapers, granted formal recognition to the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) in response to threats of strike action by Allied workers (drivers and newspaper sellers). At the same time, it granted wage increases of between 30 and 60 percent to all workers.

With these successes as a background, representatives of workers at the *Cape Herald* set out demands for increased pay, on a scale similar to that achieved in August at *Post*, for journalists and non-journalists, and improved working conditions – an end to unpaid overtime etc. When these conditions were not met by the October 24 deadline, the Herald employees went out on strike in support of their demands, adding a third: that strikers should be paid for the duration of their strike. Within a week, the Herald strikers had been joined in a solidarity strike by Mwasa members throughout the country, while Argus managing director Hal Miller said he would not discuss the demands until the strikers were back at work.

Community support in the Western Cape seemed assured for the Herald strikers. The Western Cape Traders' Association asked its members not to stock the Herald or advertise in it. Within two weeks, Herald management – and the management of the Argus Company, which owns the Herald – agreed to meet the strikers. After lengthy negotiations, management agreed to meet the strikers' demands on pay (and in some cases to improve on the strikers' pay demands). They refused however to meet the demand for pay during the strike. But with their major demands more than satisfied, the Herald journalists and workers were willing to return to work.

In the meantime, Mwasa's national leadership, dominated by Johannesburg-based journalists, had added their own strike demands in addition to the demand that the Herald strike be resolved to the Cape strikers' satisfaction; Mwasa called for payment of *all* strikers, including the solidarity strikers, and a national recognition agreement between Mwasa and the employers. This placed the Herald strikers in an extremely difficult position. If they went back after winning a major labour victory, they would be accused – as they were – of strike-breaking in *their own* strike.

Despite this, the Herald strikers returned to work, recognising that to continue striking after their victory would have fragmented their unity (non-journalist strikers were keen to return once they had won their pay demands).

As Herald strikers wrote in *Grassroots* (December, 1980) after their return: "The Herald . . . learnt that to prolong a strike after winning the major pay victory, posed certain problems. To go for total victory was unrealistic, the continuing of the strike led to unity breaking down."

In the Eastern Cape, in line with the original Mwasa solidarity decision to strike until the Herald strikers' demands were met to their own satisfaction, Mwasa strikers returned to work a week later. In doing so they achieved their own minor victory: they had set a demand – the resolution of the Herald strike – and with

the achievement of that demand they returned to work on their own terms.

The rest of the Union, however, continued its strike, but now in persuance of its own demands.

These demands, for national recognition of Mwasa and pay while on strike for all strikers, including the sympathy strikers, remained the central issues throughout the remaining six weeks of the strike (although the entire episode was further complicated by the firing or suspension of all striking journalists, a move which forced the Herald and Eastern Cape branches out on strike again; this time in sympathy with the sympathy strikers).

These demands and, more particularly, the methods adopted by Mwasa in its attempt to enforce them, demonstrate clearly why the strike failed (and the incorrectness of Mwasa's ideology and the shortcomings of its tactics).

There were clear indications before the strike that managements of the various newspapers were prepared to negotiate with Mwasa. During the wage negotiations between the SASJ and managements before the SASJ's arbitration victory, managements had agreed to Mwasa taking half the journalists' seats in the joint journalists-management concilliation board.

In addition, Post management had agreed to discuss the negotiation process with Mwasa after the August Post strike.

The Herald strikers' victory finally demonstrated that management would negotiate with the Union.

Although on the face of it, national recognition was the most important of the sympathy strikers' demands, it was in fact practically a non-issue.

It was against the remaining demand, that of pay while on strike, that management fought hardest. Mwasa argued that management stubbornness had forced its members out on strike, therefore the managements, not the strikers should pay for the lost time.

There is no question that Mwasa was right: management intransigence over the Herald journalists' and workers' pay had forced employees out on strike to achieve their demands. But the same holds true for all strikes – workers down tools because it is the only way they can force their bosses to take heed of their grievances. Strikes are won or lost with the resolution of those grievances. *Acknowledgement* by the bosses – in the form of pay for lost time – that they were wrong to have created the grievances may be emotionally soothing, but has little to do with victory in the strike. *Yet Mwasa stayed out for six weeks on the basis of one non-negotiable demand; that newspaper managements do just that.* And having made this a non-negotiable demand, Mwasa turned a substantial fictory into a resounding defeat in which its members had to return to their desks, with their "non-negotiable" unmet.

Mwasa used the "non-negotiable" paid-strike issue as a test of its strength in the newspapers, and of the community support it could generate against the newspapers. To have won, as Mwasa leadership in the Transvaal clearly believed inevit-

able – waverers among its members were again and again assured that "victory is certain" – would have dramatically strengthened Mwasa's bargaining power in the achievement of its main aim: increased control of the media. But it massively overplayed its hand: its 200-odd members were able to hurt newspaper profits only at *Post*. Extra editions continued to appear, often with the support of trade unions and community organisations which Mwasa had considered as allies. And because of the contradictions inherent in supporting a boycott of the very medium many organisations relied on to popularise and generate support for their struggles, Mwasa's newspaper boycott/news blackout call in the black communities met at best with reluctant support, and at worst with active opposition (see below).

With its black consciousness, racial interpretation of the struggle in South Africa, Mwasa saw itself as an integral part of a hetrogenuous black community with the same aspirations and interests. As the logical mouthpiece of this community, it saw its struggle as one for greater participation in editorial decision-making processes and for affirmative action in black journalistic employment. It also sought to promote greater participation by this community – "the people" – in the struggle for one of South Africa's ideological apparatuses, the press.

Because it saw itself as struggling *on behalf* of the community, Mwasa expected immediate and automatic support from this community after it made the call for a newspaper boycott/news blackout. The failure of these calls to generate the expected support – which would have seriously damaged the press, reliant as it is on high readership figures for advertising sales – came from Mwasa's failure to recognise that community boycotts need to have clearly-defined, achievable aims, and need to be rooted in the daily realities of the communities.

As a result, Mwasa was faced with the problem of attempting to popularise what was essentially a struggle over a *moral principle*, strike pay.

In addition, Mwasa's call for a boycott placed trade unions and community organisations in the dilemma of having to act against their own interests to support the boycott. To go against Mwasa's call would be to open themselves up to being labelled strike-breakers – as they were. But to back the boycott would mean cutting off their access to the media, on which many relied to popularise and generate support for their own struggles.

To have supported the boycott would have meant, to some extent, suspending their own struggles until Mwasa had won its battle. And such a sacrifice on behalf of a financially more privileged group would have been a bitter pill for many. The result was that during the strike, when organisations did make public statements in support of Mwasa – and many did not – they, for the most part, significantly failed to mention their attitude to the boycott. Examples of this were Cosas and the SA Allied Workers' Union.

SAAWU, in addition, publically criticised Mwasa's racial exclusivity, as did the Natal Indian Congress – which, along with the SA Council of Sport, publically opposed a media boycott or news blackout.

Besides being generally detrimental to community and working-class struggles, Mwasa's call for a blackout was self-destructive. Without the organisational framework or community base to publicise its call, and because Mwasa itself was boycotting the media – with the exception of the foreign press, The Voice and Bophutatswana's Channel 702 – the Union was in the contradictory position of being able to spread its call only with the widespread publicity the "boycotted" media could have given it.

One exception to this was in the areas surrounding Pietersburg, where Azapo (Mwasa's only unconditional supporter) has a strong, well-organised community base and was able, without the media to popularise the boycott/blackout call.

The result was that, although *Post* was closed, its opposition publications, particularly the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Soweto News* picked up circulation. *Post* was also adversely affected financially through its loss in advertising. But with SAAN (owners of the *RDM* and *Soweto News*) and Argus having extensive joint holdings and a virtual monopoly of the English-language press, the closure of *Post* therefore had little effect.

Earlier examples of the potential success of similar boycott strategies are the boycotts generated by strikes in the Cape meat industry and at Fattis and Monis in Cape Town. These two groups of workers and their unions were able successfully to challenge their employers' oppressive and exploitative labour practices with the help of extensive community support. But this was only possible with the establishment of broadly-based support groups in the major centres, which (rather than assume, as Mwasa did, that spontaneous support would come from a supposedly heterogenuous black community of common interest) worked energetically to popularise the boycott calls and to mobilise community support around them.

Mwasa's BC philosophy also led it to actively reject the support of its most logical allies – other journalists of whatever race. In the initial stages of the national strike, SASJ chapels (local union branches) throughout the country expressed strong support for the strikers, many of them agreeing to refuse to participate in the production of extra editions. Some organised financial backing for the strikers.

But, particularly in the Transvaal, with the active rejection by Mwasa of any "white" solidarity or assistance, much of this solidarity collapsed, and progressive journalists in the SASJ lost much of the ground they have gained in the Union over the past two years.

The SASJ has always been ambivilant towards Mwasa and its predecessors, Wasa and the banned Union of Black Journalists, all of which adopted a militant BC philosophy. But with a change of leadership in 1979, progressive white journalists were able to establish a cordial working relationship with black journalists.

Despite strong conservative opposition, within the Union, the SASJ managed to gain sufficient support for its pro-Mwasa position to enable it to offer half its seats in the 1979 concilliation board (see above) to Mwasa, despite the fact that

the SASJ represent 700 journalists, compared to Mwasa's 200 (at that time).

With Mwasa's extremely hostile response to SASJ solidarity during the strike, the initiative was lost to conservatives in the organisation. Despite this, 15 white journalists in Johannesburg actually took part in a one-day solidarity strike and – like their black fellow-strikers – were suspended.

In summary then, Mwasa lost its strike for these reasons:

- It attempted to develop a short-term pay strike (at the Herald) into a national campaign in support of *long-term* demands.
- It failed to recognise that these long-term demands were unachievable *at this stage*, but declared that its members would not return to work until these demands were met.
- By viewing an industrial dispute in purely racial terms, it actively excluded potential allies.
- It failed to recognise the contradictions inherent in attempting to mobilise community support around its particular demands, with the result that its boycott/blackout call met with little support.

In addition, Mwasa erred in its failure to recognise that expanding the Herald strike into a national strike over broader issues would attract the wrath not only of management, but also of the state.

The Union did not recognise that in attempting to stop the production and sale of newspapers, they were not merely trying to stop the sale and production of a commodity, but of a commodity which served the dual purpose of generating profit and of perpetuating the dominant ideology in South Africa.

Newspapers in capitalist society which aim at commercial success – through advertising revenue, as is the case with all South African newspapers – must support the economic status quo, or risk self-destruction. Any attempt to subvert this support would clearly attract the attention of a state apperatus traditionally highly sensitive about the role of the media.

Although *Post's* survival was possibly in doubt anyway, it is not without significance that the actions of the state and the Argus bosses, intentionally or otherwise, had the joint effect – through bannings, dismissals and the relocation of staff at *Post*, now *Sowetan*, – of severely weakening the Union and of ensuring a far tamer newspaper.