

Nels/Bliss workers fight on

The struggle to reinstate 750 Nels/Bliss workers continues nine months after they were fired for allegedly participating in an "illegal" strike. Management has consistently refused to talk to the union, the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) throughout the dispute. In fact Nels management have followed a negative, anti-union attitude ever since CCAWUSA first started organising at the three plants. Labour relations methods at Nels are generally heavy-handed; at the height of the strike organiser Oscar Malgas was threatened with a pistol as he tried to enter the premises to talk to management. There have also been signs of open collaboration with the police. Nels management were amongst the first to feel the benefits of the State of Emergency as police detained striking workers.

Now CCAWUSA has resolved to step up the pressure against Nels/Bliss. Given that all attempts at negotiation have failed CCAWUSA claims that they are now forced to "break Nels/Bliss if they continue their hardline and negative attitude towards us".

For the workers the dispute has caused hardship and suffering. Many of the workers are migrants, they are particularly vulnerable to mass dismissal. Workers have faced months without any income, and periodic evictions from their hostels in Alexandra and Denver because they cannot pay rents. Their dependants are also suffering; workers say that they are extremely anxious about not sending anything home for months now. Each day the workers congregate at the union head-office to eat mealie-meal and soup which is provided for their subsistence. Nevertheless the determination to carry on is high; meetings are held regularly to discuss methods of sustaining their action. Some workers are also thinking of putting on a play which will record their struggle.

Background to the strike

The strike began on the June 10 1986 after six workers, according to the union, were unfairly dismissed by management. This coupled with bad working conditions, low pay, and managements refusal to recognise their union resulted in a spontaneous strike at one plant. During the day management met with the workers and they resolved to return to work the following day. However on

their return the next day three of the union shop-stewards were suspended. CCAWUSA then tried to contact management but the organiser was barred from entering the premises. Workers subsequently went out on a strike at all Nels plants on the 18th, demanding the reinstatement of their colleagues, recognition of the union, and payment for the period out of work. Management however responded by issuing an ultimatum to return to work or face dismissal. Later that day police were called in. They then proceeded to detain 999 of the workers. On their release two weeks later six of the workers were charged with murder for allegedly attacking scabs. (Two have now been released for lack of evidence.)

Management has tried all means to demoralize the workers. Scabs have been brought in and are maintaining production of Nels/Bliss products, twenty of the workers who were living on company premises have been evicted. Attempts to evict workers living in the hostels have also been made. CCAWUSA maintains that the union repeatedly tried to contact management whilst workers were in detention. All attempts however were ignored.

Solidarity for Nels/Bliss Workers

The period since June has been taken up with various tactics for pressurising management. Sympathy strike action at Checkers and Pick and Pay stores in December last year saw some success. Workers sat in for two to three hours during which time demands were put forward to remove all Nels/Bliss products from the shelves. Workers also demanded that management give an undertaking not to replace these products until Nels had spoken to their union. Action stopped after Pick and Pay then gave an undertaking to approach Nels. A meeting subsequently took place between CCAWUSA and Nels; however the union claims that the meeting was a dismal failure. According to organiser, Oscar Malgas the meeting lasted one hour, during which time management simply re-informed the union of their unwillingness to talk. An unacceptable proposal to reinstate only 365 of the workers, many of these already scabs, was also put forward.

CCAUSA has received some support in the community. Shopowners in Soweto and Alexandra townships are not ordering Nels/Bliss products, while a fairly successful consumer boycott is taking place. The union promises that the pressure will be maintained and the struggle of Nels workers will not be forgotten.
(Coletane Markham, March 1987)