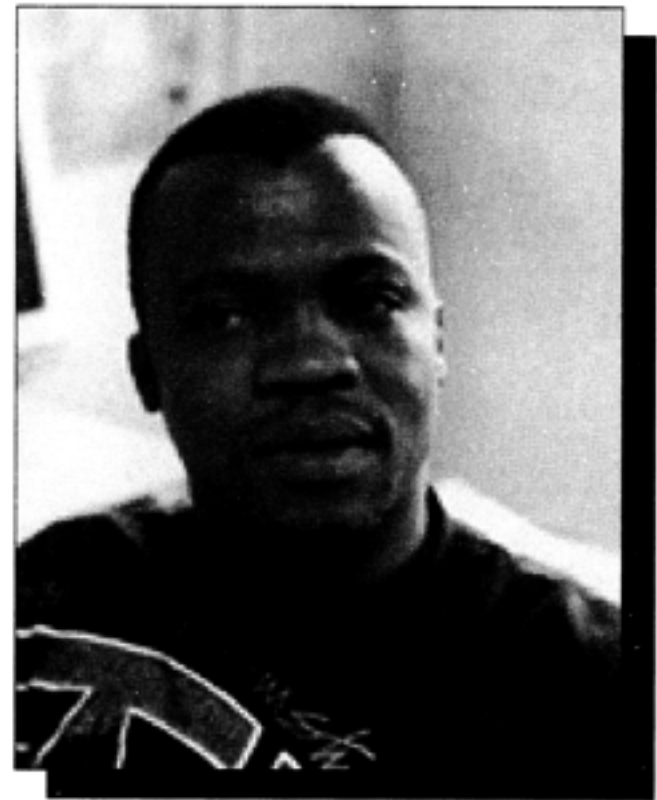


Pick 'n Pay strike

what do shopstewards say?

The Pick 'n Pay strike was marked by outrageous police violence against workers and a wave of media hysteria about workers' action. ZOLILE MTSHELWANE spoke to shopstewards from Pietersburg, Rosebank and Norwood about the strike.



The strike started on 12 July, with some stores in the PWV embarking on go-slows which later turned into full-blown strikes. The strike was eventually settled after four weeks, with both parties agreeing on an across-the-board increase of R180 per month. This represents a 12,1% increase on the old average of R1 481 per month. The new minimum of R1 110 per month will now apply, representing a 6,6% increase on the old minimum of R1 040. Tito Mboweni, the Minister of Labour, intervened in the strike by appointing a mediator to broker an agreement between the union and management.

When negotiations broke down in May, SACCAWU was demanding an across the board increase of R229 per month, while Pick 'n Pay had tabled an offer with three options: an increase of R175 from 1 March for 16 months, a 15-months increase of R165 also from 1 March, or a R175 increase from 1 March to May 1995.

The strike by more than 15 000 Pick 'n Pay workers over a wage increase turned ugly when management called in police to evict picketing strikers from about 136 shops nationwide. This was after management had obtained court interdicts instructing strikers to remain at a distance of 500 metres from some of the shops affected by the dispute.

A consistent pattern that emerged immediately after the granting of interdicts was the outrageously violent intervention of police on the side of management in many stores. The police stormed stores to evict strikers, shooting stun grenades and rubber bullets at workers, setting dogs loose to attack strikers and the subsequent arrests of hundreds, if not thousands of the striking workers.

Lepola Mokgopi, SACCAWU's organiser in Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal, said the manager of a store there had told the union he had received instructions from the company's head office to call in the police in the event of strikers defying the interdicts. Stalin Manyaka, the co-ordinating

shopsteward at the Norwood hypermarket in Johannesburg, corroborated this, saying that the store manager had told them he had received a directive from the company head office to call in the police.

Dogs, shooting, beating

Manyaka said that the workers at Norwood were picketing and singing outside the store when police arrived on 13 July. "There was no worker who intimidated customers or non-striking labour. As soon as the police arrived, they ordered us to disperse. We refused," Manyaka said.

Manyaka said that police then started shooting at strikers and set their dogs loose in the pandemonium that followed. "The entire workforce of approximately 400 workers was arrested and were charged with trespassing, and about 25 workers suffered rubber bullet wounds, baton weals and dog bites." Manyaka claimed that the order to shoot did not come from any of the senior police officers on the scene. "We know for a fact that this order came from two managers of the store, and we know who they are," Manyaka said, adding that workers started fighting back after this unprovoked action by the police.

Manyaka said that about four workers are still recovering from their injuries, and one of the four has a rubber bullet stuck in her leg. He said that this might lead to the worker being paralysed, as doctors claim they have no knowledge of this kind of bullet. In the first days of the strike, the media reported that nearly 700 workers had been arrested on charges arising out of defying the Industrial Court interdicts, and at least 60 workers were injured. The injuries ranged from rubber bullet wounds to dog bites and baton weals.

In Pietersburg, about 250 workers were arrested twice in five days. Mokgopi said workers were first charged for trespassing after staging a sit-in on 13 July, and charged with intimidation after being arrested on 18 July.

Mokgopi also said that ten women workers were stripped naked in a Louis Trichardt police station and forced to frog jump while being assaulted. "The union has laid charges against policemen," Mokgopi

said, adding that the union will meet with the provincial MEC for safety and security about this issue on 16 August. "We want the provincial government to take appropriate action against these culprits."

Old management, old police: new SA?

SACCAWU officials have also expressed concern at the "apparent co-ordination" of police action against strikers. The officials said they were left wondering whether Pick 'n Pay management had struck a deal with police to move in on workers.

The police's role in intervening on the side of management presents serious problems for the rebuilding of healthy workplace relations between workers and management. Workers are now asking whether anything has changed at all. Before the new government was voted into power, the employers could always rely on the police.

Now, even under a new government, Pick 'n Pay management has resorted to the same tactics, and the police have played the same ball game. They intervened on behalf of management, set dogs on strikers, fired teargas into police vans loaded with arrested workers, charged workers with intimidation, trespassing, etc. So, what's new? the workers ask.

SACCAWU said blame for the violence should be put at management's and the police's door. The union claimed that there was no violence until the company called in the police to the stores. At the height of the strike, management wanted the union to sign an agreement on strike behaviour, arguing that strikers were intimidating shoppers as well as non-strikers. SACCAWU, after initially entering these talks, pulled out and did not sign the agreement. The union argued that there was disagreement with management as to what constitutes legitimate industrial action. Manyaka said as far as he was concerned, striking workers' behaviour was not the issue. "The issue was for management to meet our demand and to stop involving police in industrial matters.

Had management not called in the police, there would not have been violence.”

Managers and workers

One of the terms of the strike settlement states that SACCAWU and management need to negotiate a framework to rebuild the relationship at the workplace. But Manyaka said the damage at Norwood is so big that there is no communication at all between workers and management at the store. “We have presented a memorandum of demands to management to clarify a number of issues,” Manyaka said. “We want them to tell us who in the head office instructed them to call the police, and secondly we want them to identify the person who gave the order to shoot. We also need to know what happened to the property of workers lost during the stampede, and this includes pay packets as the attack

happened after we got paid.”

According to Mokgopi the store manager at one Northern Transvaal store, who was on leave during the strike, resigned from the company as soon as she returned to work. “The manager returned to work shortly before the end of the strike. When the workers started a return to work, she said that she did not see her way clear to working with people who had intimidated customers and still get their jobs back.”

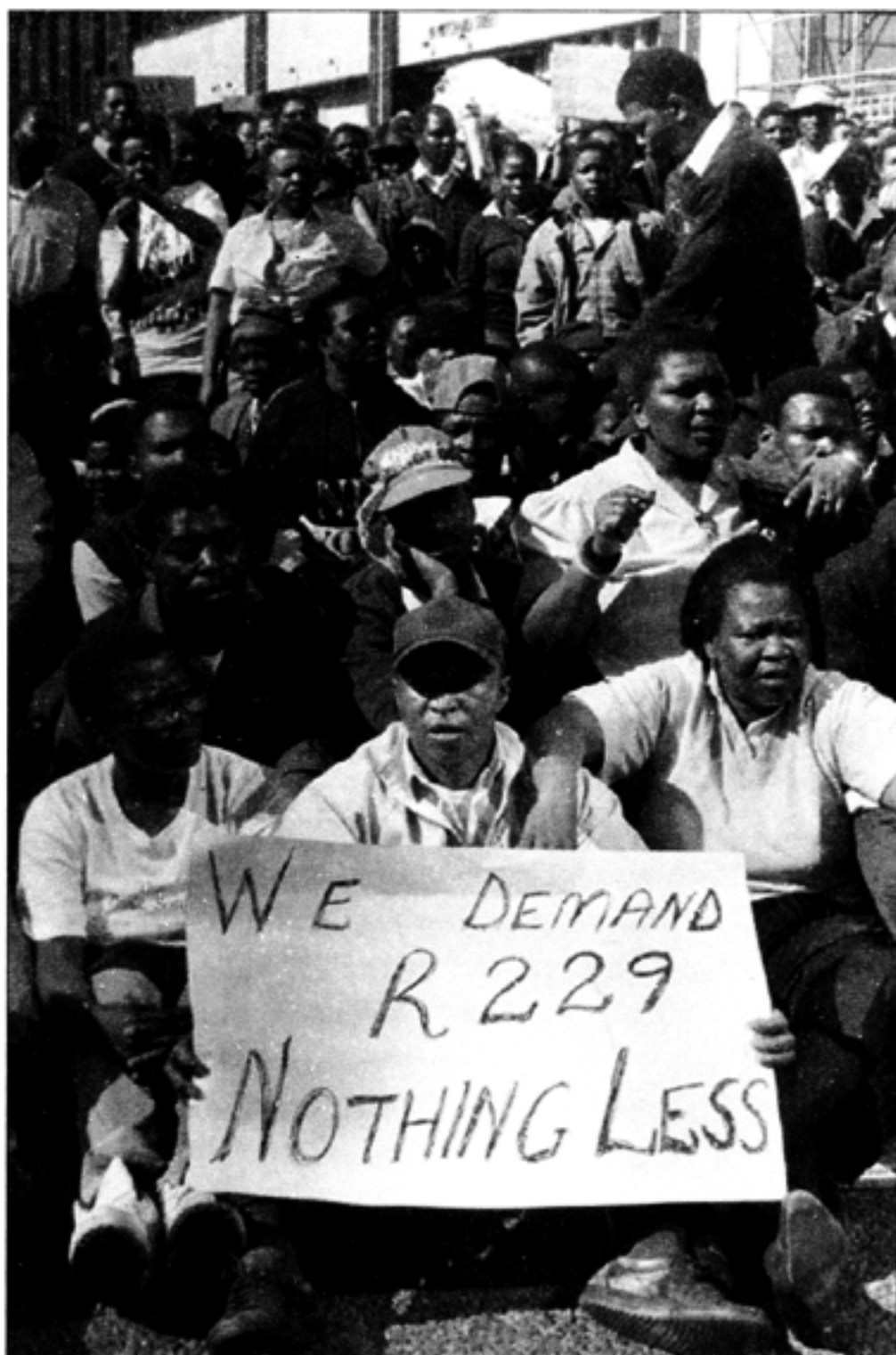
The Rosebank store is one of a few where the police did not attack workers. Shopsteward Judith Ndlovu said this might be attributed to a rumour that the owner of the building in which the store is housed had told Pick 'n Pay he does not want any police dogs in the premises. “Our manager was also not hostile towards workers during the strike. As soon as the police arrived, shopstewards

pretended to be on the phone to someone, and would come out and claim that they had spoken to the Minister of Police, who had expressed surprise at the presence of his police in the store.”

“Entrenched racism”

The bitterness amongst the Pick 'n Pay workers also relates to what workers call “entrenched racism” in the company. Shopstewards constantly referred to “racially biased promotions” and “selective discipline” applied by management in different stores. Mogale Bagale (not his real name), a shopsteward at a Pietersburg store, said the entry point for many white workers in the company is at the level of trainee manager. “We are then expected to show the particular employee how the whole system operates, and after some time, this white employee is then appointed our superior, with the powers to discipline and even fire us,” Bagale said.

Bagale said he has worked for Pick 'n Pay since 1984. Other



shopstewards complained of being ignored for promotion.

SACCAWU said it is an illusion that Pick 'n Pay management is among the most enlightened of employers. "Pick 'n Pay is still largely a white dominated, highly paternalistic and authoritarian company in terms of its interaction with workers. The daily lives of workers on the Pick 'n Pay shopfloors bear no resemblance to the public image of Pick 'n Pay created by management and labour commentators."

Asked why the workers had not gone on a national wage strike since 1986, Ndlovu said negotiations in those years had yielded better results than this year's talks. "Even though the increases we received in those years were not high, they were, however, reasonable and near what we had expected," Ndlovu said.

SACCAWU has dismissed criticisms that the union has weak leadership. Manyaka said this criticism emanates from management, who are bent on discrediting SACCAWU. "The union, for us, is the organisation at the factory floor, and not officials," he said. "Any organisation, whether it be business or a union, has its own peculiar problems. SACCAWU is alive and strong in the workplace, and our strike had no political demands, but was based on our genuine demands for a higher wage increase."

The settlement of a R180 increase is nowhere near the R229 that was demanded by the union. The increase will be effective for a 15-month period, from March this year up to June 1995. Although this is not necessarily a victory for the workers, it is neither a victory for management.

The relations between customers and the workers have been affected by the strike. Although it is difficult to gauge the response of customers to the strikes, Manyaka said that the relations between workers at the Norwood store and customers during the strike were bad. "Many of the rich customers were very hostile to the strikers, and some of them even used abusive language against us," Manyaka said. Manyaka said it will be difficult for most workers at the store to be courteous to

people who called them ugly names during the strike. Ndlovu, however, said they found some of the customers sympathetic to the workers' cause during the strike. "One regular customer, who is not poor, left her full trolley unpaid for after we told her what our strike was all about."

Now that the strike is over, workers and management are going to be squaring up to each other. Certainly both parties will want to assert their power and rights. As Manyaka said, management's decision to call in the police has hardened workers' attitudes. "The workers are more militant and angry than they were before the strike."

Management will most certainly also be wanting to enforce its authority over workers. What is in doubt is the degree to which they can do this without provoking the workers and thus reopening the wounds that have not yet healed.

Some shopstewards believe that the post-strike tensions on the shopfloor are going to take some time to settle down. However, there is no consensus on what effect these tensions will have on the job security and flexibility agreement that the union hailed as a dawn of a new era in worker/management relations at Pick 'n Pay (see *SA Labour Bulletin vol 18 no 2*).

Some believe it will be difficult for the workers to co-operate with customers who were unsympathetic to their cause, and to normalise relations with employers who "criminalised" their strike. Other shopstewards are convinced that the strike has "horrified" management, to an extent that they have realised the deep-seated anger of workers on the shopfloor.

One thing is certain, however. The myth that Pick 'n Pay takes good care of its workers has been exposed as a publicity stunt by the owners of the company and their spokespersons. The irony is that it needed a bitter strike for the myth to be exploded.

This friction will be balanced by the mutual need that both parties have of each other. It will be interesting to watch developments in the relations between these two forces in the near and distant future. *FB*