

PAWCO co-operates to survive

A CO-OPERATIVE (co-op) is a small factory or farm run and democratically controlled by the workers who share in the decisions and proceeds.

The Phalaborwa Workers' Co-op (PAWCO) began making T-shirts in March 1988. There are 50 members, all working half-day shifts to share the available work among as many people as possible.

At first the co-op experienced many of the problems that co-ops have in starting and surviving economically.

But in the last two months PAWCO has reached a turning point.

The co-op is reaching monthly production targets and their selling strategy has improved. Sales money from the T-shirts is coming in, and they have started to pay regular although very low wages to worker members.

No easy task

PAWCO's development has taken place with limited outside back-up. Phalaborwa is five hours drive from Johannesburg, in the heart of the right-wing Northern Transvaal.

Progressive organisation there has been under siege, and few structures are still functioning.

The development of PAWCO has been based very largely on the direct initiative of its members.

After 390 Foskor workers were dismissed in May 1986, the NUM NEC backed the idea of setting up a co-op.

Do you know who makes the bright union t-shirts we wear? NUM members dismissed during the 1986 Foskor strike have set up a t-shirt making co-operative in Phalaborwa. Every time we buy a union t-shirt we help promote the workers' co-op



Union members wear their thoughts on their backs

But setting up the project was not an easy task. Workers were scattered, and many were trying to find work - although this was a disheartening process: "If you look for a job, you'll never find one if you were dismissed from

Foskor. They just think you are a terrorist."

"Some of us did understand that if we can operate the promised co-op, it will help to strengthen the union in our region, and help support our

families", said a co-op member.

Low wages

"No matter how the salary may be, even if it isn't fixed and doesn't come monthly, the co-op can be useful to us."

In September 1986, the t-shirt machine was bought, and workers went to Johannesburg for training at the company which supplied the machine - which lasted three hours.

"We tried to print, but it wouldn't come. But we kept trying. We were pulling hard. There was a lot to be done, and we didn't have our own transport - we just used our own few cents to go to get quotes for electricity, plumbing, and carpentry."

"For plumbing, we decided we should just dig ourselves. By this time, we were 25, because the news had gone out that the machine had arrived. We needed a plumber, but the members resolved not to just rely on other people - we've got our own hands - let's take a spade and dig ourselves."

All must work hard

"Then, when we started digging, some workers were lazy, and refused to dig the hole. So when we'd finished, we met, and we decided those workers who were lazy had just discharged themselves from the co-op."

"Because we had resolved together that we all have to dig, that we have to do the work ourselves, and not wait for someone else to do it for us."

Members from PAWCO then visited the Sarmcol Workers Co-op in Natal to get advice. In March 1988, they started production.

were transferred to work chopping bushes in the mountains.

One day, one of the workers was assaulted by an armed security guard, and his hand was broken. When an attempt was made to separate one of the workers off again, they refused.

This refusal led to their summary dismissal. When the news reached Foskor, workers staged a sit-in.

That night, Foskor workers joined workers from Phalaborwa Mining Company (PMC) in a meeting. Police opened fire, killing one worker.

This incident sparked a war in the Namagkale community. Police recruited the assistance of Renamo soldiers from their 'secret' training camp nearby.

The Renamo soldiers ran amok in the township. At least twelve people were killed, scores injured and many arrested in the following weeks.

Then, on May 1st, against the backdrop of this township siege, NUM workers supported the national stayaway call. The entire workforce of 1 800 workers was dismissed.

After negotiations with the NUM, management agreed to reinstatement - but when workers arrived, 390 were turned away.

These dismissed workers decided to build a co-op, as a means of survival.

'A big pot of porridge for everyone to share'

THE history of PAWCO has its roots in worker struggles a few years ago.

The NUM started organising at Foskor in Phalaborwa in early 1984.

"During that time, it wasn't so simple to organise workers," explains Charles Ramahlalerwa, shop steward chair from Foskor, and now chair of PAWCO. But by late 1984, the NUM had organised majority support at key mines in the region.

When Cyril Ramaphosa, NUM General Secretary, visited the region Lebowa police detained him. Workers said they would not go to work until he is released.

Nearly 400 workers who did not arrive for work were dismissed.

In a court settlement, Foskor management agreed to reinstate the workers when they had vacancies. But they failed to keep the agreement.

On 12 December 1985, NUM members decided to have a three hour work stoppage around the reinstatement issue.

Foskor management gave workers a 12 noon deadline to be

back at work, or face dismissal. But when the buses came to fetch them from the hostels, there were only half the usual number.

By the time all eleven buses arrived, time was running out. And when they arrived at the Foskor entrance, management and security were out in force. They told the workers the buses could only go in one at a time.

"We were quite sure and aware that only two or three buses can get in before the deadline. Workers were very angry", said Stanley Matebula, a former Foskor shop steward and now secretary of PAWCO.

"They alighted from the buses, and just started to march back to Namgale on foot."

When they arrived at the the entrance to the township, Lebowa police ambushed them. Workers were beaten, many were injured, we were all forced to scatter and seek refuge in the community."

Later that day, workers regrouped at the hostel, and decided to go on strike.

"After the first three days, man-



Members of PAWCO making t-shirts

agement realised that now we are serious, and they stopped supplying us with food, and started to charge workers R1.50 for a plate of food."

"It was then that we had to rely on the support from the community."

"So when people came to speak to their relatives at the fence, we told them not to bring just a small plate of food for their relative, but to bring a huge pot of porridge, for everyone to share."

Every day, management threatened workers with dismissals if they did not return to work by certain deadlines.

"After seven days in which no

amount of threats seemed able to break the spirit of the workers, the police started to attack the members of the community who were supplying us with food, sjambokking them and preventing them from reaching us."

Finally, after ten days, workers agreed to mediation with management. Their demands were for the reinstatement of the workers, and recognition of the union.

They lost both these demands, but they did win reinstatement for all those workers who took part in the ten day strike.

However, when they returned to work, five key union leaders