

Solidarity and union power in East Cape

THE EASTERN Cape has for many years been a melting pot for labour and community issues, and this year proved no exception.

In May, when thousands of workers at Ford, Firestone and General Motors downed tools, the multinational motor corporations were for the first time faced with the power of the independent trade unions.

Solidarity strikes are now the order of the day in Port Elizabeth indicating, observers believe, that workers are now prepared to take action against all bosses and not just those for whom they work.

The dispute had its roots in a walkout in January this year at Firestone when workers expressed their dissatisfaction with the proposed pensions legislation.

Most of the workers were re-employed little over a week later — but for 150 there were no jobs.

These men appealed for aid to the Motor Assembly and Component Workers' Union (Macwusa), formed after dissatisfied workers broke away from what they saw as Fosatu's 'pro-management' National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers after last year's strikes.

In mid-May, Ford's Cortina plant closed after several hundred workers refused to handle Firestone tyres.

The strike swiftly spread to Ford's other two plants, to General Motors and to Firestone itself.

It was Ford that was most seriously affected. As the dispute dragged on, the motor giant steadfastly refused (officially, at any rate) to pressurise Firestone into re-hiring the dismissed men, or, as Macwusa demanded, to stop buying Firestone tyres.

Ford obtains parts and products from more than 300 suppliers, and clearly management feared it would be setting a dangerous precedent if it gave in to Macwusa's demands.

But it set a very expensive precedent by not doing so.

Ford's bill in lost production for the four-week stoppage was a staggering R4.5 million, while its workers lost an estimated

R1 200 000 in wages.

The workers went back when Firestone agreed to re-employ a number of the workers immediately, and the rest as vacancies arose.

Confusion still exists over the precise terms of the settlement. Macwusa understands the tyre company has guaranteed to take back all the workers, while Firestone's Managing Director Peter Morum, maintains they won't take back 'troublemakers'.

Other forces, of course, played their part in the dispute.

A mysterious pamphlet was put out urging all black people in Port Elizabeth to remove the Firestone tyres from their cars and bring them to the Macwusa offices, where the union would pay them for the tyres.

Although Macwusa may have agreed with the spirit of the pamphlet; it was an obvious attempt to smear the union, which would not have had the funds for such an exercise.

Macwusa meetings over the weekend that climaxed the Republic festivities, were banned just as it appeared that the strike was nearing its end.

As the strike ended, Macwusa's chairman, Dumile Makanda, and three organisers were detained, a move which, police claimed, had nothing to do with the strikes.

For many workers the incident brought back memories of 1977, when Thozamile Botha was detained and then banned immediately after the conclusion of the Ford strikes.

Last week five Numarwosa organisers involved in a strike at Dorbyl in Uitenhage, were also detained. Numarwosa has threatened not to handle Dorbyl products at Ford and Volkswagen if Dorbyl persists in its attempts to recruit scab labour.

Macwusa is contemplating similar action, this time over the dismissal of 160 workers at Repco in Port Elizabeth, which also supplies parts to the motor giants.

Meanwhile, Makanda and his colleagues are still in detention, and are now being held under section six of the Terrorism Act.



Eastern Cape workers . . . action against all bosses, not only those that they work for.

WORKERS at the Union Co-operative Bark and Sugar Mill are bringing two actions against their employers — one challenging their dismissal since they contend that the events constitute a lock-out — but more importantly the second is a spoliation action.

Workers claim they have been evicted from their accommodation illegally. Management says the workers left their jobs voluntarily.

In an affidavit to the Court workers said that in terms of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act or in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act, the actions of the Company amount to a lock-out.

The outcome of the Union Co-operative Bark and Sugar Mill case will only be resolved on August 22, when the judge will hear oral evidence to resolve disputes of fact in the case.

Dalton case is significant for housed workers

The legal case is of massive significance to the rights of workers housed in Company compounds and already one worker has won his case — the implication being that in future disputes of a similar nature, workers cannot be evicted from their quarters unless it is by a court order, which they can defend.

The dispute began on Tuesday, March 31, when work stopped because workers believed they were unfairly treated by

their employers.

"For many years we have received food from the company, but this was stopped on March 31, and we will now have to buy our own food. We will not get any money to buy this food. True we did get a 17 percent wage increase, but so did all workers in the sugar industry and in some companies where food was stopped they got this increase and extra money to buy food."

In an affidavit to the Court,

Cyprian Ngewu said workers were provided with dry rations of mealie meal, samp, beans, salt and stew weekly. They were also given neat twice a week.

"Such rations are a part of our remuneration and although we do not pay for them, they are taken into account when our pay is calculated," he said.

In a statement issued by the Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union, the workers said that on hearing they were to receive no compensation for the loss of food they sent their committee to speak to management. Management refused to talk and the workers were told to go away and return to work on Thursday at 10 a.m.

In spite of repeated attempts to get Management to change their minds they remained rigid in their decision to withdraw the

food allowance and offer no extra monetary compensation.

On Thursday, police arrested more than 400 workers for trespassing on the factory grounds. "On the very ground that we work and had all our belongings," said a worker.

The workers were taken to New Hanover Hall, where the trial was to be held and after Alec Erwin, a FOSATU official, had signed bail for them, all the accused were released. Union buses took them back to the factory in Dalton where they were told to pack their belongings and leave immediately. After heated argument, Management agreed to provide transport to various centres in Natal from which they would have to find their way "home". Costs covering accommodation, transport and legal fees have soared to well over R10 000.