

SATS STRIKE RESOLVED . . .OR JUST ANOTHER GAIN FOR LABOUR?

The settlement resolving the three-month strike by about 18 000 South African Transport Services' workers on June 5 was a major victory for the black labour movement. The message, after Sats capitulated in the face of mounting financial losses, is clear: no employer, including the State, can afford to ignore the undeniable power of organised labour and its integral part in any future South Africa. Sats management –, of course, the Government – acknowledged this implicitly when they agreed to reinstate the workers. They had lost millions of rands, stood to lose millions more if they continued with their intractable attitude towards the workers' only one immutable "right": the withdrawal of their labour.

This strength, growing in its application and effectiveness month by month, will become more consolidated and have an increasing effect on the economy – and it does not matter who disagrees. The expectations of workers throughout the country rise with the "resolution" of a strike. This arises, obviously, through the realisation that the **organised** and **mass** withdrawal of labour – whatever the cost – is, for any management, an internecine struggle. If workers or their representatives decide to continue a strike (as happened at Sats), then management must decide how much they can afford to lose. Clearly, Sats had lost too much – too much money and too much credibility.

The pertinent and salient feature of the Sats strike was its ostensible "spontaneity". Mr Andrew Nendzanda appeared to be the only reason why 18 000 people downed tools and led to massive losses for Sats, millions of rands in damage to railway property and an implacable militancy by workers throughout the Reef. Seven workers were killed and many, both innocent and involved, were injured.

Why did they persist with apparently irrational demands, and why did Sats finally accept the strike could go no further?.

"Andrew", as he became known, was essentially a catalyst. He was fired after allegedly failing to hand in his cash takings before closing time. On March 13 about 300 workers at City Deep, where he worked as a heavy-duty driver, immediately downed tools in sympathy. Within a few days, hundreds more had joined at the depot and at other depots on the Reef, despite Sats retracting and saying he had not been fired, but only disciplined. If the workers resumed duty, said Sats, the status quo would return. The workers however had gone beyond a simple acceptance of management's apparent "honesty."

There had been, for some months prior to the strike, activity by workers and their elected officials, concerning the kind of strategy to adopt given a large recruitment to the South African Railways and Harbours Workers' Union (Sarhwu), and what should be done if the workers took any kind of

action against Sats. "Andrew" became the surface issue and Sats management were certainly unaware of what the real issue had become – that is, a challenge by workers against the enormous resources of the State parastatal. Gradually, as the strike spread, junior spokesmen of the PRO department of Sats were replaced by more senior officials – until it led to the appearance of the General Manager on SABC-TV to talk about "intimidation" and "unacceptable demands."

Sats management pushed to the limits of credibility their assertion they would only "negotiate" with their in-house "soft" union, the Black Allied and Transport Workers' Union (Batu). Within a few days it was evident that Blatu officials did not have the support of the workers nor the ability to cope with Sats management. They urged the workers to return to work; the workers did not, and from that point Blatu became irrelevant to the strikers. They spread their attitudes to several depots on the Reef and soon about 10 000 vital workers were out. Sats, however, continued to maintain they were dealing with Blatu officials and "worker representatives," that is, shop stewards who were almost exclusively members of Sarhwu.

Sarhwu, formed early last year and affiliated to the largest trade union federation in South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), had a membership of 9 000 at the inception of the strike. This rapidly grew to its present paid-up membership of 19 000 on the Reef. Throughout, Sats maintained it was dealing only with worker representatives and refused to accept the existence of the 750 000-member Cosatu federation and its affiliate, Sarhwu. As is evident from subsequent developments, from the start of the strike, Sats management was negotiating with Sarhwu shop stewards and, ultimately, Cosatu officials at the highest level.

Of crucial importance is that the strike spread and grew, not from prompting by Sarhwu or Cosatu officials, but from the workers. According to a senior member of the National Executive Committee of Cosatu, "the workers were always one step ahead of whatever it was we thought they were going to do." It was the strikers, he said, who dictated the pace.

The NEC member stressed that at all times they were attempting to "hold back" the apparent "craziness" of the workers. The workers, however, had taken the initiative and were doing what they thought was "justifiable action, given their position as a dispossessed class." He said Sarhwu and Cosatu negotiators were, throughout the strike, attempting to exert discipline on the workers as well as maintain a semblance of civility in their negotiations with Sats.

Sats denied that at any stage it was involved with Sarhwu or

Cosatu; they were only talking to worker representatives, they said. Frank Meintjies, Press Officer for Cosatu, knew at every stage of the negotiations precisely what had occurred on any particular day. It was a de facto recognition – publicly unacceptable to Sats and the Government – that they were **in fact** negotiating with Sarhwu and Cosatu officials. It is not denied by either union. Cosatu released the first media statement on the settlement reached on June 5, for the moment effectively ending the strike.

At an advanced stage in the negotiations, Sats and Sarhwu officials agreed to appoint so-called “independent negotiators.” Following a new trend in labour disputes, both parties agreed to have people speaking on their behalf to give the impression it was now “a matter for the legal people,” as one labour expert said. It has become the norm for these negotiators to accept as a minimum condition a refusal to speak to the Press or anyone else – that is, no one knows what is happening until agreement has been reached. The effect is to take the issue out of the news and hence the public awareness of what either side is proposing.

One of the Sarhwu negotiators admitted after the settlement it had been “frustrating and exhausting, mainly because there was a strong reformist element apparent, but it appeared orders were coming from the highest level in Government.” During the talks, Professor Nic Wiehahn, architect of the Government’s labour reform which allowed African workers to be classified as “employees” for the first time in 1979 called for a major revision of government policy vis-a-vis unions. A voice from such an influential position – and others – probably pushed Sats and the Government to agree to the settlement they finally made.

The agreement, according to a Cosatu spokesperson, provided for the reinstatement of all 18 000 workers (despite Sats claiming throughout the strike there were only 12 000 involved). It is significant Sats agreed to reinstatement as opposed to re-employment. The implications are that workers will be entitled to benefits they would not have received if they had in fact been fired – for instance, they will remain on the pension fund, receive full medical, travelling, and length of service benefits. Sats according to Cosatu also undertook to upgrade hostel facilities at several compounds on the Reef and committed themselves to an expenditure in the long-term of R10 million on the dwellings. It was agreed “Sats workers will have the right to democratically elect their own representatives.”

Minister of Transport Affairs, Mr Eli Louw, was quick to assure the white House of Assembly on June 5 that “intimidators” would not be re-hired and all Sats workers would have to re-apply for their jobs before June 15. The principle of no work, no pay, would remain, he said. It remains to be seen how this discrepancy between the Government and Cosatu will be resolved.

An outstanding and unresolved problem is the recognition by Sats of Sarhwu and Cosatu. On the day of the agreement, Sats spokeswoman Miss Jeneé Jordaan said the right of workers to elect their own representatives did not constitute recognition of Sarhwu.

The irony of the lengthy and acrimonious dispute is that Sats will not admit they were involved in negotiations with representatives of 18 000 workers, most of whom are members of Sarhwu. It is common – and public – knowledge that Sarhwu was involved from virtually the beginning of the strike. Further, after at least 30 of the 37 “worker representatives” were detained (presumably for their role in the negotiations), Cosatu officials were brought into the dispute to fill an obvious gap left by the departure of almost the entire executive of Sarhwu.

The Government and Sats cannot admit publicly they were dealing with a union federation they so evidently do not like and, perchance, regard as some sort of threat to “law and order.” Certainly, they will continue to blinker their approach to a very costly strike and deny the people who ultimately were part of resolving the problem their due credit.

The workers pushed the strike in a direction they chose; Sarhwu and Cosatu should be commended for the restraint they were able to exert. If it were not for this “invisible” organised union presence, workers may have lost faith in their officials and caused considerably more damage than they did.

The apparently irrational demands of the workers and Sats’ response are perhaps a pointer to future labour disputes. This was a strike which developed for what seemed to be a niggly and fatuous reason: “Andrew”. Union officials have complained regularly about the impetuous reasons for dismissal of workers at Sats. On this occasion, workers did not accept reasons given by management: a groundswell of militancy swept the Sats depots, developing into an explicit challenge to the ability of the State to check their refusal to work and, last month after most of them were fired, to leave their hostels. It would have been too great a risk for Sats (and the Government) to have sent in the forces; inevitably, considering their already substantial losses, financially and in terms of credibility, they had to capitulate.

Labour had simply shown – again, but this time more explicitly – its determination to inject itself into the mainstream of South African society’s multifarious veins. Despite ideological disputes within the union movement which observers have presaged as potentially destroying their solid shop-floor power-base, workers in the Sats dispute have won a victory and demonstrated by their actions their determination (and that of most black workers) to edge into control of their own lives – albeit gradually, perhaps more rapidly than the Government would like.

Unions are legitimate; the Government may arrest leaders, shop stewards and other workers. It would be folly for the Government to engage in open confrontation. For the moment, the unions will remain a vestige of open opposition while authorities pretend they did not talk to Sarhwu or Cosatu and claim all is well in the Republic. □