

## Unemployed Workers on the West Coast

Grapnel Silencers Ltd in Atlantis retrenched 112 workers nearly half its workforce - as motor manufacturers and component suppliers increasingly begin to feel the impact of the recession generally and the slump in the motor industry particularly. The increase in petrol price will only compound the already grave situation.

Atlantis on the West Coast, 50 km outside Cape Town, has become a pathetic sight with its spiralling unemployment (see SALB 10.3). Hundreds of workers queue fortnightly for the unemployment benefits which most acknowledge to be very inadequate, and daily hundreds are seen walking from one factory to the next looking for work. It is not only Atlantis that is affected. Many of the surrounding towns such as Mamre, Malmesbury and even as far afield as Saldanha have been hit by unemployment. While the Department of Manpower in the Western Cape do not see unemployment as "significant at this stage" it is steadily increasing. Figures released by the Department's Western Cape Inspectorate showed 7,976 people registered as unemployed in December. But this is a gross underestimation as it is well known that thousands of workers are either underemployed or unemployed but have not registered at the unemployment office.

Developments in Atlantis are important because of state attempts at fostering decentralised growth points - where workers live near to the industry and where urbanisation in a sense can be curbed. The social engineering of "depopulating" the metropolitan areas through housing incentives encouraged many to take advantage. Whilst they thought that taking a house in Atlantis would assist them in getting employment in the local industry, in practice this did not occur. Many still have to commute to town while others, who did find employment, now find themselves retrenched.

Unionisation in the area is extremely weak making workers vulnerable to management abuse. Where unions have established a presence they have been generally bureaucratic,

unable to secure improved conditions of employment and totally unsympathetic to grassroots issues workers are confronted with in the area. The weakness of unions is clearly evidenced during retrenchments, where no agreements have been negotiated. Even the most accepted principle of last-in-first-out (LIFO) was not applied, contributing to tensions amongst workers. Even worse is the growing suspicion Atlantis workers have of their fellow workers of Cape Town. As one put it: "they come and take our jobs".

Significant, too, is that workers don't know their rights when unemployed (ie. the few they have!) and many lose out on the monies they are entitled to. The workers I spoke to were all unemployed - some were young, others old, but all were angry and bitter. They are angry at the system, the bosses and the government:

Walfadia, 27 and unmarried explains:

I worked for AMC Classic, you know that place that makes the pots. Before that I worked at a clothing factory in Cape Town. I moved to Wesfleur 3 years ago because I got a better job. I earned more money. I was a despatcher at AMC Classic. I earned R65 per week.

SALB: How did you lose your job?

I had an argument with the supervisor. The "boere" (whites) like to push you around. I back chatted. They told me to leave. That was in 1983...early part. Since then I am looking for a job. But damn it I can't find anything.

SALB: How do you survive?

I live off other people. but I feel bad about it. But what can I do? I intended to "smokkle" (smuggle) ...I'm serious, I must do something.

SALB: Did you ever draw unemployment money?

I never. I don't know my rights. No-one explained them to me. When I did go to the office, the clerk told me I was

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too late. So I did not get my money.

SALB: What are the major problems you have?

Money! Money! We have no money. The Council sends us the white paper [reminder of rent arrears]. Everytime we receive the white paper we must pay R2,00 extra. This is our other worry...the house. I might lose the house I'm sharing with people.

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Joseline, 23 and Maria, 44 stand outside the factory gate. The time is 10.30 am, Monday 21 January. It is extremely hot already. They are part of a crowd of 70 workers clinging to the gates of a newly-opened factory. They hope to be asked to come through and place their names on the waiting list. The security guards patrol the gate. They shout at the workers not to push. One or two manage to squeeze past and are led to a nearby office. They wait outside the office...

Joseline and Maria both leave the gate and stand on the opposite side of the road. Others decide to sit under a tree, near the gate. I approach the two and ask whether they are prepared to talk about their experiences. They agree. Both lean against the car. Eventually Joseline starts:

We both come from Malmesbury. Everyday we travel to Atlantis. We have done this for the last year looking for work. We were both retrenched from Lemonkloof Braai Chickens. We were packers there until they put off alot of workers early in 1984. There are alot of us who are unemployed in the area. The two of us are lucky that we can still come here and look for work. Most of the workers can't.

SALB: Why? Can you explain?

The money of course! It costs us R2 a day by bus to this desert! The bus leaves at 6.30 am and we arrive here at 7.45 am. We only go home tonight when the bus goes, that is at 5.15 pm.

We walk from factory to factory. We know all the factories

here, but we get the same answer. They say "wait here, come later, come tomorrow, come next week". It is the same story everyday. They let us wait until sometimes two o'clock before they put up a notice or send out someone to say there is no work. They don't tell us early in the morning so we know where we stand.

SALB: How do you survive?

I can't say for Maria, but I have a child and I still live with my parents. Only my father and brother work. Both are at ADE. But they say there will be more retrenchments in March. So they might lose their jobs. So at the moment it is difficult. At home it causes alot of problems because sometimes they think I don't want to work. It causes alot of house problems, you know!

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A worker shouts that someone is coming to the gate. Everybody rushes back to the gate. "What do they say?", asks one worker to those who managed to get past the gate to the office. The security guards let the workers out. All the rest surround the 2 workers that managed to get in. "What do they say?", "Is there work?", "What will they pay?". One of the women replies: "They want experienced people. We must come back tomorrow. They can't make a decision." "Why not?", asked another worker. "I don't know, the bosses are playing games with us", is the reply. "But they kept you there for an hour...what did they do all the time", says someone else.

I check the time, its 11.45 am. "You see", says Joceline, "The same story. So it will go on."

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Katrina, 32, is married has 2 children (4 and 9 years old). She explains her struggle for work:

I worked for Cape King Foods in Stikland before my husband was transferred to Koeberg. That was in March 1984. Since then I've been looking for a job. But there is nothing. Many of the factories bring their own workers from Cape

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Town. At first the Government said that they were going to build factories for the people of Atlantis to work. But this did not happen. So we in Atlantis have no chance of getting work.

SALB: What do the bosses say when you ask for a job?

You know they all say the same thing. Not today, come later, try next week...everyday the same thing. It's really bad. It is already like a rhyme in our heads.

SALB: What do you intend doing?

I'll probably have to go back to Scottsdene, where I come from, and try to get a job there. I might stand a better chance. I'm not sure. You know what happens here? Workers that have work bring their aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters to take the openings. So we will never get work. This Atlantis is so bad, I would not bring my enemy here

I might have to go alone, because my husband has a job here at Koeberg. I'll just go on like this till the end of February, then make my move.

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By the time I leave, 12.30 pm, many workers still sit waiting. About 20 workers decide to go to another factory. Others go home. A group sitting under the tree, starts shouting:

"We want work! We want work!"

(Marcel Golding, Cape Town, January 1985)