

## NUM: Food Boycott at West Vaal Hospital

Over 180 workers, all members of the National Union of Mine Workers, have boycotted food at the West Vaal Hospital since 27 February this year. The hospital, situated outside of the town of Orkney in the Western Transvaal, is owned by Anglo American Corporation and serves the nearby mines. The workers involved in the food boycott include nurses, nurse assistants, physiotherapists, cleaners, domestics and labourers.

According to a shaft steward the food boycott started in protest against the 11% increase in board and lodging and the increase in food fees. There has been no simultaneous wage adjustment, drastically reducing workers' incomes. Single rooms went up from R97 to R108 per month while a double room increased from R85 to R96 per month. In addition food at R2,00 a plate is a heavy burden for workers.

According to the workers they brought the quality of food and exorbitant board and lodging fees to the attention of the hospital superintendent way back in 1983. Although promises were made of an investigation and improvements, this never materialised. The latest struggles are linked to 4 issues:

- \* to draw attention to the quality of the food;
- \* to highlight workers' inability to afford the board and lodging and feeding fees without wage improvements;
- \* to have wages raised on a par with other hospitals;
- \* to implement the pay as you eat system.

Although only 55 workers reside in the hospital complex, they have been supported by the rest of the workforce, many of whom reside in the nearby townships at Jouberton in Klerksdorp, Kanana in Orkney and those living at Vaal Reefs married quarters. Attempts to negotiate with the medical superintendent have been futile and workers remain resolved to continue till their demands are met.

The protest action has been extremely successful, serving to conscientise a workforce often seen as passive. The NUM was introduced in early 1983 by a very active nurse who explained to workers, on an individual basis, the importance of a trade union. Amongst other things that had to be combatted - besides

- food boycott -

fear - were management attempts to foist a liaison committee on the workers. This was decisively rejected. Her patient and persuasive organising work bore fruit when, in March 1983, a shaft stewards' committee of 7 was elected from all sections of the workers.

The shaft stewards are active in the Western Transvaal region of the NUM. A shaft steward explained why workers, "professional" and general, joined the NUM:

We had many problems. Nurses and workers were often discharged and victimised without their cases being properly investigated. The attitude of the floor supervisors was biased and they treated workers badly. They are more spies than supervisors. In addition, black staff were searched by the security every time they leave the hospital while the whites are exempted. Also there is a lot of job discrimination. Here whites, whether they have the experience and qualifications or not, will be appointed floor supervisors

Since joining the NUM confidence and consciousness has been raised. And because the hospital is small, close relations have been built up between professional and general staff. Because the hospital serves the nearby mines, nurses are exposed to the horrors of mine injuries and have clearly identified themselves with the mine workers' struggle. While they might enjoy relatively better wages and a professional status they are nevertheless also confronted with discriminatory practices which require organisation and struggle if they are to be eradicated. For this reason they are squarely with the union in the struggle against job reservation. Although some have made contact with the Health Workers Association, to broaden their contact with other hospitals, it is with the NUM that their future belongs if they wish to wage a battle against the mine bosses.

(Klerksdorp correspondent, May 1985)

