

WORKERS' CONTROL

ABASEBENZI normally deals with the workers struggle in South Africa. But in this issue we look at some of the demands being made by workers in Europe. These workers have a long history of organised opposition to bosses, and are finding new ways to oppose bosses. For nearly 100 years workers in Europe have had a strong trade union movement. This movement grew out of the realisation by workers that without organised, united action, they would be at the mercy of the exploitation of the bosses. Because the early movements arose directly from workers' experiences of life and could only be effective with the active support of all workers, the movements represented all the problems that faced workers.

Their demands did not stop at asking for better wages and shorter working hours. Workers demanded to be treated like people and not simply be dictated to like animals. They said: "We are no less clever than bosses. Why should we spend our lives just being told what to do? Often we can see a better way of doing a job. Why can we not use our skills to find better ways of working? Must we do the work while bosses take all the decisions that affect OUR lives?"

Now bosses were not going to accept this. They knew that if workers questioned bosses' control over work they would end up by getting rid of bosses altogether. But the bosses were clever. They realised they could not fight all the demands of workers. So they gave in in certain areas. They accepted the trade unions' right to bargain for higher wages and better conditions on behalf of the workers. In return bosses demanded that the trade unions act in a way that they called 'responsible'. Bosses insisted that trade unions negotiate only on certain issues but that the control of work was not to be discussed.

But the old demands for workers' control were not forgotten. In a few factories workers have actually managed to gain control. Usually this took place when bosses felt they were not getting enough profits from the factories and wanted to close them down. Workers were not prepared to accept this and used various ways to take over the factories. Sometimes workers forced the government to lend them the money to buy the factory. Sometimes they just took it over and told the old bosses they would be paid out from future profits. Sometimes workers got together and used their savings to start new industries. Let us look at one example of this in Spain.

Workers' Control in Spain

In 1943 a Catholic priest, Father Maria, set up a technical training school. By 1955 it had 200 pupils and they felt that what was needed was an industry they could run themselves. At first five students of the school got together and began making cooking equipment. It was not easy, but they continued. Today this has grown to a huge co-operative made up of 35 factories. These are run by the 10 000 workers who work in them.

How is it organised? To become a worker at the co-operative you have to pay money to join. This is used to expand the factories to make more jobs. The factories are run by directors elected from the workers themselves. Each worker has an equal vote and all main decisions are referred back to workers when they meet in a general assembly.

Who get the profits? Well, some of the profits are kept by the firm so as to expand production and to buy newer, better machinery. The rest is paid out to the workers. So workers not only control their jobs, but no money goes to anyone who has not worked in the factory.

Why is Workers' Control so important in Europe today?

There are many reasons:

1. To prevent bosses from cheating workers. Often bosses give complicated answers to try and prove that they can not give workers better wages and conditions. They "prove" this by using figures from the company's records. But the workers do not know if the figures are accurate or if bosses are just making them up. So workers now demand to see the company's records. But these are often difficult to understand, so they demand the right to bring in their own experts to see what is really going on!

2. To get a greater share in the wealth workers have created. Workers no longer accept that profits must simply go to bosses. They use control over the company to decide for themselves what is to be done with the profits.

3. To organise their work more efficiently. Workers also have brains and they demand to use them! Workers are the ones that actually work with the machinery. Often they know how best to organise their jobs. They use control to make sure that jobs are not dangerous to the health of workers. To make sure that workers are properly trained for the job. To fight these problems workers demand control over the way they work.

4. To stop bosses using workers as machines. Often bosses break jobs into so many parts that they have no meaning to workers. Workers are just expected to do one very simple job, such as tightening one screw all day long. If they complain that their work is too dull, bosses may answer by putting a machine in their place. Then workers lose their jobs. With workers' control there can be new machines and new jobs created for workers.

Workers spend most of their time working. This time should not simply be spent acting out the wishes of bosses. Every human being is entitled to make decisions about their lives. To remain treated like a child at the place at which workers spend most of their lives and time is intolerable. Therefore workers demand the right to control this vital area of their lives.

#### WHAT DO WORKERS THINK?

This month ABSEBENZI spoke to a group of workers at the Advice Bureau's office. There were three who work for King's Transport, and they had a sad story to tell.

They had come into the Advice Bureau to get legal help. They said that while they were delivering goods, the driver of the truck stole something. When the bosses found out that something was missing, they said that it must have been stolen by the workers. The bosses refused to listen to the workers story that the driver had stolen the missing goods. The 3 workers were told that they had to pay R50 each.

The workers said it was bad enough paying for something they did not steal. But usually they earn only R16 a week - no the bosses decided to take off R10 a week for 5 weeks until each worker had paid off R50. This meant that for 5 weeks the workers earn only R6!

The workers were dissatisfied with this. They had heard about the Advice Bureau, so decided to come in to see if the Advice Bureau could help. They were told that it is illegal for bosses to deduct money unless a COURT has proved that the workers actually stole something. So the Advice Bureau would write to the bosses to give the money back to the workers.

This pleased the workers very much. They had not known about the Advice Bureau before. Now they saw how a workers' organisation would help them. While at the Advice Bureau, they had also learnt about the happenings among other workers. They had learnt a number of useful and interesting things about workers in other factories. They felt that many of these ideas would be useful at their own work. Most important, they said, they now felt part of the Advice Bureau and of the workers' struggle in Cape Town.

ABASEBENZI asked about conditions at King's Transport. The workers told us that they are not good. Most of the workers are casual labourers, and the bosses take advantage of this. For instance, last year the workers earned only R11 a week. The hours are long (from 8 - 5.30) and there is much work to do. The low wages earned at this time are hardly living wages - busfares are up, food is up, all sorts of prices are rising. The workers thought they should get a minimum of R35 a week.

Had they ever gone to ask the bosses for higher pay? They had, they told us, but there are problems. The workers are not well organised and have no works committee. Everyone must go to the bosses himself - the bosses see the workers are weak, and tell them that they will see about higher wages. Usually the bosses never see!

So the bosses exploit the workers and take advantage of the fact that most are casual labourers - they do not even pay the casual workers overtime. It is difficult for the workers to organise and they are scared of their being sacked. But the workers from King's Transport told us that there was in their minds the idea of forming a works committee to obtain better conditions for the workers.

## THE STRUGGLE OF THE NIGHTWATCHMEN AT GROENVLEI

Nightwatchmen from the Cape Town City Council's House Building Unit at Groenvlei have been fighting for over a year to establish a works committee. ABASEBENZI recently spoke to a number of the watchmen to find out why they wanted a works committee.

The workers feel that a works committee will unite them and force the bosses to meet at least some of their demands. They are demanding an improvement in working conditions.

- == They want shorter working hours. At present they work more than 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.
- == They want sick leave and holidays. At present they are allowed neither.
- == They want an end to victimisation. Sometimes the checker does not like a particular worker and accuses him of sleeping while on duty. Proof of this is not given and pay is deducted from the worker's wages.
- == The workers want protection against the weather. At present they must sit in the open even on cold and wet nights.
- == The workers want protection against "skollies". The City Council does not provide them with any weapons.

### Low Wages

For working under these bad and dangerous conditions they are only paid about R24 a week. They are not paid extra even if they have worked for 10 years. Workers feel they should get at least R2 extra after 3 years service, increasing by R1 for every year after this. This does not mean that they are satisfied with their basic wage, which they feel should be much higher. The watchmen told ABASEBENZI that they feel they deserve at least R40 - R50 per week.

Workers are also very angry about their time of pay. After they have finished work on Friday mornings, they have to wait for 2½ to : five hours before they receive their pay.

Is it any wonder that the nightwatchmen at Groenvlei are angry about their conditions? Let us now look at the way they have tried to organise themselves to improve their wages and conditions.

Firstly they talked to other workers about their problems and they discovered that the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau might be able to help them. They approached the Advice Bureau and the organisers helped the watchmen to organise a meeting to demand a works committee. The bosses refused to speak to the workers and would not give them a works committee. Eventually four of the representatives of the workers were dismissed by the bosses, but the watchment did not give up their struggle.

### The Struggle Continues

They continued to build up their unity and strength in their fight for a works committee. The watchment have now drawn up a petition which they hope will force management to give them a works committee.

The nightwatchmen at Groenvlei are taking the first steps in building up their strength and unity. They have resisted all efforts by bosses to divide them and their determination is a shining example to the workers of Cape Town.

### KNOW YOUR BOSSES

Would workers like to earn R30 000 per year and more? Get a free car from your firm? Own a house in the best suburbs, worth between R60 00 and R250 000? These are the salaries and conditions of the top bosses of the companies in which workers now works

In the December issue of the bosses' magazine, "MANAGEMENT", we learn of the salaries and conditions of these top bosses. These men are not badly treated. Apart from the salaries of from R30 000 to R100 000 and more every year, these bosses get other benefits, for example free samples of other factories' products from the other bosses. These are in addition to the salaries mentioned above. They consider private swimming pools, tennis courts, wine cellars and even a gym to be a standard part of their homes. Most top bosses buy at least 12 shirts, at R25 each, every year, to wear with the 4 suits they have made, at R250 each. They buy their shoes in London on their business trips overseas, at R100 per pair.

In case these trips are too tiring for the bosses, they find time while overseas to visit luxury holiday hotels in Spain, Italy, London and the South of France. Paid for by the company of course! These are the same men who tell workers that they can not afford to pay workers higher wages!

## WHAT HAPPENED ABOUT DUENS?

Workers will remember having read in previous editions of ABASEBENZI about the workers at Duens, who were accused of striking last year. In January the trial of these 19 workers was held in Cape Town. Let us look at what happened there - the events leading up to the 'strike' and the goings-on in Court.

### THE WORKERS COMPLAINTS

In May 1974 the bosses at Duens decided to set up a liaison committee. They collected nominations for the committee through the foremen of the different departments, and set up the committee, which worked until about March of last year.

However, workers were not satisfied with this committee, which they had not asked for and for which they had not voted. They felt that this committee was not representing them properly or reporting back about what happened in their meetings with the bosses. So, in November 1974 about thirty workers got together and complained to the bosses about the committee. After this meeting the bosses said that they would allow new people to be chosen for two of the places on the liaison committee - the two places for 'representatives' of the bread department. But they would still keep the liaison committee itself and all the other members. They thought that this would satisfy the workers as the thirty who complained had all come from the bread department.

The workers were NOT satisfied however. They did not like the liaison committee itself. And so there were no nominations received by the bosses for the two places in the bread department.

### LIAISON COMMITTEE OR WORKS COMMITTEE?

The workers wrote letters to the bosses, asking for a vote to be held to choose between a liaison committee and a works committee. Management agreed eventually, but wanted workers to vote by secret ballot. This would mean voting on pieces of paper, and these written votes would then be counted by management. The workers did not want this. Many of them were illiterate. They did not see why they could not vote by show of hands at a meeting of all workers, either department by department, or of the whole factory.

And so, when the ballot was held to choose between the two committees, only one worker voted. The rest boycotted as they did not want a secret ballot. The bosses then claimed that this showed that the workers were not interested in representation at all, and took away the liaison committee. Thus the workers were left with neither a works committee nor a liaison committee.

### A WORKER IS SACKED!

In June a petition signed by 240 of the 370 workers at the factory was sent to the bosses, asking again for a works committee. In the law it says that when a majority - over half - the workers in any factory ask for a works committee, the bosses MUST see that it is set up.

However, the bosses did not do this. Instead one worker, the one who had presented the petition to the bosses, was dismissed. The bosses thought they would remove their problems in this way.

Two other workers then went to see the bosses to complain about the victimisation of this worker. After this meeting the bosses said that they would take the worker back. But when they took him back they moved him from the bread department, where he had been before, to the flour department. They thought that all the trouble had been in the bread department, and so if they moved the 'ringleader', the trouble would stop. They also agreed at last to have a works committee.

However, it was not only the bread workers who were dissatisfied. Workers in all the departments were united in their dissatisfaction.

They were dissatisfied because, although the bosses had agreed at last to a works committee, they still said workers must choose the members by secret ballot. Again the election was boycotted by all but one workers.

#### THE "STRIKE"

And so, on 12 August, more than a year after the first demands, over 100 workers gathered early in the morning in the yard at the factory. When the bosses arrived the workers demanded a works committee elected by show of hands. The bosses called in the Labour Department and the Police. When they arrived it was agreed that all workers would go back to work, and that 2 workers, Shasha and Balfour, would go and see management after lunch to put forward the workers' demands.

However, once again the bosses attempted to solve the problem by sacking the representatives - before the meeting.

The next day a large group of workers again gathered early in the morning. This time they had two demands:

1. that Shasha and Balfour be taken back
2. that they be allowed to elect a works committee by hand vote.

Again the Labour Department and the Police were called in. Long meetings were held with bosses, labour department officials and police addressing the workers, telling them to go back to work. They suggested again that representatives go and see the bosses in the afternoon, but this time the workers had learnt their lesson and they refused. They did not want more workers sacked as the two had been the day before. They refused to go back to work until their demands were met.

The bosses would not give in, and at about 10 o'clock nineteen workers were arrested. These were the nineteen tried in January.

#### THE TRIAL

During the trial, which many other workers attended, some interesting things were said.

For instance, the bosses, claimed that they had originally sacked the workers because of a reduction in staff, caused by using more machines in the place of workers. However, when the workers' lawyers questioned the bosses, they found that there had been no reduction in staff since then, and there are still as many workers now as there were a year ago.

The bosses also said that when they decided to sack workers they chose the bad workers. But most of the nineteen had worked in the same factory for many years. Why had they not been sacked before if they were bad workers?

The bosses claimed that voting by hand was impossible, as all workers could not be at the factory at the same time, because of the three shifts which the factory had. But at the 'strike' there were workers from all three shifts.

14 of the 19 workers were found guilty. They were sentenced to R100 fine or 90 days in jail each, suspended for 3 years on condition that they do not strike again in this time. The other 5 were found not guilty as the bosses could not prove that they were meant to be working at the time of the 'strike'.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

We have seen the workers' perseverance throughout a long period of struggle. Why did they not succeed?

Many people think that the law gives workers and bosses an equal chance before the law to get what they demand. However, in this case we see that the bosses did not give in to the demands of the workers, who were only asking for a works committee elected by show of hands. This is allowed in the law. And yet, the workers were still found guilty of striking, and most still lost their jobs. Meanwhile the bosses lost nothing.

The Duens workers stood up for their rights, but they were not strong enough to stand against the bosses and against the law all on their own.

## WORKERS' ADVICE COLUMN

### YOUR PAY SLIP

In the last ABASEBENZI we looked at Basic Pay, calculated by the number of hours worked. There is another way in which wages can be calculated - the PIECE RATE system. Here you are paid a certain amount of money for each 'piece' of work you do, for example for each tyre you retread.

If you are working on this system, you must make sure when you get your pay slip that the correct number of pieces have been recorded. Most factories do not use a simple piece rate, since the workers are not usually responsible if the machinery goes wrong or the material breaks. It would be unfair to pay a very low wage just because the workers produced very little because of a failure of machinery or materials. So the law says there must also be a basic rate for the job, which is the lowest the wage can go. This is the TIME-RATE, and is the minimum you can get for a certain period of time worked.

So, if you are on a piece rate system, your pay slip will have both the time rate and the piece rate for the job. It will show how many pieces you have made, and how much you should have been paid for those pieces. Then, if that amount is less than the time rate, the time rate will count as your basic pay.

If you think that you have not been paid the correct amount, or for the correct amount of pieces, you must complain. There should be a record of what you have produced. Ask to compare this with your payslip. Demand the money which is due to you.

In the next ABASEBENZI we will look at overtime.