



# APDUSA VIEWS

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## THE GREAT SARMCOL STRIKE!

### INTRODUCTION

Since 30 April 1985, the Midlands of Natal has been witnessing the unfolding of a drama, the basic theme of which is the conflict between WORKER and CAPITALIST. Almost a 1 000 workers employed by SARMCOL, a subsidiary of the British owned BTR went on strike. SARMCOL responded by dismissing ALL the strikers.

### THE REASON FOR THE STRIKE

Negotiations between the METAL AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION (MAWU) and SARMCOL on the terms of the Recognition Agreement broke down because of disagreement on a number of issues, the more important of which are as follows:—

#### (a) SEVERANCE PAY

i.e. compensation upon retrenchment. MAWU demanded one weeks pay for every year worked by the worker to be retrenched.

SARMCOL offered 3 days pay for every year worked AFTER two years service.

#### (b) PEACE OBLIGATION

MAWU asked that in the event of a "wild cat" or spontaneous strike, SARMCOL should not dismiss the strikers without first giving the Trade Union the opportunity to settle the matter.

SARMCOL wanted the right to dismiss those workers on the spot.

#### (c) RETRENCHMENT

MAWU demanded the adoption of the internationally accepted procedure on retrenchment, i.e., those who were employed last ought to be the first to be retrenched.

SARMCOL insisted that it should have the right to retrench whoever it wanted to regardless of the length of service rendered by any worker.

if one went through the list of disputed matters, MAWU's demands will be found to be fair, just and reasonable and, therefore, the attitude adopted by SARMCOL was soundly condemned by all persons and organisations who were interested in the welfare of workers in general.

## **APDUSA'S STANDPOINT ON THE DISPUTE**

In response to a call by MAWU to well-wishing organisations to write letters to SARMCOL indicating their attitude on the dispute, APDUSA forwarded a letter which we reproduce hereunder:—

*"The Managing Director  
BTR SARMCOL  
P O Box 29  
HOWICK  
Natal*

*P O Box 8415  
Cumberwood  
PIETERMARITZBURG  
3235  
4 July 1985*

*Sir,*

*I am directed by the Executive Committee of APDUSA (PIETERMARITZBURG) to convey to you my organisation's utter disgust and abhorrence at the manner in which your company has treated the workers who belong to the METAL AND ALLIED WORKERS' UNION (MAWU).*

*It is our considered view that the clauses, which MAWU insisted be incorporated in the recognition agreement between it and your company, are both just and reasonable. Your company's refusal to have those clauses incorporated in the agreement is a clear indication of your company's attitude to workers who give the best part of their lives to enrich your company. That attitude is one of base ingratitude.*

*It is also clear that your company's philosophy is thoroughly impregnated with baaskaapism. It is only because the workers are a franchiseless people that your company is able to act fast and free with their rights.*

*Your company's action in dismissing almost 1 000 workers at a time of severe recession displays a callous disregard for human suffering and the disaster that has befallen thousands of dependants of those workers.*

*That form of economic relations described as capitalism has come under heavy fire from all enlightened and civilised thinkers for over 150 years because of certain evil features inherent in capitalism. Your company's conduct and attitude reveals capitalism at its worst.*

*In the course of our work and activity amongst the Black community (African, Coloured and Indian), you can rest assured that when economic systems are discussed, your company will feature prominently as an outstanding example of the depths that capitalism can sink to in trying to crush the spirit of workers who make legitimate demands.*

*We are aware of the futility of appealing to your company to retract its inhuman decision. Therefore, we DEMAND that you forthwith re-employ the dismissed workers AND accede to their just and reasonable demands which MAWU requires to be part of the recognition agreement.*

*Yours faithfully*

*KADER HASSIM  
Chairman"*

## **PERSECUTION OF THE STRIKERS**

The workers who went on strike underwent and are still undergoing great suffering. Cut off from earning a wage, the strikers and their families have had to live on the sum of about R6,00 per week per worker and his family. Notwithstanding this, the workers assembled daily at the



Community Hall in the Mpophomeni Location near Howick to collect their food hampers and to discuss the progress of their struggle. The high morale of the workers proved to be too much for the ruling class which banned all meetings in Mpophomeni.

The strikers then arranged to meet in a church in the town of Howick. But the sight of hundreds of singing workers terrified the Whites of Howick and the Town Clerk prevailed on the church authorities not to make the church available to the workers.

The workers had no alternative but to meet in Pietermaritzburg and elsewhere at considerable inconvenience and expense.

## **MASS MEETING**

On 6 July 1985, MAWU called a mass meeting of the strikers. Invited to this meeting were various organisations which supported the SARMCOL workers. The meeting was well attended (2 000-3 000). As one of the invited organisations, APDUSA delivered the following message of support.

*"I bring comradely greetings from APDUSA and the UNITY MOVEMENT to you, the members of MAWU, and especially to those 1 000 workers who have been cruelly deprived of a livelihood by the SARMCOL owners who have no heart and no shame.*

*Your courage, your determination and your willingness to suffer and sacrifice for your rights have inspired the oppressed people throughout the country. The manner in which you have conducted your strike – the careful planning and the efficient organisation – has won you great admiration. Above all, you have avoided the usual traps set by the ruling class – traps which provoke people into anger and uncontrollable action and thus providing the ruling class with the excuse to employ violence against an unarmed people. By acting in this way, you have taught the entire oppressed people a valuable lesson for which they are indebted to you.*

*When you went on strike, you struck a blow for the freedom of all oppressed. Your struggle has become our struggle! Your defeat will be our defeat, and your victory will be our victory!*

*APDUSA and the UNITY MOVEMENT say to MAWU:*

**"FORWARD TO VICTORY!**

**POWER TO THE WORKERS!**

**A PEOPLE UNITED CAN NEVER BE DEFEATED!"**

At the end of a long and lively meeting, it was decided to approach the Chamber of Industries to intervene in the SARMCOL dispute, failing which a work stoppage or stay-away would be called.

## **STAY-AWAY**

It surprised nobody when the Chamber of Industries not only refused to intervene but through its liberal director (long-time Mayor of Pietermaritzburg) PAMELA REID threatened to report MAWU to the members of the Chamber of Industries if MAWU did not call off the STAY-AWAY.

The STAY-AWAY was unique in a number of respects. It was the first time that the entire public were called to go on a one-day general strike in support of an industrial dispute in a single factory.

Further, the method of organising the STAY-AWAY was unique in that no organisation PUBLICLY called for the STAY-AWAY for a particular day. Yet by Monday 15 July 1985, Pietermaritzburg was buzzing with talk of a the STAY-AWAY on 18 July 1985. By Wednesday 17 July the entire population of Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding areas knew of the STAY-AWAY.



On Tuesday 16 July, APDUSA issued a statement to "THE NATAL WITNESS" which refused to publish a single word of it. APDUSA's statement reads as follows:—

1. *The struggle of the SARMCOL workers is a just one and as such every man, woman and child who is sensitive to peoples' sufferings must support the cause of the SARMCOL workers.*
2. *The owners of SARMCOL have, by their actions, shown a callous disregard for the plight of the workers and their families.*
3. *By their arrogant refusal to negotiate with the workers, the owners of SARMCOL have caused a situation of extreme tension to prevail in Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding areas.*
4. *We support the call for the STAY-AWAY as a means of applying pressure on SARMCOL to negotiate with MAWU.*
5. *Our approach to the call for the STAY-AWAY on 18 July 1985 is as follows:—*
  - (a) *All traders and self-employed persons should cease their activities for the day.*
  - (b) *All those workers who are confident that their employers will sympathetically view their absence from work should not go to work.*
  - (c) *Those workers who fear dismissal must make up their own minds as to whether they should go to work or not. We cannot accept the responsibility of the action of un-sympathetic employers.*
  - (d) *Employers ought to view the STAY-AWAY as nothing more than an act of solidarity by workers for their fellow workers who have been deprived of a livelihood. They must, therefore, refrain from victimising the workers who absent themselves."*

The STAY-AWAY was a resounding success. Pietermaritzburg became a ghost-town on that day. All sections of the population responded splendidly. The show of UNITY and SOLIDARITY was moving. FULL CREDIT must be given to MAWU for the professional manner in which it organised the STAY-AWAY. Its hallmark was DISCIPLINE. Hence, as a daily newspaper reported: "There were no deaths or serious injuries."

Credit must also be given to organisations, political and otherwise, which supported MAWU. LAWYERS FOR DEMOCRACY made available the services of a panel of its lawyers, while a group of DOCTORS were on standby for the whole day. Traders and self-employed persons closed their businesses for the day.

However, the GREATEST SACRIFICE was made by those workers who responded to the call. For them, staying away from work meant the loss of one whole day's wages because most industries and firms adopted the policy of "no work, no pay!"

## **CONCLUSION**

The drama of the Great SARMCOL Strike has not yet played itself out. The strikers have shown no signs of giving up their struggle. SARMCOL remains unmoved in its unreasonableness. The strikers, by their determination and discipline, have revealed those qualities which makes the working class a potent force for liberation.

The leadership of MAWU has wisely adopted the strategy of calling on community-based organisations, the trading class, the petty bourgeois intellectuals, etc to lend support to the workers. The strategy is based on the lessons learnt from countless struggles in history. It is not possible for any single class, not even the working class, to achieve major victories without allies from other classes.