

THE 11 WEEK TEMBISA STRIKE

The state and government are there to see that the system of racial capitalism runs smoothly and profitably. It enforces the same or worse anti-worker policies of this system in the industries that it controls. *These industries form part and parcel of the whole capitalist system.*

State workers, (those who work in hospitals, municipalities, schools, forestry departments, etc.), are as exploited as any other workers. In fact, state workers are subjected to extremely oppressive conditions at work and, in most cases, are denied basic rights like the right to strike. They have to undergo security checks and unions have no ready access to these workers.

nationalisation

In many countries, not only South Africa, the state has been forced to nationalise (take over) industries which the bosses cannot afford to run profitably. For example, the Leyland motor company and the coal mines in Britain are owned by the state. Yet the workers have no say in the running of these industries or companies. They are run according to the principle of making profits and not according to the needs and benefits of working people. This is totally in conflict with socialism which stands for the democratic control of the means of production by workers.

tools down

The story of the Tembisa strike is as follows:

Tembisa is the second largest black township after Soweto and is situated between Kempton Park and Olifantsfontein. In May 1986 more than 1 200 workers from 11 municipal departments downed tools and demanded:

- a minimum wage of R700,00 per month
- the dismissal of certain seniors
- the right to observe stay-aways without the loss of wages or fear of victimisation.



Malibelineye

(SABMAWU)

An ultimatum by the "mayor", Lucas Mothiba, for the workers to return to work while he looked into their problems or be dismissed, was rejected by the strikers. They were subsequently dismissed and started preparing the community for the struggle which was to follow with door-to-door pamphletering and discussions.

On three occasions, the workers were teargassed and baton-charged by the police and army, but they could not be crushed. Seventy families were evicted and several strikers arrested, leaving many families stranded. The union, SABMAWU, looked after the families at Wilgespruit and started a campaign to assist the children.

1200 detained

The entire workforce of 1200 was arrested by the security forces. This was the biggest single mass detention under the State of Emergency. The significant feature here, was that although the workers were in detention, the bosses still could not get scabs to replace them, indicating the level of support for the strike. At the same time a rent boycott and a consumer boycott of the Councillors' businesses continued in support of the strikers.

workers' power

When the workers were released from detention, they continued their struggle and pressure was put on the Councillors to resign. By the time the councillors had resigned, the writing was already on the wall. The Council was collapsing through the power of the workers. In order to try and save the Council, the deputy minister of Law and Order flew by helicopter to encourage the 'mayor' but to no avail - Mothiba resigned and the Council collapsed. An official from the Department of Constitutional Development pleaded with the workers to return to work, giving in to all their demands. The workers returned to work, victorious after eleven weeks of intense struggle.

significance

The eleven week strike was significant in that:

(a) In a high unemployment area, bosses found it almost impossible to recruit scabs due to the support won from the community for the strike.

(b) The rent boycott was used correctly as a tactic rather than a principle, and was given a proper perspective of being related to the struggle against exploitation.

(c) The struggle against the puppet Town Councillors was supported by all sections of the community, i.e., the students, youth, etc., under the direction and control of the workers themselves.

(d) The collapse of the Town Council, as well as the successful rent struggle, is accredited by all in Tembisa to the power of the workers' struggle.

At the end it can be said that another small battle had been won by black workers in the overall war against the apartheid-capitalist state.