

THE STAY-AWAY

The deepening crisis in South Africa resulted in increased black worker and student militancy during 1984. The year was marked with an upsurge in strikes, resistance against rent increases in the Vaal triangle, anti-election campaigns and country wide student boycotts. It was also in 1984, the year of the new constitution and its supposed "reform" that 7000 soldiers and police invaded the township of Sebokeng on 22 October. It is against this backdrop that the fourth stay-away of the year, on the 5th and 6th of November, was called.

The stayaway was called to support demands for:

- The withdrawal of the army and the police from the townships,
- The resignation of community councillors,
- The release of detainees and political prisoners,
- A stop to rent and busfare increases,
- The reinstatement of all dismissed workers,
- The withdrawal of "unfair" GST and other taxes, and
- Democratically elected SRC's at black schools and the abolition of educational age restrictions.

About 500 000 workers stayed away, making it the most successful Stayaway in the 35 years that it has been used as a political weapon. The greatest response came from the Vaal triangle where 90% of workers stayed away, and on the East Rand where the stayaway was 80 to 90% effective.

This particular stayaway was the most effective and widespread because of the involvement of progressive trade unions. Yet, there were limitations and some valid criticisms of the stayaway. Some critics felt that the stayaway should have had a broader basis by incorporating more progressive organisations thus making the decisions more democratic.

CONDITIONS AT SASOL

The SASOL2 and 3 plants, situated near Secunda in the Eastern Transvaal, is controlled by 11 directors, at least 7 of which are state appointed. In June '82 - June '83 group profits after taxation from the Sasol2 and 3 plants rose from R176,7 million to R197,2 million.

The SASOL2 and 3 plants employ 6500 "african" workers. By December 1983 over 50% of these workers, 2200 in Sasol2 and 1300 in Sasol3, had been organised into the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), a FOSATU affiliate. Managements attitude to the unionisation of the workers was, as can be expected, negative.

Conditions at Sasol are bad. The plant hostels are like a military camp. There is heavy security and workers feel oppressed. In places like the coal and ash handling plants it is dirty. The masks that they give the workers don't prevent chest problems. Wages are also generally very low, some as low as R1.18c perhour.

In November 1984 another very pressing issue was the workers struggle with the Highveld United Bus Company. The company had increased fares from R23 to R25 per month. The company also acts in a racist manner by cramming black workers into busses with hard plastic seats. Buses carrying white workers arrive sometimes with only two people on board.

A Commuters Committee was set up by workers with support from people living in the township. The workers had already decided to boycott the buses on the same day that the Stayaway was called.



2 Shopstewards and organisers from the Sasol workers' union plan the fight back.

SASOL WORKERS VICTIMISED!

On Monday 5th November army hippos,armoured cars and police in camouflage started to invade the hostels.Management dropped leaflets from a Landrover and,by helicopter warning workers to be at work by 10-00 on Tuesday morning.The general feeling of the workers was to ignore the ultimatum and to walk to work on Wednesday morning. On Tuesday morning at 11.30a.m. the General Manager,Mr.De Waal,informed the Union that the company had no more dealings with them.Management also announced that all the boycotting workers had been dismissed and that the hostels had to be vacated by 6.00p.m. that same day.



This ultimatum,too,was ignored by workers.When the workers tried marching to work on Wednesday morning,they were confronted by the police and the army.A general meeting was held where workers decided to stay on unless forcibly removed by the army. According to the workers,the army was provocative in many ways for instance by insulting workers and openly preparing for attack by brandishing shields,batons,shotguns and putting on gas masks.Workers were forcibly removed from the hostels and transported back to the 'homelands' by the same bus company.Tsidiso Mothupi (a CWIU organiser) was detained that day.

WORKERS FIGHT BACK!

Since the dismissals,the Union has struggled to keep the workers informed.The workers were scattered - in homelands,such as Qwa-Qwa,Venda,etc. where there are no telephone facilities close at hand.Some workers however,have kept in touch by phoning the Union officials and by forming groups so that they can be briefed regularly by Union officials.

The Union has fought back in many different ways.Some of these are,as Tsidiso Ntaopane (Chief Shop Steward and Vice Chairperson of the Sasol 2 Shop Stewards Council) explains, "We are looking for support from other unions and organisations.We look for support from the international labour organisations.We are looking at a boycott of Sasol products.Maybe we can hold campaigns in the homelands - explaining the mass dismissals and affecting Sasol's recruitment.Also we still have members inside."

Sasol has since announced that they would selectively re-employ the dismissed workers. Returning workers have been called in individually for an interview in which they are asked the following questions:

1. Why did you stay away from work on the 5th and 6th?
2. Why did you not heed the return to work deadline?
3. Were you intimidated?
4. Who were the organisers/intimidators-name them.
5. If there is another such stay-away will you participate?
6. Did you have a record, i.e. warnings?
7. What is your relationship with your superiors or fellow workers?

Over 20 unions with a combined total of over 300 thousand workers have decided to support the CWIU and to call for a national strike if Sasol does not give in. Partly as a result of this Sasol has agreed to negotiate. In the meantime, dismissed workers and their families are starving in the homelands.Finding work has been made more difficult because the workers reference books bear the stamp that they are dismissed Sasol workers. It is appropriate to end this article with a quote from Tsidiso Mothupi (CWIU organiser): " The irony is that Sasol itself is contributing into making people into radicals. As it is said, A hungry man is a angry man"



mass meeting of Sasol workers



Tsidiso Mothupi organiser for CWIU with FOSATU logo in the background