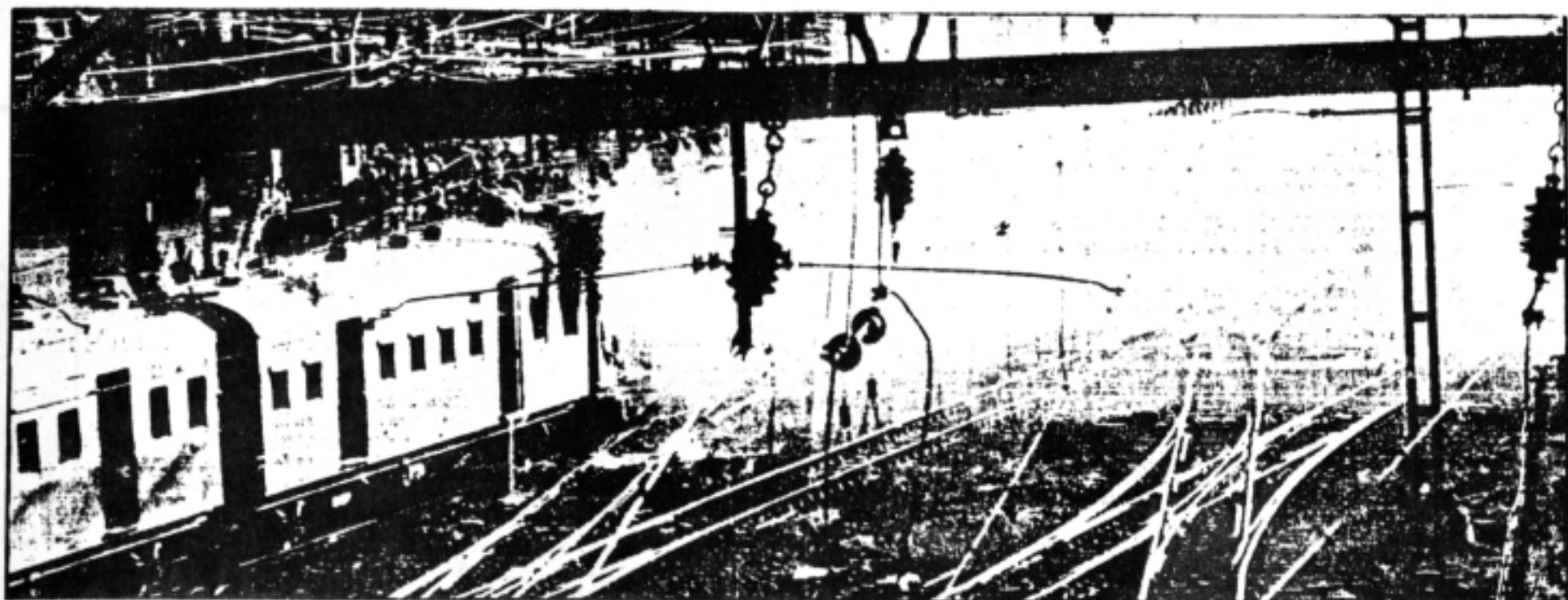


RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE



On March 12 1987, a driver at the City Deep Container Depot, Andrew Nenzanda, was dismissed. This dismissal prompted strike action by 16 000 South African Transport Services (SATS) workers. The dismissal of the comrade was a spark which ignited the frustrations and anger of thousands of black railway workers who had for many years experienced bad and racist working conditions and low pay.

This strike has led to tremendous violence. We have witnessed workers being killed, many viciously assaulted and brutalised, hundreds detained, union offices raided, and millions of rands damage to railway property.

background

Black workers in SATS are subject to a hated disciplinary code. This code is used daily for minor offences, and it was under this code that Cde. Nenzanda was fired. On returning from his delivery rounds on 24 October 1986, Cde. Nenzanda forgot to hand in a sum of R40,40. On the following Monday, Cde. Nenzanda on his own initiative, handed in the money. Months later, after an inquiry was held, he was fired.

The treatment of this comrade is not abnormal for black railway workers. SATS employs 105 000 white workers compared to 101 000 black workers. These white workers receive protected employment from SATS – higher wages, better working conditions and many subsidies and benefits.

living conditions and wages

Living conditions of black railway workers are miserable: hostels provide poor food and are overcrowded. In Germiston, for example, 4000 workers are accommodated in an overcrowded single-sex hostel. The majority of black railway workers earn a salary of just over R300 per month.

unionisation

The union recognised by SATS, the Black Trade Union (BLATU), is a "sweetheart" union. Blatu urged workers to return to work during the strike, and said that according to their agreement with SATS, workers had no right to strike! SATS workers have rejected this so-called union, choosing instead unions like the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union (SARHWU), the National Union of Railway Workers (NURAW), and the African Railway and Airway Workers Union (ARAWU).

sats response

SATS management have tried to break the strike in various ways. Many white students and unemployed white workers were recruited during the strike. SATS management also threatened to evict workers. They have also gone on an aggressive advertising campaign. They have tried to discredit the union using the press posters and pamphlets. The SABC

has acted as the mouth-piece for SATS' distortions.

demands:

The main demands of the striking workers are:

1. Unconditional reinstatement of a worker fired unfairly.
2. Workers to be allowed to have representatives of their own choice.
3. Striking workers to be paid for the period on strike.

lessons

What is clear, is that this strike was a spontaneous one. Not enough preparation was made before the strike. As one worker commented: "Our union was caught with its pants down".

The striking workers showed courage and determination despite the hardships they were facing. The unevenness of the level of organisation throughout the country is shown by the fact that the strike has been largely limited to the Witwatersrand. This prevented the strike from being more effective nationally.

Another contributing factor was the fact that the SARHWU leadership has refused to co-ordinate strike action with NURAW and ARAWU, despite the willingness of the latter two unions. It must be remembered that 35% of the striking workers are NURAW members, and that NURAW has strong support in provinces outside of the Transvaal.