

Noise and dust campaign

FAWU's struggle for better conditions in the milling industry

The Premier Group, a subsidiary of Anglo American, is one of the "big four" companies dominating South African agribusiness. It has four divisions of which Premier Food Industries (PFI) is one. The milling industry, in turn, is one of PFI's six divisions. The milling industry presents particular problems for union organisation and campaigns. These are highlighted in the history of Food & Allied Workers Union's (FAWU) noise and dust campaign in Premier Milling. Peter Lewis of the Industrial Health Research Group (IHRG) who worked with FAWU on this campaign, reports.

Background

The milling industry has performed well over the past 20 years, evading the effects of the recession because steadily rising real wages in the economy as a whole, together with bread price controls, have increased the demand for bread as a working class staple food, while milling industry profits have been guaranteed by the subsidy system. Since the late 1970s, therefore, there has been considerable industry-wide investment in plant and machinery in milling.

In the 1980s Premier Food Industries (PFI) began promoting the internal regulation of the industry by recognising FAWU as a bargaining agent at divisional level and in the majority of mills. Recognition has developed so that now there are virtual full-time shop stewards in each mill and Premier Milling Division finances shop stewards' transport to national divisional meetings.

PFI also attempted to bring the other "big three" into an industrial council and to persuade the other companies to stop competing by keeping wage levels as low as possible. Both Premier and FAWU have so far failed to create an industrial council in milling.

In 1986, a government-appointed commission of inquiry recommended the removal



Bulk feed offloading



Bag handling: rail loading

of the bread price subsidy, the drastic reduction of the role of the wheat board in setting wheat-procurement prices, and the removal of the wheat board's guarantee of millers' profit levels via determination of cost margins for subsidised bread. This is in line with the economy-wide policy direction of reduction in state budgets, privatisation and deregulation.

The refusal of the other large milling companies to form an industrial council, and the probable removal of the state controls over the industry, persuaded PFI to abandon attempts at regulating the industry from inside and to swim, instead, with the deregulation tide.

In 1987, PFI milling division went into dispute during the annual wage round with FAWU and SASKO. 5 000 Premier and SASKO workers went on strike in most regions. The strike was a considerable victory for FAWU and so in 1988 Premier Milling Division began to impose decentralised plant bargaining on FAWU, to make it more difficult for the union to coordinate at a national level. FAWU resisted these moves successfully and at present wage bargaining still takes place at divisional level.

The switch in PFI policy, however, has had implications for the FAWU noise and dust campaign of the 1980s.

Some of the hazards in the industry

Inside the concrete silo and mill buildings there are many workers with coughs and different kinds of respiratory-like illnesses. Conversations with longer serving grain

workers are often punctuated with whistling and wheezing sounds, as the workers struggle to get enough breath. Some workers have ugly sores on their skin, caused by too frequent contact with the irritating raw materials, while others have hearing problems from noisy machinery.

Workers are exposed to dust when:

- unloading grain or feed from rail trucks into the elevator system;
- taking off bran, feed or flour into sacks at various points in the elevator system ("bagging off");
- handling dusty sacks of product, loading rail or road trucks for dispatch;
- working in semi-automatic packing departments;
- breaking open rejected bags of product for recycling ("returns");
- cleaning mill and silo floors, and especially elevator boots and silo bins, when workers have to climb into confined spaces and clean up dust;
- weighing and adding chemicals such as minerals, vitamins and parasite killers in feed mills;
- hand tipping grain and feed raw materials into the elevator system;
- working long periods in the same plant, leading to intensive dust exposures.

Noise is a constant feature of the mills, pervading all departments. **The main sources of noise are:**

- milling machinery such as box sifters, screens, separators;
- air moving and pumping equipment for the elevator system;
- "blowlines": large air movers that act as transport for raw materials around the plants, and into and out of the elevator systems;
- vacuum equipment to clean re-usable bags;

Bagging off



Tipping



● packing machinery.

The mills are the noisiest sections, sometimes reaching constant levels of 95-98 dB(A). Noise levels in other areas are often higher than 85 dB(A).

Premier Milling has expanded and modernised a number of flour and maize mills during the 1980s, incorporating a high degree of automation. Modernisation has brought many hazards into the industry. If improvements in technology are motivated only to spread costs over increasing levels of output, there is no guarantee that they will result in improved health and safety for workers.

Between 1983 - 1989, about a third of the workforce at the Cape Town branch of Premier Milling left their jobs. No doubt the dusty and noisy working conditions have something to do with this.

Workers reject NOSA

The semi-state, but independent NOSA "inspectorate", financed by the Workmen's Compensation fund, with its star grading system, has always been closely aligned with "loss control" strategies for reducing the number of factory accidents (i.e. controlling the amount of production time lost) and is not concerned with introducing potentially costly preventive occupational medical and technical services into industry. FAWU has consistently refused to cooperate with NOSA's star-grading system. Members believe that the evaluation process never involved them, and their grievance about such problems as dust and noise were not considered. NOSA training was therefore dismissed as irrelevant and when management set up the MOSA safety committee the union boycotted it, dealing instead with health and safety issues on the normal agenda of shop stewards' caucuses and monthly negotiations with branch managers. Thus "official" health and safety organisation in the industry was mirrored by an "unofficial" shop steward-based structure at plant level.

The noise and dust campaign attempted to extend isolated gains made through this unofficial structure to the whole company, through a national health and safety agreement for the dry milling division. The first initiative was to gain the principle of health and safety inspections and ultimately dust and medical surveys to be carried out by union nominees such as the health and safety service organisations. This broke the monopoly held by NOSA on company health and safety matters.

The course of the campaign

Shop stewards negotiated access to the mills for IHRG. Inspections were carried out by IHRG with shop stewards but not in the presence of managers. Also, no time constraints were placed on the inspections. Lengthy discussions were held with shop stewards and



FAWU won significant gains during the noise and dust campaign.

workers to identify their problems.

Following the inspections, shop stewards decided that more detailed investigations were necessary. They negotiated for IHRG to carry out surveys, first in the Cape Town branch and then in the East London plant (which was carried out in conjunction with IHSEP). IHRG, HIC* and IHSEP (all health and safety service organisations) together undertook the following surveys:

IHRG: 1983/4 - undertook a respiratory health survey of workers in 5 plants in Cape Town, including bakeries and grain mills.

HIC: 1985 - performed grain and flour dust measurements at Isando flour mill, and undertook a respiratory health survey of all workers at the mill.

IHRG: 1987-89 - carried out dust and noise measurements at the Premier grain mill depot in Cape Town, and measured carbon monoxide levels from diesel exhaust fume in the depot. A respiratory health survey for all workers was undertaken at both plants.

IHRG and IHSEP: 1989 - carried out dust and noise survey at Epol animal feed plant, East London. A company nurse was trained to carry out lung function measurements.

After the HIC and 1988 IHRG health screenings, individual workers with respiratory health problems were referred for specialist medical attention, and all workers were given individual reports from the tests they underwent.

* The Health Information Centre (HIC) has become the Workplace Information Group (WIG).

Recommendations for improvements

Detailed recommendations were put forward on the basis of observed dust and noise levels, and the relationships between dust levels and respiratory health problems discovered in the screenings. Personal protective equipment, cleaning equipment, product handling, and maintenance of machinery were covered by the recommendations.

Larger-scale monitoring and control strategies were also proposed, including:

- annual audiometric (hearing) testing;
- incorporation of the respiratory screening protocol into annual medical examinations provided by the company;
- a recommendation that the company contract engineering surveys of dust and noise sources with a view to design or adapt engineered control measures.

Significant gains made

Although all these surveys took place at plant level, the recommendations for a comprehensive occupational health service at the plants and preventive engineering interventions could not be discussed at plant level, as management approval for any spending had to come from the national divisional level. After considerable delays, some of the smaller items were, however, attended to in the Cape Town branch:

- some airstream helmets were purchased and their maintenance improved (with shop stewards deciding how often filters should be replaced);
- a pressurised air supply system was introduced for workers cleaning inside silo bins;
- 3 vacuum cleaners were bought for general cleaning purposes;
- in East London, management looked into purchasing airstream dust filtering protective helmets for those workers highlighted during the survey as being at risk.

Meetings with management

These gains gave the union negotiators confidence that health and safety was firmly on the negotiating agenda. At last health and safety was moving away from the management-dominated MOSA structure and the NOSA star grading system. But management in both plants told union members that the larger issues could only be dealt with at divisional level negotiations between the national joint shop stewards' council and the divisional management committee.

Two such divisional level discussions on health and safety have taken place. At the first, in 1988, management gave a presentation that dealt with dust as an explosion hazard only, ignoring the fact that it is also a chronic health hazard. Their approach to the meeting was "consultative". No minutes were taken; no decisions were reached and

no undertakings were given - it was clear that management intended to dominate the discussion and determine its terms.

The union, however, tabled a health and safety agreement drawn up by IHRG at the request of, and in consultation with, the union's national milling organiser. The agreement was discussed with the union in great detail before the meeting. (See the following box for details of agreement.) Management requested time to respond but expressed a preference for dealing with health and safety outside of a negotiating format.

Health and Safety Agreement - initial draft

The agreement is a comprehensive one dealing with the following issues:

- shop stewards to be recognised as safety representatives under MOSA, with all the duties and rights in the law;
- rights for shop stewards to union training, time off for meetings at plant and divisional level;
- rights to information for shop stewards and union officials;
- access for union officials and their advisors;
- procedures and rights of shop stewards to deal with accidents;
- workers' rights including the right to refuse dangerous or unhealthy work, and no loss of status if transferred for health reasons;
- personal protective equipment - general requirement on management to institute engineering controls alongside PPE program;
- grievance procedures for routine and urgent health and safety problems;
- provision for respiratory health screening annually with detailed protocol including issue of confidentiality;
- provision for extra sick leave for respiratory health problems;
- procedure for extra safety precautions when construction work is being done on mill sites;
- provision for the company to carry out industrial hygiene monitoring of dust levels.

The second divisional meeting took place early this year (1990). In the meantime, most of the survey work was completed and reports sent out widely in the company to both management and the union.

The second meeting was more like a negotiation, with detailed responses from management to the agreement presented at the first meeting. The union made several concessions, the most important being that they would no longer argue for the recognition of shop stewards as safety representatives under MOSA, but that shop steward representation on health and safety issues, along with the expanded rights laid down in the agreement, should exist parallel to management MOSA health and safety committees.

At the union's request, IHRG also tabled a proposal for the company to contract an engineer to investigate dust and noise control measures for the entire industry. Insights gained from the hygiene surveys mentioned above would be used as the starting point.

Management rejected the proposal to use an outside engineering specialist, suggesting instead a "technical meeting" between IHRG, the company medical officer and

company engineers to discuss control measures. The union requested this meeting to include the joint shop stewards' council. This was also rejected by management on the grounds that "workers would have nothing to contribute to a technical meeting of this nature". We were wary to define the area as "purely technical" and felt that union representation would be important. No agreement has been reached on this issue.

The health and safety agreement itself is still to be finalised, and the joint shop stewards' council will attempt to negotiate the same agreement in the other two milling divisions of PFI: animal feeds, and edible oils.

Importance of "participative" research methods

The research undertaken by the IHRG was based on "participative" methods. While participative research can take a long time to produce results, the education process involved is valuable for both researchers and union members and greatly adds to factory floor level organisation over health issues. The process involved extensive discussions with shop stewards and union members prior to and during the survey. Through this participation, researchers gained an understanding into the way the workers experienced the problems involved. This led to more meaningful and representative results in contrast to management-commissioned studies which had minimal worker involvement, and sometimes contained contradictory recommendations.

Researchers reported back extensively in meetings with shop stewards' committees and in joint management-union meetings at plant level. Written technical reports were also given to the union and management while shorter, simpler summaries were written for worker readership.

Detailed discussions took place with shop stewards over concepts of occupational health and disease. The existing situation was discussed and compared with what is possible and desirable to achieve. In this way, different approaches were debated and formulated into detailed plant-level strategies involving definite demands.

Why is health and safety low on management's list of priorities?

The content of the proposed national agreement and the proposals for investigations into health and hygiene conditions and control measures at the factories all came from detailed plant-level investigations, which are an indispensable basis for any union intervention in health and safety matters. But plant-level work also has limitations, especially in a highly centralised and technology-intensive industry such as milling.

Managements in the industry have been very slow to do anything about preventing



health problems from noise and dust exposure in existing mills for the following main reasons:

☆ Post construction control of noise and dust involves expensive equipment and machinery and it is difficult to convince production managers that the expenditure will lead to increased output or profits. This is also why plans for new mills are not discussed with union representatives with a view to designing in standards for dust and noise exposure.

☆ Most of the health problems connected to milling involve a steady, slow deterioration of health. They are not dramatic diseases (resulting in deaths which cannot be ignored) and do not cost money in the form of increased workmen's compensation insurance premiums.

☆ State regulation of specific health hazards in the industry is still extremely limited. Although the legislation contains provision for the factory inspections, the factory inspectorate is underfunded and unable to undertake a comprehensive enforcement role.

Problems with the semi-state, but independent NOSA "inspectorate" have already been mentioned.

There is still no specific regulation of the milling industry to control dust levels in the mills, either for respiratory health protection, or to control the potential dust explosion hazard.

Also, occupational asthma is still not included in the "second schedule" of compensable occupational diseases. This discourages workers and their unions from pursuing

any individual claims, since there is a burden of proof on the asthmatic working in the grain industry to prove that his or her asthma was caused by work, while the costs of the claim and medical expenses for unsuccessful claims must be borne by the claimant or the union. The same applies to other respiratory diseases common in the industry such as chronic obstructive lung disease which is compensable in some countries.

For these reasons, PFI's health and safety practices at national level lag a long way behind their investment programme in machinery. Management's standard response to MOSA has been: participation in the NOSA star grading scheme and appointment of management representatives at various levels as safety representatives, who sit on safety committees.

The other main management initiative has been the creation of a rudimentary factory-based health service through the employment of occupational health nurses in factory clinics. This service was designed to deal only with accidents and routine ailments. Also, it suffered from very limited resources. The company nurses have a very limited educational role especially concerning occupational health problems and are not in a position to provide preventive occupational health programmes. Recently the company has appointed a national medical officer. This is probably a response to successes in FAWU's campaign rather than an autonomous management initiative. It is unclear what role this officer will have and defining that role may be one of the tasks for the FAWU negotiators.

National initiatives in FAWU's campaign

FAWU has concentrated on company level bargaining, especially over wages. This has led to intense struggles for access by the union to top management. The health and safety campaign has also followed this trail to national bargaining, but still with considerable resistance from management over both the character of meetings on health and safety, the types of issues that are placed on the agenda, and over the principle of union representation at what management defines as "technical" meetings. The climate of deregulation in the company and in the state has sharpened these conflicts.

FAWU negotiators will be addressing a number of questions about the union's intervention at national level on health and safety issues:

- the continuing need to reconstruct an industrial council for the whole industry, to counter deregulation;
- the need to negotiate at decision-making levels with management before investment in new technology in existing and new plant takes place;
- the need to develop a more formal structure for the health and safety campaign, and to involve officials (especially at national level) in the conduct of the campaign. Such a structure could improve communications between officials, shop stewards in the

different branches and regions and service organisations so that tactics and strategies are understood, are consistent between different divisions, and have the support of all shop stewards and the mass membership. It could also speed up the campaign by making sure that health and safety does not fall off agendas;

- the need to finalise the health and safety agreement in all divisions so that health and safety organisations at all levels can proceed at a faster pace;

- the need to develop a strategy towards better and more relevant legislation to control and monitor health and safety in the industry;

- the need to address the problems of workers in rural mills, which are smaller, less technologically advanced, less safe and more unhealthy, and where union organisation is less developed - this applies particularly to the mills in the "independent states". These workers will have to be included in the campaign.



These workers will have to be included in the campaign.

Conclusion

The FAWU campaign on health and safety in milling has raised many questions which also apply to other industries. One of the central questions raised is what kind of occupational health service should there be for workers? What should be the roles of the state, workers and their unions, and corporate managements in this service? Who should provide the service, and how can accountability to workers' organisations be ensured? These questions are now more real than ever before since a change of government with totally different priorities is on the national political agenda. The FAWU campaign has begun to point to some answers. □

(We would like to pay tribute to the shop stewards in the milling industry who have built the campaign through their patient determination to struggle for better conditions for all workers in the industry.)

Peter Lewis, IHRG

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