



Flashback: The 1980 Frame strikes

Long bitter struggle at Frame has ended

THE longest recognition struggle in South African labour history has come to an end.

Nearly 2 000 National Union of Textile Worker members at the giant Frametex mill, the heart of the Frame complex at New Germany near Pinetown, now have the right to be represented by their union. A right which they have been fighting for for over ten years.

Way back in 1973 after the strikes at the New Germany mills, Frametex workers decided to form NUTW.

At that time nobody would have dreamed that they would succeed in their struggle.

Workers determined

The full might of the government was set against them. The police violently smashed strikes, arrested workers and detained union leaders.

And their employer, Frame, dealt only with liaison committees which were set up in each mill. The company was adamant that it would not accept a union at any cost.

The struggle at Frame quickly became a symbol of workers' determination to win the right to be represented by a union of their choice.

In 1980, the struggle took a new turn after TUCSA's Textile Workers Industrial Union changed its constitution in order to admit black workers.

Frame decided to recognise this union at the smaller mills in the New Germany complex.

But, in a court case in 1983, Frame was blocked by NUTW from recognising the TUCSA union at the Frametex mill. With a workforce of over 3 000, Frametex is the largest mill and has always been the stronghold of the NUTW.

The company attempted to justify its refusal to recognise NUTW by arguing that it would only recognise one union in the entire complex — that union was TWIU.

After two years of technical objections, Frame and NUTW began settlement negotiations earlier this year. These talks have led to a full recognition agreement being signed.

And an independent audit of union members at the New Germany mills was held in June.

Frametex workers for the first time in the history of the company were given an opportunity to prove what they had

always known — that they wanted to be represented by NUTW.

Close to two-thirds of the workers at this mill declared that they wanted to be paying members of the union.

In terms of the settlement agreement, NUTW will get stop order rights, shop stewards, the right to participate in grievance and disciplinary procedures and various other factory rights exclusively at Frametex.

Bargaining will take place jointly with TWIU for the complex as a whole except if that union drops below 20 percent membership.

Another major aspect covered by the agreement is retrenchment.

Up to now the policy on retrenchment, which was accepted by the TWIU, has allowed the company to select workers for retrenchment on the basis of company competency tests.

Workers were stripped of their seniority if transferred to another department and the policy limited the severance pay to about one-third of a week's pay for each year of service.

This retrenchment policy has been the subject of many court cases between the NUTW and Frame, where the company has

vigorously defending its right to retrench in accordance with these procedures.

Although, the cases demanding reinstatement of previously retrenched workers are still continuing, the new recognition agreement provides for a new retrenchment policy.

In terms of which, the company agrees that retrenchment must either be voluntary or in accordance with the principle of Last In First Out.

Severance pay will be increased to a week's pay per year of service. Also, workers who are transferred because of redundancy cannot have their wages cut for 12 weeks even if they are doing the work of a lower grade.

Commenting on the agreement, an NUTW spokesperson said 'We really sweated for this breakthrough. It opens the way for thousands of NUTW members in Frame factories in Natal and the Cape.'

'In the past we haven't seen much cooperation from the Frame Group but its attitude to NUTW has definitely been changing since settlement talks started outside the court doors.'

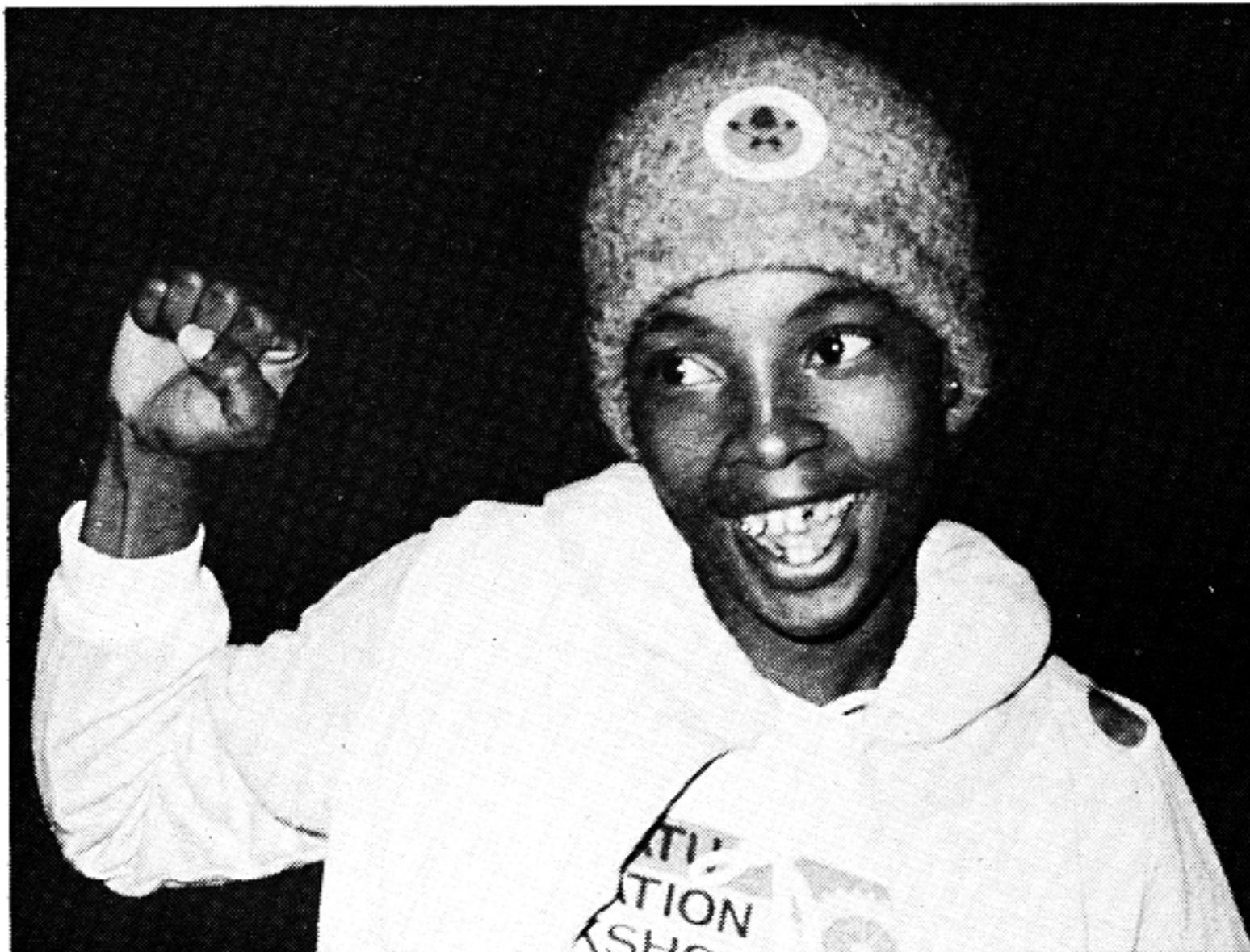
'With strong disciplined organisation, we are confident we will gain recognition in several more Frame mills over the next year,' he added.

Ladysmith too!

Meanwhile, Frame workers in Ladysmith are rapidly following on the heels of the Frametex workers.

Some 2 000 workers are now members of NUTW — about 80 percent of the mill's workforce.

No doubt they will be the second Frame mill to march to the company's door and demand recognition of NUTW.



An elated Frame worker