

# Bata

## 'Proud partners in KWAZULU'S progress'



CLC's Roger Southall speaks to the Keate's Drift workers (on the right is Canadian Consul Ed Willer)

Hidden away in the middle of rural KwaZulu, Keate's Drift seems the most unlikely place to put a factory. However, the generous incentives paid to companies for the 'inconvenience' of moving to decentralised industrial areas has attracted giant multinational, Bata Shoe company to this small village.

Under the smokescreen of its declared aim of providing *much needed jobs for the people living in the homeland of KwaZulu*, Bata is also able to operate a system of exploitation which reminds one of early industrial Britain. A large number of women workers slave away at home sewing the uppers of shoes all because the company says 'there is no room at the factory'. Bata employs these workers on a temporary basis and pays them a piece rate of about R3-R4 for 10 pairs of shoes.

Under this out-work system there are many 'savings' for Bata. It does not have the expense of expanding its factory to accommodate these workers, nor does it have to pay them a standard weekly wage. The out-workers' wages fluctuate depending on how many shoes the company decides to hand out to them. If there is no work they don't need to be paid at all. But, even when there is a lot of work, their wages are still way below the poverty wages being paid to the more 'fortunate' workers employed inside the factory.

Since the early 1980's when Bata began removing workers from the factory and em-

ploying them as out-workers, the company has been able to quietly carry on with this highly effective system of exploitation. After all, rural workers are more pliable than their more knowledgeable urban counterparts. Or so the company thinks. However, these 'simple' rural workers committed a grave offence. They dared to join a union — without even letting Bata management know that they were doing so! Over 580 employees out of a total workforce of 700 have signed up with the National Union of Textile Workers. Not surprisingly almost 100 percent of the out-workers have joined.

The National Union of Textile Workers is not unfamiliar with Bata's operations in the homeland areas of South Africa. Back in 1981, workers from another Bata factory in the homelands, KwaZulu Shoe Company, joined the union. At the time, the union exposed the appallingly low wages being paid at this factory at Loskop. The majority of the workers were being paid less than R117 a month.

Although, the union represented the majority of the Loskop workers, Bata refused to meet union representatives. Letters, telexes and telephone calls requesting a meeting with the company were unanswered. When the Loskop workers eventually went on strike in an attempt to force Bata to meet NUTW, the company was able to smash the union by shifting production to other fac-

ories and drastically reducing the workforce to about 225 workers.

But, now the union is back, having learnt many lessons from the Loskop saga. Predictably, NUTW's requests for a meeting with company representatives have once again gone unanswered.

However, FOSATU's policy of developing strong links with unions worldwide is beginning to pay off. Canada's major union federation, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has promised to support the struggle of the Keate's Drift workers. So, Bata not only faces the campaign being waged in South Africa by the NUTW, it also faces a campaign back in its home country.

The Canadian press has slammed Bata for not keeping to the Canadian government's Code of Conduct for firms operating in South Africa. Bata has violated the Code by paying poverty wages and by refusing to meet the union that the workers have chosen to represent them.

Bata has responded to these criticisms by saying that it pays 'some of the highest wages in the industry' and 'provides the most equitable and best working conditions'.

'By creating massive employment for blacks and providing basic footwear requirement at affordable prices, we feel that we are positively contributing to the present and future standard of living of the majority of the population,' Bata said in a reply to criticisms levelled at it in Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper.

The Keate's Drift workers certainly do not believe that the company is 'positively' contributing to their standard of living. 'Hawu,' exclaimed about 100 workers when a representative from the CLC told them that Bata in Canada had said that it 'takes care of its employees and pays them very well'.

Roger Southall, a CLC representative, and Ed Willer, the consul responsible for labour affairs at the Canadian Embassy in Pretoria, recently travelled to the remote village of Keate's Drift to hear what the workers themselves had to say about Bata's employment practices.

The weekend meeting

was held at the local school. Most of the Bata employees arrived dressed in colourful traditional Zulu costume — bright purple cloaks, bangles, bead necklaces, and red headresses. Only one feature of their costume revealed their work environment — they all wore Bata takkies.

Many of the workers arrived sewing the uppers of shoes — sewing as they walked.

CLC's Roger Southall told the workers that the Canadian unions were committed to 'intensifying its efforts to see that you are properly represented by the trade union of your choice in these plants.'

He said the CLC 'deplored' the failure of the Canadian government to demand a meeting with Bata's head office in Canada.

Roger Southall said that the CLC would like to see Bata following Canada's Code of Conduct but obviously 'moral pressure' was not enough to force the company to stick to the Code.

'We want to see Keate's Drift workers freely represented by the union of your choice and to see Bata engaging in collective bargaining with that union,' he said.

He told the workers that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions had chosen Bata Shoe Company as a target company for this year. And that the International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation together with the CLC would be holding a seminar on Bata towards the end of this year 'with special emphasis on South Africa'.

Initially, the workers were slightly reluctant to speak about conditions at the factory at the meeting because, as one worker said 'if we say something here it will get back to management on Monday and we will be victimised. And victimisation here means dismissal'.

The workers began by outlining the wages they received. The average wage after 10 year's service was about R52 per week for employees working inside the factory itself.

Out-workers are paid R4 for sewing the uppers of 10 pairs men's shoes, R3,92 for women's shoes and R3,13 for 10 pairs of children's shoes.

The company decides how many pairs of shoes to give

to each outworker. The women said that sometimes they are given 30 pairs to do a day which meant that they had to work 'all day and night' or get family or friends to help out.

Workers said that when they complained to company management about their wages they were told 'to go and get more money from the union'.

The Bata workers reported that the company had only introduced paid sick leave in October last year after NUTW began organising in the area.

One worker complained that a death in the family was not considered a just excuse to stay off work which, she said, made things difficult as traditionally 'a wife must not work while there is a body in the house.'

Among the workers at the meeting were eight employees who were dismissed in December last year.

One told of how she together with another six were called in to the manager's office and asked who were the other strong union members. 'We refused to say as we did not want to expose the others,' she said.

They were then questioned about NUTW. 'The manager told us that he was disappointed that we had mixed ourselves with outside people. We were then given five minutes to decide whether we wanted to continue with an outside organisation or continue with Bata,' she said.

'The manager also told us to take a group of people to tell the others not to continue with an outside organisation. But when we reported back to workers they said that they had wanted to join the union and would not be bossed around by management,' she added.

On December 14 the eight union activists at the plant were dismissed. No reasons were given.

'We are putting our hope in our union, the Canadian unions and all people interested in our struggle to help us.'

'For us who were dismissed we are just praying that the struggle for recognition is a success even if just for those in the factory,' one of the sacked workers concluded.