

# Maternity - a worker right!

THE present law as far as maternity is concerned is very disadvantageous to women workers. In particular, there is no guarantee that an expectant mother will be re-instated after childbirth.

To avoid problems caused by children and loss of labour caused by pregnancy some employers have introduced Family Planning Clinics in their factories. Workers are given contraceptives without any explanation. The manufacturers of these contraceptives acknowledge that these have side effects such as vaginal discharge, disruption of menstrual cycle and sometimes even sterility. I believe workers should be educated about these contraceptives by a person acceptable to the workers and employers. They should know the disadvantages as well. And thereafter, they can choose whatever is best for them.

The determination of women to keep their jobs has led them into a situation where they will prevent pregnancy by all means. A woman has to choose whether to be a mother or a worker. As a result, we have people who resort to back-street abortions and some fasten their stomachs tightly so that the foreman cannot see that she is pregnant. In practice, a woman is often fired as soon as the employer finds out she is pregnant or she is not re-instated after childbirth especially if she is not favoured by her foreman. Maternity, then, becomes retrenchment through the backdoor. It will not be taken into account that she needs to keep her job. Are women not supposed to bear children who will be the pleasure of their old age just because they want to secure their jobs? If women stop bearing children who will be the workers of the next generation? What about the husbands of these women - should they be happy that their wives are afraid to conceive? I think it is time we all realise that it is a natural right to bear children.

To avoid infant deaths and

miscarriages, expectant mothers should attend ante-natal clinics before the tenth week of pregnancy and more often thereafter. These clinics are not open on Saturday - they function on weekdays. Women should be given paid leave to attend these clinics. Seeing that some women are breadwinners, they cannot afford to lose half a day's wages - so they then avoid going to these clinics.

Working conditions in some

a woman up to six months to get her paltry benefits from the UIF. So, at her time of greatest need, the mother does not have any money. It is time that employers recognise their responsibility towards their women workers. Imagine the worry of a mother with a new baby - no guarantee of work and no money. If women exhaust their UIF benefit through maternity, how will they survive if they have no job to go back to? What

In the last issue of FOSATU Worker News we carried an article written by a women worker on the issue of the 'Double Shift'. We carry on this month with NUTW's Khosi Maseko discussing problems which pregnant workers face. She says that often women have to choose between being a worker or a mother. Rightly, Sister Maseko insists that women workers have the right to be both. She also points out that the law governing maternity in South Africa is even worse than that in our poorer neighbours of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana.



factories are terrible. No provision has been made for expectant mothers to be transferred to healthy departments, to be given light work, not to be exposed to dangerous chemicals and to be given jobs where they don't have to stand all the time. All these things can cause spontaneous abortions.

I am well aware that if employers pay less than a third of a woman's normal wage during maternity leave, then she can claim 45 percent from UIF, provided she qualifies. However, my experience is that most employers pay nothing and it takes

about the people who do not contribute to UIF at all, such as part-timers and domestic workers. With contract workers it is even worse because they do contribute but in order to claim their maternity benefits they have to undergo a long and unnecessary process in their homeland.

The position in this country is even worse than its poorer neighbouring countries. In Lesotho women do not work six weeks before childbirth and six weeks after and they cannot be given notice of dismissal whilst on maternity leave. In addition,

women get half an hour off twice a day after birth to breast-feed their babies. In Botswana it is also six weeks before and six weeks after, with re-instatement guaranteed plus half an hour off twice a day after birth. In Swaziland, women workers also get six weeks off before birth and six weeks after and they can resume their former or equivalent work without any loss of seniority.

#### DEMANDS:

\* Education on contraception to be given by a person acceptab-

le to workers.

\* Family planning clinics should be equipped with a full range contraceptives so that women workers have a genuine right to choose the one that is best for them.

\* Women should be given the right to attend ante- and post-natal clinics without loss of pay.

\* Women should be given the right to maternity leave and to return to the same or a similar position after such leave.

\* Women should be given the right to full pay while on maternity leave.

## Women workers speak out at FOSATU booklet launch

WOMEN workers representing most of the FOSATU unions in the Transvaal attended a meeting on June 9 to launch the federation's newest booklet - Women Workers.

The booklet was put together following the success of last year's worker lecture on the problems facing women workers which was given as part of the FOSATU Education Workshop.

#### In her union

It deals with issues like maternity contraception, child care and sexual harassment.

The booklet rightly concludes that 'a woman's place is in her union'.

At the booklet launch, workers spoke of the problems that they had faced in their factories.

#### Sexually harassed

Sister Irene Stracher of Nampak Polyfoil spoke about the problems of sexual harassment at her factory.

She said a manager used a company car supposedly for 'business' but a delivery worker saw the car in the workers' residential area.

'He reported the matter to the shop steward committee which decided to speak to



TGWU shop steward, Elizabeth Makhonjwa speaking at the launch (Picture courtesy of the Sowetan)

the managing director,' she said.

'The next day when the manager again wanted to go on business in town, he was followed to a worker's house by the managing director and the shop stewards,' she added.

Sister Stracher said they had found the manager 'hard at work'.

#### Fired instantly

He had been fired instantly and the shop stewards managed to prevent the worker losing her job, she told the meeting.

Other women's issues like the fact that some workers get lower wages than their male colleagues were also discussed at the booklet launch.

#### Women's voices heard

Towards the end of the meeting, Sister Refilwe Ndzuta, general secretary of the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union said, 'If we are going to fight these issues in the factory we must also make sure there is true solidarity and equality in the unions.'

'This means that women's voices must be heard,' she said.

The Women Workers booklet can be obtained from the FOSATU Printing Unit.

## Sigma signs first maternity agreement

THE motor industry's first formal maternity agreement has been signed at Sigma near Pretoria.

The agreement which forms part of a wage deal negotiated by the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union gives women workers three month's unpaid maternity leave.

During this time, the company has agreed to pay the worker's medical and pension contributions.

Sigma also said where possible it would place women workers back in a job at the same rate of pay.

## R1 800 paid in back-pay

AT Willard Batteries in the Eastern Cape, the company has backed down on its earlier dismissal of a worker and has agreed to pay-out R1 800 in back-pay.

The worker was dismissed on February 9 for refusing to attend a disciplinary hearing.

The company backed-down when the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union's attorneys wrote saying the dismissal was an unfair labour practice.