

STRIKES IN DURBANJANUARY TO APRIL 1975*by John Mawbey*

## INTERNATIONAL DELIVERY COMPANY

On the morning of 15 January 30 workers at the International Delivery Company refused to start work after clocking in at 7.00a.m. The company is an Indian owned concern operating from the docks area.

After receiving a R1 increase in August 1974 workers agreed to withhold further wage demands until November. In November they formed their own committee to discuss grievances and to formulate demands for presentation to management. Repeated appeals were made from November onwards but received no positive response. On a rainy 14 January frustration boiled over and all 30 workers refused to start work, demanding that the firms Managing Director be brought to negotiate with them.

First to arrive on the scene were the police, but after a short stay they left it to a Labour Department official to explain the legal implications of the workers action. They adamantly refused return to work reiterating their demand to see the Managing Director Mr. Pillay. When he eventually arrived from Pietermaritzburg they presented their demands. They demanded an increase in pay and the provision of gumboots, gloves and overalls to protect them during the loading and unloading of heavy drums. Before they took action the workers basic wage was R15 per week with overtime and a bonus of R1,50 for every night spent away from Durban. After negotiations they eventually accepted an increase of R3 per week and the provision of two pairs of overalls.

Mr. Pillay appears to have been convinced that an 'agitator' was behind the workers action and singled

out one individual as the ringleader. When asked what he intended to do about this he is reported to have said: "when there is a thorn in your side you remove it"; whether any victimization took place is unknown.

#### R.H. MORRIS PTY. LTD. (CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTORS)

On Monday 16 January 144 workers on the Old Mutual shopping and residential construction site near Greyville refused to start work because of a pay dispute. They claimed that they were still owed wages for the week prior to the Christmas recess.

Police patrol cars and dog handlers converged on the site shortly afterwards but the workers remained calm. A Labour Department official addresses them on the legal implications of their action but they refused to return to work. Finally at 3.30 p.m. management resorted to the now common practice of firing the workers and telling them they could seek re-employment in the morning. On Tuesday 90% of the men returned and were re-employed.

Management claimed that the stoppage resulted from a misunderstanding on the part of the workers. To facilitate the firms book keeping, workers were payed one week in arrears. Before the Christmas recess they were offered the option of being payed up to date or of receiving the outstanding weeks pay on their return. Most accepted two weeks pay immediately except some of the workers who had been with the firm for over a year. On the first Friday after their return the latter workers were payed the amount due to them. The others felt that they should also have been payed the extra amount and on the following Monday took action.

#### MILLER WEEDON TRANSPORT COMPANY

On March 10 42 workers at this company refused to start work and demanded a cost of living increase. Initially the police were called in but after management had decided to negotiate they left. The outcome of these negotiations was an average increase of 17% to all the men involved. This

meant that wages now stood at R16.50 per week with an outside maximum of R32 per week.

#### PLATE GLASS COMPANY

Workers at this concern were fired on the 10 March although they had never actually stopped work, but had merely made representations for a cost of living increase.

Before work they had organised their councillors to approach management to ask for the increase. Due to obstruction on the part of a foreman the request only reached management when the works manager arrived late to start them working. They had already begun work when management called them out into the factory yard. Workers presented their demand for a P5 increase to meet the rising cost of living. The Manager replied to the effect that they would have to shoot him first if they hoped for an increase. He told them to hand in their overalls and get out. About 40 workers responded by leaving the premises.

On Tuesday they returned to the company to be informed that they had all been fired and that others had been employed in their places. On attempting to enter the premises to collect their things they were told to get out. Finally on Thursday they were allowed in, one by one and received their notice pay.

#### THE DURBAN ABATTOIRS

A total of 300 workers in two departments at the Durban Abattoirs downed tools on Friday 11 April. Out of an approximate 800 cattle and 5 000 sheep which are needed to supply the daily needs of Durban, only 10 animals were slaughtered. Abattoir authorities were finally forced to suspend operations for the day. Though the city's meat supply was not immediately effected, it would appear that an extended stoppage could have substantially disruptive consequences.

First to down tools were 200 slaughterers working

for the United Flaying and Dressing Company. This effectively halted production. They had last received an increase over a year ago. In the interim they made regular representations through the company works committee for a further increase. It is clear that these requests had generally received scant attention. Never-the-less workers seem to have been persistent in attempting to utilize the works committee to communicate their grievances to management. In the past they had also attempted to control this body and make it more effective by demanding the resignation of members who were compliant towards management. Still the committee had gained little ground.

In November 1974 the committee was promised an increase in March of each year; pending ratification by the Meat Control Board. By the end of March 1975 the promised increase had not materialised and on Wednesday 9 April workers asked the committee to take up the issue. The demand was presented to management. By Friday no response had been made and the entire workforce of 200 stopped work.

Management called in officials from the Labour Department through whom they conveyed a promise to consider increases at the end of the month; if the workers would return to work. The workers refused and demanded that the officials convey their demand for a R5 increase to management. At this stage the officials became short tempered and left, forcing management to face the workers. It was finally agreed that management would present a definite statement about increases on the following Monday. On this condition workers returned to work. On Monday workers each received a slip of paper with the promised increases on it. In outline they were as follows:

Grade	previous basic	increase	new wage
Induna	R27,20	R3,80	R31
Assistant Induna	R25,28	R3,80	R29,08
Others	from R17,90 to R23,10	R3,10 R2,90	R21 R26

These increases depended on ratification by the Meat Control Board at its sitting on 22 April.

Beyond the wage grievances which workers expressed they had further complaints about their working conditions. They alleged that the pace at which they are expected to work led to frequent injury. That when injured and forced to go off work they are regarded as absent from work and pay is deducted.

In resorting to strike action these workers appear to have been fully aware of the potential power which the nature of their work gave them. That given the rate of production expected, the relation of their department to the rest of the abattoir, and the wider ties of the meat marketing network, a stoppage could cause extensive dislocation.

Taking an example from their fellows in the Flaying Department, the total workforce of 100 in the adjoining By Products Department (Durban By Products Company) downed tools the moment the others had returned. Obviously the news of the slaughterers partial victory played a part in this move. That they acted only at this juncture, however, suggests that they may have seen more advantage in creating a new stoppage rather than in joint weight of numbers. At this stage the abattoir authorities were forced to suspend production for the day.

Grievances in this department were substantially the same but their attitude to the works committee was far more cynical. They had long since given up any hope of making the committee the affective representative of their demands and had gone so far as to elect known management stooges to the committee.

Workers appear to have had little idea of the role which the meat board plays in controlling all their wages. They conceived of their struggle as one against the individual contracting companies for which they worked. On April 22 the meat board sitting took place and the wage increases were ratified.

## JAMES BROWN AND HAMER

The Natal Mercury called this "the strike that never was". When asked to comment on the stoppage which had occurred management denied that there had been a strike. Apparently if workers are employed on a daily basis the precarious nature of their employment makes it impossible for them to strike. The moment they stop work they are 'unemployed', not on strike! In the very same report however management claimed that they had entered into negotiations with the workers.

A total of 300 African painters employed in the Durban Dry Docks had walked out of the premises and refused to return unless negotiations for a cost of living increase took place.

A reporter covering the action was approached by a Labour Department Official. Refusing to disclose on whose authority he was acting he prevented the reporter from photographing the scene of the action. He claimed that there was wide spread labour unrest in the harbour area and that publicity would aggravate this situation.

## UNION WHALING COMPANY

When African day-shift workers at Union Whaling Company downed tools on Monday 21 April they did so in the knowledge that the night-shift was ready to back up their action and that close on 300 workers were united in the struggle. This solidarity was possible because of their compound based existence. Conceived as a means of controlling labour the compound can have the countervailing tendency of enabling workers to attain the solidarity needed for effective strike action.

The official means of gaining redress at Union Whaling is via the factory liaison committee established in 1973. Workers have used this to express a variety of grievances but have gained only marginal improvements. An improvement in compound food was effected but a more fundamental demand that a hostel be built to house their wives was rejected. A pension

fund had been established but demands for a night shift allowance were rejected. Also rejected was a demand for a day off work. Workers claim that though Saturday and Sunday are meant to be off days they often have to work on these days, or face dismissal. They regard this as forced overtime.

The last wage increase which they received was R2 per month in October 1974; mere "ice-cream money". At the beginning of April they decided to ask their liason committee members to demand an increase of R5 on their basic wages of from R58 to R80 per month. Management made no reply to the demand and on Thursday 17 April the committee members again approached management. In reply management said that they would only consider an increase in July and that in any case the demand had been formulated by the committee members and had not come from the workers. This blunt rejection of their demand and disregard for their elected representatives evoked a strong response from the workers. They decided "that we would show management who are the workers here. We would all sit down so that they could see clearly who was asking for the wage increase". Over the weekend plans were layed and the solid support of all the workers was mustered. Compound living made this comparatively easy.

The unfolding of events on the Monday is graphically discribed by the workers themselves:

"Then on Monday morning at ten past eight there we all were, sitting down. First of all came one of the clerks and one of the managers.' What are you people all doing here?' We were silent. They asked this question again. Again we were silent. So they returned to the office. Next they sent the black clerks to us, to ask what we were doing. ' We don't want to speak to you,' we told them, 'we want to speak to the Managing Director.' We were waiting there to see the Managing Director. We wanted him to see how many of us were there and to hear from us that it was in fact everybody that wanted the wage increase. The black clerks went back to the office. The next message we got was that the factory manager would be coming at twelve o'clock.

'We don't want to speak to him. We want the Managing Director,' we said. We were told that the Managing Director would not be coming till much later. 'That's alright, we'll wait,' we said.

At about twelve o'clock the factory manager came, together with another member of management. He told us that the Company was experiencing hard days. He said that there would be no increase now. We must wait until July. Meanwhile we should go back to work and on Friday the company would reply to us. We refused. 'The Union Whaling Company will fall down,' he said. 'We don't care,' we replied. 'And we are staying here. We want to speak to the Managing Director.'

At three o'clock the compound manager came. He told us that we would be getting a R5 increase in July. If this did not satisfy us, management had one other preposal. Ten workers would be fired, and their salaries shared among the others. We rejected this preposal strongly. If they wanted to fire one of us, they must fire all, we said. At this satage we all got up and began to go to the compound to get our luggage. 'Please sit down,' said the compoud manager. Then he returned to the office.

Finally at five o'clock the Managing Director came. He used the same words that we had heard from others during the day. Eventually he said: 'those of you who want to work, please stand up. Those who refuse to work can remain sitting.' On our side, not a man stood up. Then the Managing Director told us that the Company had directors in Cape Town and Johannesburg as well. He asked us to wait until Friday while he discussed our demands with them. We told him that, for our part, as he was the Managing Director we would agree to this, but there must be an answer on Friday. He agreed that workers would be paid for Monday. Because of this move on his part the night shift workers agreed to resume work. They were solidly behind the strike and would not have worked if those who went on strike were not paid."

That the workers were demanding an increase of R20 by the end of the day is an index of how angered they



were by managements stalling tactics. Initially they had no intention of engaging in a lengthy stoppage. It was the failure of the Managing Director to put in an early appearance which caused them to sit it out.

On Friday 26 April management called together part of the work force. While workers objected that all of them should be present management presented their terms. The promised July increase of R5 would be brought forward to take effect from the end of May and a further R3 would be added in July. Workers objected but were unable to discuss and formulate their alternatives because management refused to allow them to do so in the factory. They were forced to return to work.

Subsequently management has been collecting the names of selected workers thought to have been heavily involved. This is standard Labour Department policy in the case of strikes.

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