

1982 — A Record Strike Year

There were 394 strikes in 1982, the largest number in over twenty years. A total of 141,571 black workers were involved, with a resultant loss of 302,489 man-days. No white workers were involved. These are the as yet unreleased figures compiled by the Department of Manpower and obtained by the SALB.

The full details are:

394 strikes — made up of 48 'stoppages' and 346 'strikes'. A 'stoppage' is essentially a short strike where the Department of Manpower feels the demands are not clear.

Workers involved

	strikes	stoppages	total
Coloured	17,745	175	17,920
Indian	1,170	—	1,170
African	117,829	4,652	122,481

Man-hours lost (divide by 8 to get man-days)

	strikes	stoppages	total
Indian	502,021	758	502,779
Coloured	33,866	—	33,866
African	2,357,626	28,427	2,386,053

All official strike statistics can be regarded as underestimates, since they only include strikes reported to the Department of Manpower. Furthermore the official statistics have in the past excluded mass stay-aways, such as those which occurred in 1976 and 1980. In this respect the 1982 figures are no exception; the widespread stoppage in February following the death of Neil Aggett is not reflected in the statistics. 'It was only a sympathy stoppage', commented a source in the Department of Manpower, 'and anyway the details of the numbers involved are not reliable'.

The statistics are nevertheless significant, despite these shortcomings.

They reveal 1982 to have been the most turbulent year on the labour front since at least the early 1960's. The total of 394 strikes can be compared with previous peak years — 384 in 1979 and 370 in 1973. The 141,571 workers involved can be compared with 98,378 in 1973. Similarly the 302,489 man-days lost far exceed the 229,281 lost in 1973.

These statistics confirm the views of many labour observers: that 1982 was the culmination of three years of hectic union and worker activity. Since 1980 workers have been joining the unions in massively increasing numbers. They have also begun to flex their muscles and, despite many setbacks, have made real gains.

	Strikes	Workers involved	Man-days lost	Av. duration
1980	207	61,785	174,614	2,78 days
1981	342	92,842	226,554	2,44
1982	394	141,571	302,489	2,14

This trend is not expected to continue in 1983. The recession, and the problems it brings for trade unions, mean that workers may be less eager to strike.

However, making predictions is a dangerous occupation, and employer attempts to roll back some of the gains of the past three years may yet provoke some substantial, if desperate strikes.

(Johannesburg correspondent, March 15, 1983)
