

STRIKES IN THE TRANSVAAL AND O.F.S.

One of the larger and more protracted of the wave of strikes engaged in by workers on the Reef and in the O.F.S. during July, occurred at Kros Bros. a furniture firm in Germiston. Here 750 african workers picketed outside their factory for a 20c an hour increase. There was apparently no scabbing and no physical confrontations were engaged in. The police confined their role to keeping the road outside the factory unobstructed. The workers refused to comply with management's demand that a negotiating committee be elected. They eventually returned to work having obtained a pay increase of 7c an hour, this being the settlement management had initially sought.

During none of the other strikes which occurred during the first half of July at approximately 14 factories and contract sites in the Free State and the Reef, and involving approximately 5 000 african workers did picketing occur and in the vast majority of cases settlements were obtained through immediate wage increases. In spite of a total lack of evidence in its support and much evidence to the contrary, the agitator theory of strike causation was again bandied about. According to Mr. Drummond, director of the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation, the strikes were "not entirely spontaneous there was agitation".

On July 19, a two day strike occurred at Transvaal Metal Merchants, Jeppestown. Some 170 african labourers struck demanding R5 a week increase. (The day before the workers had obtained a R1 statutory wage increase). Again the workers refused to elect a negotiating team from amongst their ranks.

On the first day of the strike, whilst Department of Labour officials were addressing the workers, a lorry carrying scrap metal arrived. The striking workers told the driver to leave at once. When he refused the workers immediately accosted him and forced him to leave. A large contingent of police was present and on the second day of the strike the workers were addressed by Brigadier J. B. Wiese, District Commissioner of Johannesburg. The settlement eventually reached was that workers would obtain a R1 per week increase.

July 19th also saw strikes at another four firms, in Isando, Germiston, Alberton and Bedfordview. At Superocla in Germiston a 7c per hour increment ended a 3 hour strike of some 480 african workers. At Bohler Steel Africa in Isando managements' response to the workers' strike was to immediately introduce a new minimum wage of R25 per week; this meets the PDL computation of the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce. It is interesting to note that the minimum wage laid down by the new Agreement in the Steel and Engineering Industry is only about R17.50 per week. At Union Flooring Tiles in Bedfordview however the 200 striking workers' demand for a 7c an hour increment was rejected and the 100 who refused to accept management's offer of R1.00 per week increment were immediately paid off.

Intransigent postures were also adopted by the managements of the National Chemical Products factory, the Banana Control Board (both in Germiston) and the Germiston Coal Company, where management apparently stopped strikes by threatening workers with instant dismissal. The Germiston Coal Company did in fact fire 140 striking workers.

In July there were also strikes at the following factories and plants; (details of settlements where disclosed and available in brackets after the firm's name) Germiston Fresh Meat supply, Germiston; Anderson Mavor (Pty) Ltd., Germiston; Sand and Co., Johannesburg; N.F. Diecasting (Pty) Ltd (20% increment from 35c per hour to 42c per hour); Rand Refinery, Germiston (increase of 56c per shift and charge of 70c per shift made for food and accommodation rescinded. The week before a R6 per week increase had been obtained). All the striking workers at these firms made demands for weekly increases ranging from R5 to R9. The disputes were all settled on the same day except for that at Abkin's Steel Corporation (settlement undisclosed) where workers were asked to wait a day until a meeting of the Ferrous Scrap Distributors Association, at which the future price of scrap would be decided, was held. Strikes of 250 and 100 african workers respectively occurred at the General Erection Company, Wadeville and in the electricity department of the Germiston City Council.

On the sixth of August the 400 strong african work force of the Vetsak factory in Bothaville demanded an increase of 7c an hour. The management of Vetsak apparently told the workers that in terms of the Factories Act, it was only possible for wage increases to be introduced on prescribed dates. Police then arrived at the factory and addressed the workers who subsequently returned to work. Three days later 400 african workers at the Prima Meat Factory in Doornfontein struck for one day. There too the police were appealed to and apparently were again successful in ending the strike. Company spokesmen refused to reveal the nature of the dispute.

On the 17th August the Palabora Mining Company confirmed that a strike by 100 white miners had begun at the mine, apparently in opposition to the quite legal employment by a contractor of three Coloured welders to work on a pipeline between the Palabora Mining Company works and Foskor. The chairman of the Palabora Mining Company reported two days later that the dispute had been settled, one of the conditions being that the strikers would not be prosecuted for what was an illegal stoppage.

The 400 african women workers at Turnwrights sweet factory in Johannesburg who struck in the third week of July came out again on August the 21st. As before the workers who were still receiving wages from R11 - R12 demanded a R5 per week increase. In the July strike management had negotiated with the liaison committee.

In the presence of the police liaison committee members attempted

with only partial success, and amid shouts of "more money", to persuade the workers to enter the factory and to listen to addresses from the members of the liaison committee. Mrs. Thelma de Klerk, the General Secretary of the Sweet Workers' Union, a white and coloured workers union, also spoke to the workers and promised to negotiate with management on their behalf. The workers, however, wished to be represented by the Black Allied Workers' Union. During July this union had attempted to represent the workers but management had been refractory.

On August the 23rd the management of Turnwrights issued a pamphlet to the workers which stated that the striking workers had broken their contracts and were thus no longer legally employed by the company. However, were the workers' to immediately cease striking they would be re-employed. In addition management promised to review extant wage scales in consultation with the liaison committee. The workers vociferously rejected this approach and marched en bloc to the headquarters of the BAWU. Mr. Cecil Fanekiso, Acting General Secretary of BAWU, who had earlier distributed pamphlets to the workers which detailed the functions of the different types of in-factory committees and explained the advantages of committees linking up with trade unions, was asked by the police to address the workers and request them to disperse. This they did. Later Mr. Fanekiso met liaison committee members in his office. According to a spokesman of the Sweet Workers' Union, Turnwrights pays its workers the lowest wages amongst the sweet factories in the Johannesburg area. At the time of writing this dispute was unsettled.

Of course no convincing attempt can be made to cull society wide or even localised generalizations from such sparse, fragmentary evidence as is here presented. However, widespread dissatisfaction with wage levels is patent as is the fact that this is an important reason why workers strike. Another persistent fact is the short duration of the strikes which reflects the current, very unjust weakness of black workers as a social group and is in turn a function of both a shortage of material resources and the fact that black workers lack strong trade unions.
