

Factory Occupations and Sit-ins

Not only has the South African emergent labour movement grown in size and depth of organisation over the last decade, but new and sophisticated methods of struggle have been developed by the workers in these unions. Hampered by labour laws which make legal strikes an arduous and lengthy experience, and faced with the threat of dismissal and police action even if they do engage in legal strikes, workers are shaping new strategies to further their struggles. Towards this end, the sit-in is one tactic workers have recently begun to use with some success. We will look at three case studies which occurred in South Africa during 1985. Although the sit-in tactic has only recently been used in South Africa, it has a long history and has been employed extensively by workers' movements in other parts of the world.

Generally, factory occupations and sit-ins provide an effective means of pressure which workers can use against an employer in pursuit of improved working conditions, or to protect jobs. Workers take the initiative, and their physical presence in the workplace gives them control over whether or not production will continue. In so doing the factory sit-in challenges private property and capitalist control of the means of production, and suggests the possibility of an alternative economic system in which production takes place under the control, and in the interests of, the working class. Thus, during periods of general political and economic crisis, sit-ins and occupations have formed part of the broad political offensive against the particular regime, whilst at the same time attacking the very foundations of the existing social order. Examples of such occasions include: Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany and Italy after world war I, Spain in the 1930s, Algeria during decolonisation, and Portugal in the 1970s. Equally, sit-ins have been used to achieve much more moderate aims, as in the attempts in Britain in the 1970s and '80s to prevent closures.

Italy 1920

In Italy, in 1920, workers occupied factories throughout the industrial areas of the North. The occupations followed the breakdown of national wage negotiations in the engineering industry. In August workers decided on a national go-slow. But on September 1 employers proclaimed a lock-out, sparking off the occupations.

The workers continued production, but under workers' control. There was no intervention from the police and army who surrounded the affected factories. The factories were evacuated and workers returned to work for the owners in October, after a settlement was negotiated with the employers by their unions which limited the workers demands to employers' recognition of trade union control in the factories. (1)

France 1968

France in 1968 was hit by national factory occupations, which coincided with widespread student revolts. The occupations were in support of demands for an increase in wages, a progressive reduction of the working week to 40 hours with no reduction in wages, a lowering of the retirement age and the extension of trade union freedom and rights in factories. (2) The occupations lasted from 3 to 5 weeks and were most concerted in the metal sector, although white collar workers and civil servants also participated.

An interesting feature of the occupations was that firms recognised the right of workers to occupy their workplaces. During the occupations strike committees were set up in all factories to co-ordinate and organise activity. They were under union control in most cases. There was also inter-strike committee co-ordination. Strike pickets, set up to prevent strangers from gaining entry to factories, to protect factories from attempted sabotage and to prevent a takeover of the factories, were responsible to the strike committees and were organised on a voluntary and rota basis.

In most cases production ceased during the occupations except in cases where machines had to be maintained or where the lives of the community would be adversely affected. In some factories attempts were made to experiment with workers' control in the running of them. At one shipyard, workers organised payment of wages and distribution of food to striking workers and also requisitioned food supplies held in the port.

At some occupied plants workers held management captive for about two weeks. The aim of this was, at first to, gain a quick settlement, but after the first two days when it became clear that the strike would be protracted, management's captivity became symbolic.

The final settlement reached between the employers, the government and the unions gave the workers higher wages, but did not address

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their wider demands. Back in control again, employers in some areas began victimising militant strikers.

Britain: Upper Clyde Shipbuilders

In Britain in the early 1970s, workers' control of society was not really on the agenda in the occupations which started at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' (UCS) yards in June 1971, and spread rapidly to other plants.

Workers at the four yards decided to occupy when the British Government withheld financial assistance to the directors of the company, so allowing it to close down. The workers' occupation included continued production because, they reasoned, the threatened closure of the four yards could not be averted by a withdrawal of labour. The Chairman of the shop stewards joint co-ordinating committee for the UCS company, Jimmy Reid, explained their action:

We are taking over the yards because we refuse to accept that faceless men can take these decisions. We are not strikers. We are responsible people...we are not the wildcats, we want work. The real wildcats are in [the government]... The biggest mistake we could make is to lie down, capitulate and grovel to them. (3)

The work at the yards, during the occupation, was carefully monitored so that production did not exceed levels at the time of the start of the strike. After more than a year of occupation of the yards the government announced in February 1972 that it would grant money towards the reconstitution of 3 of the yards and would provide aid to any buyer of the fourth one. On October 10 1972 the fourth yard was sold and the occupation was called off.

The workers' action succeeded in stopping closure of the yards and saving jobs in the short-term. Also, during the sit-in workers had encroached on managerial powers when they took over the right to hire and fire. When the occupation came to an end such experiments were also discontinued.

Sit-ins in South Africa

In this period of recession, when there is reduced surplus with which to lubricate the wheels of industrial relations, struggles over wages and conditions have become longer and more bitter. Workers have shown that they are not prepared to passively accept the

terms dictated by employers. But the bosses can simply dismiss workers, and call up the massive reserve army of unemployed labour. If that does not work, police action and a battery of security laws are available to hamper the organisation of any strike and to prevent picketing.

Bosch

About 300 workers at the Bosch factory in Brits, Transvaal, staged a two-day sit-in in September 1985. The workers were members of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU).

A wage dispute began at the beginning of September with workers calling for a R1 increase across the board to raise the minimum wage to R3,50 an hour and management refusing to grant an increase of more than 12c and 18c an hour from January 1986. When attempts to resolve the issue failed, workers went on strike on September 3. Management then changed their offer to an 11c an hour increase from July 1 and a further increase of 7c an hour at the beginning of 1986. After discussing this new development, workers, however, voted in favour of continuing the strike. On September 5, management dismissed the striking workers and ordered them off the factory premises. A surprise lay in store for management, however, when workers decided not to leave the factory but to remain inside until their demand was met. Moses Mayekiso, a MAWU official, explained why workers took this decision:

They wanted reinstatement. By that time they had also indicated that they were willing to accept an increase of 70c. They wanted to protect their jobs and block management from getting new recruits. "No worker will touch our machines", is what they said.

It was a tactic which had been planned for winning an acceptable increase. It developed as the way to combat the threat of dismissals and police action against workers picketing outside the factory to prevent scabs from taking their jobs.

On the first day of the sit-in management refused to talk to workers. "They thought workers were just joking about sitting-in until their demands for reinstatement and an acceptable increase were met. But after 6.30 pm on September 5 they realised the workers were serious," said Mayekiso. By that time union organisers and family members of the workers had begun to bring food and blankets to the factory. Soon after the food and blankets arrived, manage-

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ment said they were prepared to talk.

Negotiation continued all night and at 4 am on September 6 agreement was reached. An increase of 50c an hour was agreed (12c an hour backdated to July 1 and another increase on October 1). The minimum wage would then stand at R3.00 an hour, only 50c short of the workers' original demand. In addition management agreed that workers could have the rest of the day off. As Mayekiso saw it:

The experience was important for workers and several important lessons were learnt. Firstly, workers realised that they had real power. They learnt that the real power to control production lay with them, not the bosses. Secondly, they saw that the only way to protect their jobs was through fighting.

Strikes legal or illegal are always a problem because of dismissals. There is also the problem of strikers being dismissed and when they don't leave the point of production becoming trespassers. At this point the police are usually called in to forcefully remove them.

Once they've left the factory it is more difficult for workers to win a strike. The tactic of the sit-in overcomes both these problems: new recruits are kept out by strikers guarding the factory gates. Management, especially if they are still in the factory, are reluctant to call in the police. In the case of Bosch there was no attempt by management to call the police.

A sit-in makes it difficult to cross the picket line - to scab - and it makes it difficult for the police to smash the workers inside. In addition, the rest of the community gets involved. Workers inside the factory depend on them for material support. The consciousness of non-workers is raised and links are forged between them and the workers.

Durban bakeries strike

Two thousand one hundred bread workers belonging to 4 different unions - Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU), Food and Beverage Workers Union, Black Allied Workers Union, and Natal Baking Industries Employees Union - went on strike for two weeks in Natal in July 1985 to demand a living wage. The workers were up against some of the largest companies - Anglo Vaal, Premier Group, and Tiger Oats (Barlow Rand).

Despite this, workers belonging to SFAWU occupied three bakeries during the first week of the strike. Their reasons for doing so were made clear: they wanted to stay close together and so maintain solidarity, to prevent scab labour replacing them, to prevent management continuing to produce, and to show management that they were serious.

The bakery bosses were equally determined to show workers that they would not budge on their minimum wage offer of R93.90 a week. Workers in SFAWU were demanding R105.50. When workers occupied the bakeries, managements closed the canteens, hoping to starve workers into submission. But workers' families brought food to the bakeries' gates and more than 200 Clover Dairies workers brought crates of milk, yoghurt and mageu. In turn the bakery workers allowed the undelivered bread, which was still on the premises, to be distributed to charity organisations and to workers who had earlier been dismissed from the multinational BTR Sarmcol in Howick, Pietermaritzburg.

Although workers had saved money in preparation for the strike, they were only prepared to use it when it became absolutely necessary. "It was so cold and I became terribly sick," recalled one worker. "But we did not want an organiser to give blankets or buy food until we could not go any further. We used flour bags from the mill to cover ourselves, until the bosses took them. Then we huddled together and used cardboard boxes."

But despite widespread support for the workers' struggle and their willingness to suffer to achieve their goal, they were evicted by court order from the three bakeries at the end of the first week of the strike. At the end of the second week, all the striking workers were back at work with hardly any change in managements' offers.

The chief factor which led to this outcome was the variation in levels of organisation and preparedness for the strike between the four participant unions. Only SFAWU members occupied their bakeries. The workers from the other unions had signed agreements with their managements saying they would leave the bakeries in the afternoons and return in the mornings.

Printpak

Ninety workers at Printpak Gravure in Industria, Johannesburg, all

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members of the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union, began a two and a half week sit-in strike on October 9 1985. Their action followed the dismissal of a fellow worker who had refused to obey management's order that he do his own work as well as that of another worker who had been taken ill. Joseph Nene, the chairman of the shopstewards committee at the plant, explained:

The trouble started on Tuesday night [October 8] when we found that we were short of one person in our department. He had become ill. We told the foreman about this and he said he would get somebody from the basement to do the work. Cyril Rulashe was sent up. But he also had to feed the machine in the basement and couldn't cope with both jobs. At one point the basement machine had to stop for 3 hours.

The Wednesday the same situation existed - we were still short of one person. When Cyril told the foreman about his difficulty in coping with both jobs he wouldn't listen. I also explained the situation to management but they weren't interested. Instead they wanted to give Cyril a written warning. We left the office without signing anything.

Soon after we'd left I was called to the manager's office and told to tell Cyril to do the two jobs. Cyril was given a final warning.

The other workers decided to discuss the issue but while we were busy, one of the managers came up to us and told us we had 5 mins to get back to work and that Cyril was dismissed. But we decided not to go back to work but also not to leave the factory. We told management we would stay in the factory until the problem had been solved.

The workers left the factory on Friday night after having occupied it for two days. However, when they returned on Monday they found themselves locked out. Management insisted that they agree to Cyril Rulashe remaining outside the factory until the matter had been resolved and that the other workers sign an undertaking not to go on strike. Workers refused to agree to either of these and instead devised a way of getting back into the plant.

"We got one of our members to drive up to the gate with a car and to hoot," Joseph Nene recalls. "When the security people opened the gate he drove in so that they could not close it again. Other workers then rushed in and opened the gate properly so that we

could all enter the premises."

Management called the police but the latter took no action. They further tried to prohibit workers from leaving and entering the premises freely and told them they would not be provided with food. After workers demanded food, however, management allowed them to buy some from the nearby shop. Workers further warned management that if the police were called in and took action against them, they would fight back and the safety of persons, that is, management and others not involved in the strike, and of machinery, could no be guaranteed.

The next day, the workers won further ground when management signed an agreement saying they would not prevent workers entering or leaving the premises. When it became clear that workers were prepared to sit-in for as long as was necessary for management to reinstate them all, management re-opened serious negotiation and acceded to their demand. Besides the pressure of the workers' sit-in, Printpak management was also faced with threats of solidarity action by workers in factories which handle Printpak products. "Other workers would have come out in support if the sit-in had failed," said Sipho Kubeka, PWAU Transvaal Branch Secretary:

But this was not necessary because management gave in. Workers saw the strike as very important. Although the issue might seem small, it was important to protect that one worker's job. It is something which could face any worker and the only way to stop dismissals is to have united action by other workers.

The tactic of sitting-in was consciously decided on. Workers had learnt from the bakeries strike in Durban and the Brits one. They felt it would give them more control over the situation than an ordinary strike, although it needs more thorough organisation. There was also the advantage of workers being together for a long time. They were able to discuss issues, explain things to one another and build greater unity through closer interaction.

Sit-ins or factory occupations, although on the increase in South Africa are still a new and relatively unexploited tactic. Given the often harsh repression which even legal strikers face once they have been evicted from factory premises, and given the vast numbers of unemployed, sit-ins could prove to be an effective

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method of defending workers and their jobs during a dispute. Their success will depend on the level of organisation of workers involved, their preparedness for the occupation, as well as the position adopted by management.

As can be seen from the above examples the sit-in tactic can be used to redress a wide range of grievances. It places control of the strike directly into the hands of the workers and indicates, practically, when they see the machines standing idle, the pivotal role that the workers play in production. Depending on the extent and form of the sit-in, it gives a vision of how a new, worker-controlled society might function.

But although workers may control their factories for a period, in society at large the bosses remain in command, able to use the law, the courts and the security forces to deal with strikers.

(Estelle Randall, January 1985)

Footnotes:

1. A Gramsci, Selections from political writings 1910-1920, London, 1977.
2. A Hoyles, Imagination in power, Nottingham, 1973.
3. K Coates, Work-ins, sit-ins and industrial democracy, Nottingham, 1981.

Postscript: We have learnt that 250 workers at Chesebrough Ponds, all members of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, have staged a successful sit-in to further their demands. The sit-in began on January 22 when negotiations with management broke down. CWIU's demands were for a minimum R3,25 per hour, May Day as a paid holiday, a 40-hour week, one month's annual bonus, and 5 days a year compassionate leave. The company offered a package amounting to an 18,4% increase (hourly minimum up from R2,70 to R3,05; increased annual bonus and compassionate leave).

The workers occupied the factory for two days and three nights, during which time relatives and friends kept them supplied with food and clothing. With production at a standstill, management gave way: the union demands in respect of wages, annual bonuses and May Day were all met, whilst hours were reduced to 44 a week.