

FCWU: Dairy Belle Dispute

This briefing is based on discussion with Israel Mogoathle, the secretary of the Kempton Park branch of Food and Canning Workers Union, J. Funky Komape, vice-chair of the Dairy Belle shop stewards committee and chair of the Kempton Park shop stewards committee for the food industry (a joint body with Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union), and Wilson Manokwane, a security guard who was victimised by Dairy Belle management.



The Dairy Belle plant in Olifantsfontein (Clayville) is owned by the Imperial Cold Storage and Supply Co. Ltd. It prepares milk, juices and yoghurts with its production operations organised according to long-life and short-life products. The plant is new and was opened in 1984 after operations were transferred from the Pretoria and Johannesburg branches. Some of the workers from these other factories were transferred to the new plant, and local people from Tembisa were also recruited. Management used this relocation as an opportunity to reorganise production and change conditions of employment.

The Pretoria workers were already organised by FCWU and took the lead in establishing a union at the new plant (some Johannesburg workers had been members of CUSA's Food and Beverage Workers Union). The Dairy Belle workers fall under the Kempton Park Branch of the union, which also includes Olifantsfontein and Isando. FCWU has 10 factories in the area and SFAWU another 10. With the impending amalgamation of the two unions, Kempton Park is set to become one of the largest branches of the new combined food union.

In early 1985, Dairy Belle management finally agreed to negotiate a recognition agreement, but laid down that this be completed before any wage negotiation could take place. The workers saw this as an attempt to delay paying any increase, and in February staged a successful half-day strike to force management to set a date for wage negotiations. A recognition agreement was signed in March and a wage agreement was reached on July 4. Previously there was no clear wage structure and most workers received between R50 and R55 per week. The agreement provided for 4 grades paid at an hourly rate of R1.68, R1.78, R1.88 and R1.98. Also, further benefits were

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negotiated, eg. an allowance for working in refrigerated areas. By this time some 500 of the company's 600 employees were union members. This included many of the security personnel, despite management's declaration that these people should not join unions.

In July, Wilson Manokwane, a security guard and union member, detained the security manager (Edwards) as he was going through the gate with four 500ml cartons of yogurt. Management, however, refused to take any action against the security manager. Workers struck in protest against management bias and double standards. The matter was resolved by mediation, the security manager and Mr Manokwane were both suspended pending the outcome of an investigation which found there was inconclusive proof of theft. Shortly after, the security manager left Dairy Belle of his own accord.

A similar incident occurred two months later when Mr Manokwane had reason to suspect the personnel manager, Marais, of irregularity. Marais' explanations contradicted the statements given by others involved and so a hearing was set for the following Friday, September 20. However, before this could take place management issued a pamphlet claiming that the union agreed that Marais was not guilty and announced that Wilson Manokwane was to be disciplined for forging overtime on his clock card. Mr Manokwane was informed that he must report to the new security manager, a Mr Wilson, and that he may be accompanied by two representatives. However, when they arrived they were told it was "too late". Mr Wilson was warned not to "play" with the workers in this way. The next day Mr Manokwane was dismissed. The union took the issue up with management, who refused even to let them see the alleged forged clock card. The union office bearers declared that their members could not be dismissed without a hearing and instructed him to continue to come to work as normal.

Mr Manokwane did not arrive for work the next day (Thursday September 19) because he had been arrested the previous evening. The police who came to his home on Wednesday night did not know why they were picking him up, just that they were acting on information received from Dairy Belle management. Mr Manokwane was accused of causing strikes and unrest and being responsible for the consumer boycott.

When the shop stewards heard about the arrest they confronted the general manager, Waldeck, and demanded that Manokwane be delivered to the factory by 12.00 midday. When workers heard what had happ-

ened they stopped work, saying they would remain on strike until their fellow worker was reinstated. The next day the shop stewards committee informed management of this decision. At midday Waldeck arrived to deliver a 10 minute ultimatum to get back to work or be dismissed. Workers were not to be frightened so easily. They threw their passes at Waldeck and marched to the office to demand their money. Police and ASSEC security guards were already present. Workers were told to leave and come back on Monday. The workers sat down and refused to move. After ignoring the ultimatum, and with Hippos, police vans and sjambok wielding police now moving in, the committee members led workers out in a disciplined march.

On the Monday, the union told workers not to collect their wages, which would amount to accepting dismissal. They were also instructed to report to the union office daily for the latest information and to maintain discipline. Local area strike committees were established to maintain contact with workers who lived further away.

The union telexed their demand for reinstatement to Dairy Belle management. There followed a series of meetings with management during the period of the 3-week long strike. Meanwhile, FCWU was organising support from the federation unions and plans were well underway for boycott action. Workers at the Pretoria warehouse staged a one-day solidarity strike and Retail and Allied Workers Union was putting pressure on local Dairy Belle management in Cape Town. Members of CCAWUSA (Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union) threatened to refuse to handle Dairy Belle products. Also, although the white employees and their families tried to keep the factory going, production and distribution was suffering. At this point management gave way. They agreed to reinstate all workers except Mr Manokwane who would be suspended on full pay until his case could be heard.

ASSEC security

Management made one significant gain during the strike. They managed to install a private security firm, ASSEC, in place of their own guards, who they planned to retrench. It seems that management formed this plan when Dairy Belle security guards began to join the union. It transpired that the new security manager, Mr Wilson, actually worked for ASSEC. His role in the events at Dairy Belle requires further attention. In the first place, he adopted this secretive approach because previously, when ASSEC guards had been installed at the Pretoria plant, workers refused to tolerate their

presence. Mr Wilson, once installed, tried to trick security guards into signing resignation papers. They refused. Wilson's intentions were made plain in an outburst in the canteen after canteen staff reprimanded him for jumping the queue: he would dismiss all the union people starting with Manokwane, he blustered. The new security manager was certainly deeply involved in the dismissal of Mr Manokwane. It was he who accepted and signed Manokwane's clock card - only later was the alleged forgery discovered.

But it was the strike itself which gave management the opportunity to install ASSEC guards. The reasons are clear: to divide workers by using an outside security agency which took responsibility for their wages and conditions and imposed their own discipline. Presumably these guards will be less "cheeky" to white management and get on with the job of policing black workers.

Since the workers were reinstated relations with management have been tense and workers complain of unnecessary harassment. One departmental manager threw a container of maas into the face of a worker. A white employee in the workshop brandished a revolver at a union member. There are also complaints that "coloured" women in particular are being harassed. Also, since the strike there have been threats of retrenchments, which have, so far, been successfully resisted by the union. The case against Wilson Manokwane has fallen away, as he has now accepted employment elsewhere.

Despite problems, the union has entrenched its position; membership has actually increased since the strike. It survived this "trial of strength" and has used the period since reinstatement to reorganise before carrying the struggle further. One tactic used by the management during the strike was to employ "coloured" strike breakers. But since its return the union has started to recruit these workers, much to the frustration of management. The union has set out to unify all workers irrespective of race. As the workers strength grows in the face of a backward management, the first casualties have been amongst the white supervisors, who are being squeezed in between. They see how they have been used by management - to keep the factory going during the strike - but that they have no organisation to speak for them. On the other hand their power on the shopfloor has been undermined by the presence of the union. Out of frustration some white supervisors have already left for an easier life elsewhere. Presumably, as union organisation spreads and grows, the time will come when there is nowhere left to run. (SALB correspondent, December 1985)