



George Nene

Strike at ABI

Report by ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

As Amalgamated Beverage Industries (ABI) workers return to work after a four-week wage strike, the future of industrial relations at the bottling magnate can never be the same again. In its wake, the dispute left four non-striking workers dead. Scores of strikers were injured when management at one of the ten plants in the dispute called in police to disperse a meeting on company premises.

All 2 500 striking workers were members of FAWU, which called on consumers to boycott ABI products in support of workers' demand for a 16% across-the-board increase, as opposed to ABI's offer of 10%. The strike was resolved on 28 January when FAWU and ABI agreed on a 13,1% across-the-board increase. The increase will be effective until 31 March next year.

The strike started on 31 December after more than 3 700 workers had voted in a strike

ballot, with 76% in favour of the strike. The strike affected all the eight ABI plants in the PWV area and the other two in Durban.

The union urged consumers not to buy Coca Cola products or allow Coca Cola deliveries in townships. It accused the company of:

- negotiating in bad faith;
- union bashing;
- racism and job reservation; and
- stalling negotiations.

George Nene, national chairperson of the ABI shopstewards council, is convinced that the boycott call was necessary. "We agreed that management would not feel the effect of the strike as long as people were drinking their product," says Nene.

But what of the 'new era' of co-operation said to be dawning in South Africa? Is this not happening at ABI?

Not according to Nene. "ABI management is racist and reactionary," he argues. "For example, job reservation is still in effect. There are no blacks in senior management categories. In all ten plants, there is no single black plant manager, personnel manager or general sales manager." Nene also says that it is not unusual for management to apply the disciplinary code selectively. "There are cases of white managers who flout the code and are never disciplined accordingly. When we raise this at meetings with management, we are told that such cases warrant confidentiality, and that will be the last we will ever hear about the matter."

Nene believes that ABI management only pays lip service to sound industrial relations. "All in all, there is no 'new era' dawning at ABI as far as industrial relations are concerned," says Nene.

How, then, was the boycott enforced? Were businessmen and consumers coerced to support FAWU's call?

Nene says it is not FAWU's policy to intimidate people to support the workers' struggles. "However, we received calls from some businessmen in Mamelodi, Pretoria and the East Rand complaining of intimidation by some striking members. This included the breaking of fridges, soft drinks bottles, and so



on. We met with these businessmen and assured them that it is not our union's policy to antagonise potential supporters."

Although he stressed that progressive organisations were fully consulted and their support canvassed over the strike and the product boycott, Nene concedes that the consultation process with black shopowners and other businessmen was not sufficient, especially in Mamelodi. "We apologised to them for failing to consult them at the beginning of the strike."

Nene is also not convinced that ABI deserves its publically proclaimed status as a well-paying employer. "The fact that the lowest-paid worker at ABI earns R1 800 a month is not because of the bosses' goodwill. This is due to the struggles we have waged, whereby higher earner scaled down their increases so lower earners could earn more. This has been happening since FAWU started organising at ABI nearly eight years ago."

Nene gave the example of the average driver, who, he says, earns R2 000 a month

before tax. "This is very low given the responsibility a driver has to shoulder. He is responsible for the stock, for its delivery, driving the heavily-loaded trucks, supervising the delivery crew, handling cash and promoting good customer relations. At the end of the month, he ends up with a take-home pay of about R1 500."

Nene believes the product boycott contributed to softening management's attitude. "When the Soweto Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) sent a fax to ABI raising concern about the dispute, the company sent one of its managers to the township to try and convince SCCI members not to support our boycott call," he recalls.

Nene is not optimistic that ABI management will review its "racist, reactionary" posture with the end of the strike. Rather, he believes ABI workers still face an uphill battle. "Whatever changes are going to take place at ABI," Nene says, "we will have to struggle hard to convince the bosses to agree to." ☆