

The Corobrik Strike

Corobrik is controlled by the Tongaat Corogroup which owns approximately 72% of the equity, which is in turn part of the holding company, the Tongaat Hullet Group. Tongaat Corogroup is the major supplier of walling, roofing and cladding materials to the building industry in South Africa - the main products marketed include clay bricks and blocks, roofing and flooring tiles.

Employment conditions at Corobrik are notoriously bad. The work is heavy, unhealthy and dangerous. The hours are long and supervision aggressive and abusive. Wages are appallingly low, although the company prizes itself as the leading producer of clay bricks in South Africa. Its production strategy and response to the recession has been the mothballing of factories and retrenchment of workers. When the building industry regains momentum the factories are re-opened depending on the regional requirements for building materials. Earlier this year, for example, over 2,000 workers were retrenched and 9 factories closed, while production was also reduced at 31 of the 51 plants.

In May this year 1,600 General Workers Union members engaged on a national legal strike which involved 4 Western Cape plants and 1 in Pietermaritzburg, and which came after months of fruitless negotiations over wages. The strike ended on May 29 without securing any further increase in wages. For both the union and management the strike was important in showing the present balance of forces within the company. Although no immediate financial gain was made, the workers emerged organisationally more consolidated and determined to continue their battle for better wages and working conditions. It provided a hard school and major test for the union which gave workers some insight into the extent of management intransigence and capital's power. For management it was a traumatic experience, summed up by the terse comment of the managing director of Corobrik in the Western Cape, Mr Bounds when approached to give an interview: "The strike was an experience I'd like to forget, the sooner the better."

In fact this view reflected the general stance of Corobrik

- Corobrik -

management throughout the dispute. As David Lewis, general secretary of GWU put it: "Corobrik told us that when the strike begins, the talking ends". Corobrik has been well aided in this strategy by a pliable inhouse and totally unrepresentative union - the National Union of Black and Allied Workers (NUBAW) - which was established in 1979. NUBAW is one of the two unions established and financed by the Tongaat Hullet Group - the other is the National Sugar and Refining and Allied Industries Employees' Union (NSRAIEU) in the sugar division of the Group. Both are designed to rubber stamp managerial decisions, keep out democratic trade unions and regulate industrial relations in favour of management. Workers are often forced to join such sweetheart unions.

GWU organises

GWU started organising in Pietermaritzburg and the 4 Cape Town plants of Phesantekraal, Koelenhof, Stellenbosch, Killarney and Somerset West around June 1984. Organising was a gradual process, affected by the disorganising role of NUBAW. In Pietermaritzburg in particular management was very hostile and continued to give NUBAW access to the factory although it did not enjoy support.

But GWU's organising efforts gained momentum as workers began to see the importance of unionisation and appreciate the treacherous role of NUBAW. All categories of workers were organised - office cleaners, skilled artisans, drivers and unskilled workers. The union gained majority recognition in six factories, some just before the wage negotiations began. An important clause in the recognition agreement, which was bitterly fought for, was that Corobrik, if they wished to dismiss workers during a strike, had to dismiss all. On the other hand, if they wished to re-employ, all had to be re-employed. This ensured that active union members would not be victimised.

GWU's wage demand was R1.95 per hour for the Western Cape workers and R2.00 per hour for the Pietermaritzburg workers an increase of 87 cents and 71 cents per hour respectively. The submission was based on 2 arguments: firstly, does Corobrik pay a living wage and, secondly, can Corobrik afford to pay a living wage? The pre-strike wage rates of R1.17 for the Western Cape and R1.29 for Pietermaritzburg were well below

the UNISA minimum living level figures - although the holding group is the eleventh largest company in the country. The GWU firmly opposed this low wage policy. Lewis explains:

We presented very detailed arguments on the cost of living, workers budgets, statistics of price increases and even things such as the affect of the drought in the homelands on the workers families and their roofing requirements for housing.

The union was not prepared to accept or negotiate over cost of living increases when the absolute wage levels remained so low. The union's arguments seemed conclusive. They demonstrated through the latest audited accounts of Toncoro that the annual profits of the group had increased from R9 million to R29 million and that the company was in a position to pay a living wage.

It seems that the pressures in the sugar division of the Tongaat Hullet Group, for example the financing of the R170 million Phoenix sugar mill has necessitated that the building materials division, in particular Corobrik, be used to assist through maintaining low wages and shifting profits to other divisions. The Corobrik, Toncoro and Tongaat Hullet network of financing and loan repayments creates an incorrect view of the financial position and profits of the company because they are constantly being repaid in the form of interest to the holding company.

"Corobrik did not respond to our arguments and had no legitimate case concerning its inability to meet our demands", said Lewis. Errol Rutherford managing director of Toncoro summed up their position:

Our companies were not prepared to increase their offer ...because they considered their final offer fair and reasonable in the circumstances.

The strike

The Corobrik offer was R1.37 per hour. Although GWU was prepared to negotiate on their proposals Corobrik was not. After the deadlock of the conciliation board negotiations, GWU balloted for a strike which the majority of workers supported. Prior to the strike the foremen attempted to discourage so-called coloured workers in the Western Cape from participat-

ing, but failed miserably and the workers commenced strike action on Monday May 20.

The 9 day strike action was extremely disciplined with workers picketing at the gate. Holding placards explaining their struggle for a living wage, it was an important schooling which consolidated unity at the workplace. Only one independent cartage contractor managed to cross the picket line. The 45,000 brick stockpile served no purpose as workers ensured that no scabs were employed. They stayed on the factory premises. For management it was a matter of holding out, although substantial amounts were being lost. In fact losses were reported to have been greater than had the company simply agreed to GWU's demands. The rationale for the company's stance was the fact that the NUBAW in the Transvaal had accepted the company's wage offer and to have conceded to GWU would have undermined the sweetheart union.

On the union's part there was constant evaluation of the progress of the strike and after 9 days when management indicated no alternative offer, the workers decided to go back. But the workers do not see this as a defeat. The intransigence of the Corobrik management must be seen as an attempt at union bashing in order to restore the sweetheart union, NUBAW.

The strike has also raised important questions concerning negotiations and official disputes procedures, which have been clearly exposed as working in management's favour. What is collective bargaining when legitimate and well researched arguments are ignored at the negotiating table by management? It is becoming increasingly evident that astute reasoning at the negotiating table is not sufficient to change the attitude of an intransigent management. Class organisation, power and struggle are the ingredients of change. For Corobrik workers this is a clear lesson. Their flexibility in tactics has ensured that the union has survived to continue the battle with a clear perspective of what is necessary, namely the national organisation of all Corobrik workers.

(Marcel Golding, Cape Town, June 1985)