

Lockout in Queenstown

A worker at the Eastern Cape Agricultural Co-operative Creamery in Queenstown gave this account of the lockout, which took place in March, to the SALB.

We had to stop work.

There were many complaints. Our wages were R29 a week and R35 if you had long service. Our conditions of work were terrible. I have worked continually at Bowker's Park* since 1971. I started at R7,33 a week, but I have never been handled decently. There was no way of resolving our problems. There was no one to whom we could refer these things. So you had to go yourself. And when you took your problem to the management, if they felt your complaint was something they didn't like they would tell you: 'If you are going to have complaints such as these, you are going to make us kick you out and that will be the end of work for you. We don't want a person who has complaints. We only want a person who is just going to work.' That made us weep. And that was not all. Workers were beaten. Women were insulted and called filthy names. But when one who had been assaulted went to complain he was just told that those who complain will be expelled.

There was another serious complaint which we had. We used to borrow money from the firm when we had problems and they would lend us this money. But now we can no longer borrow money. They said we could never receive loans again. But because of the meagre wages we get we often cannot manage. Sometimes someone in the family gets ill and you've got to take them to the doctor and you don't have the money. Now there is no place where you can get help other than the place where you work. This was a big complaint among us at Bowker's Park. It was one of the complaints which was taken by the liaison committee to the managers, to ask them why there were no longer any more loans.

The liaison committee

In about 1980 we heard something about a workmen's committee or liaison committee which we should have to take our complaints. This idea came from near the offices of the employers. What I mean is that it was their idea. We were told to elect members who would represent us to them. The

managers would also take their complaints about the workers, those things about our work which did not satisfy them, to the committee. The committee would then bring those things to us.

So we elected members to this liaison committee which was going to represent us. And we used to send it to the managers and when it arrived it said what we had told it to say. When it had said what we had sent it to say we found that the employers would want to know: 'Who advised you to say what you are saying?'

But the committee would say, 'Nobody, this thing comes from the workers — from us all!'

Then the employers would say, 'If you come here with bad complaints we will start to expel workers and we will start with you, the committee. Then we will expel everybody who says things with which we don't agree.'

This happened when we took the complaint about the loans to the managers. The reply to the liaison committee was that the law of the firm stated that the managers should no longer give loans. One who is not satisfied with that could simply take his jacket and march out. There was nothing we could do and the committee said there was nothing it could do in such a situation because it had also been told it would be expelled if it caused any trouble.

At that point it was found that they were given loans when they wanted them, these members of the liaison committee, but were told not to tell the rest of us that they had received loans. But it soon became known. So we saw there was nothing we could do. This liaison committee was hopeless. The managers only wanted to use it to tell us of the things that did not satisfy them. But our grievances were not heard at all.

Some of us had children to support. And we pay taxes. Now if we talked we were going to be expelled. The best thing was to keep quiet and see whether God was not going to help us. We could see the liaison committee was not going to do anything.

We want our union to be recognised

While we were still waiting to see who was going to help us there arrived in July 1982 this organisation, the African Food and Canning Workers' Union. We heard about the way it works to help people, the workers. Then we realised, as it explained to us how it works, that we should accept it. We accepted this organisation. I was one of the workers who accepted it. And

there were others here in the firm. There were quite a number of people who accepted it. In fact, after a time, all of the workers in the firm accepted it, in 1982.

After everybody in Bowker's Park had joined we wanted to know how this organisation was going to represent us. Because we had elected shop stewards and committee members which we were compelled by the rules of the organisation to elect. So we first had a meeting with other factories where workers had joined the union in Queenstown. This was at KSM (Kaf-frarian Steam Mills) and Dunn's Bakery. KSM and Dunn's had recognised the union. But our committee reported to us that our company had not responded to the letter written by the union. They said they would have nothing to do with the union. We had told the union to take the initiative but now we asked the committee to go and see the manager to tell him we wanted to speak to him. It was the 8th March, on a Tuesday.

The committee saw the assistant production manager who said, 'What do you want to see the Branch Manager for? He is not in.'

The committee replied, 'We have been sent by the workers.'

The manager repeated that the Branch Manager was not in and said that the committee should come the following day.

But after the committee had left this manager called one committee member aside and spoke to him on his own.

'Now tell me,' he said, 'What do you want?'

But the steward replied, 'No, we want to speak to him.'

Then he asked the shop steward, 'Have you joined the organisation? Do you want to see him about this organisation of which it is said there are people of this firm who have joined?'

The committee member replied, 'Yes! We want him for that. We want our union to be recognised.'

We did not know then what this shop steward had told the assistant manager. He just repeated that we should go the next day. But we saw that there was something going on behind this. We had already seen that they were not on good terms with this matter concerning this organisation of ours.

We only want to see the manager

The following day, on the morning of 9th March, we arrived at work and entered the premises. We had already reached a decision that because

management was ignoring our requests there was only one thing to do, and that was to sit. We should go to work but not work.

So when we arrived we did not put on our overalls but asked to see the manager. Then he came and asked, 'What do you want to see me for?' So we said, 'We want to tell you about this organisation we have joined. It is a workers' organisation and we want you to meet it. We have sent it to talk to you about the things with which we are not satisfied in the firm.'

His reply was, 'This organisation has already written to us telling us it wanted to meet us. But we told it that we will have nothing to do with it.'

To which we said, 'If you say you will have nothing to do with it and it is the organisation which is going to represent us to you, then we are not going to work until you meet the union. We belong to this organisation because we have complaints which you don't accept when we come to you by ourselves. You just show us the gate and say that a person who has complaints should go through it.'

The manager then said, 'I don't want to talk to you about this organisation which you have joined. Now I am going to call the police.'

No! We will not march out of the gate

He called the police. We were still inside the firm. The police arrived. A policeman, called a commandant, accompanied by his captain, came to us and said, 'We have been called by your whites who say that you no longer work here. They don't want you here, so go!'

But we said, 'How can we go when we are the workers of this firm? No, we will not march out of the gate. We want to speak to the manager.'

But the commandant just said, 'Go away from here. We have been called to arrest you for trespassing. These premises are not your territory. They have expelled you because they want nothing to do with your organisation. And they do not want you on their premises.'

Then we said, 'But this is our ground. We have not yet been discharged and we are still being hired by this firm. Everything of ours is still inside the factory. They cannot just say we must go without giving us any time to prepare. We are not going to march out.'

'Well I give you five minutes,' the policeman said, 'Otherwise I will call the police vans and arrest you for trespassing.'

Then we got out of the factory

Then a committee member said we should leave the premises. Then we got out of the factory. We went across the road, still near the firm in front of the gate, but on the opposite side of the road. But the commandant came again and said we still didn't have a right to stand there. We would be arrested under the law concerning Unlawful Gatherings. Then he advised us to go to the location but not to hold a meeting publicly, by just standing in the open. If we wanted to meet it should be under a roof, because even there in the location they would still arrest us if we stood together on open ground.

So we left and met to decide what to do the next day. We decided to go back to the firm because the manager had not yet given us a reply. We decided to go back there and speak to him because we were still workers.

They were there with dogs, standing in the gate

We arrived back at work the following day. We all were there and work was at a standstill in the firm. Then the coloureds who worked the computer in the office started doing the work. And then farmers also came with other whites from the farms to work and help in the firm. The white staff and these other whites helped to do our work.

We just stood in front of the gate. They were there with dogs now, the security, standing in the gate with their security dogs, so that we should not enter the gate again.

We wanted to enter because we were being hired by the firm. But we saw the presence of the dogs and that they had locked the gates. And there was also one who had gone to fetch a gun. But he did not use the gun because he was prevented by another white who worked in the firm.

And then the police came, the commandant and his captain. No bosses turned up; only police and the security patrolling the factory. On this second day they gave us thirty minutes to leave, repeating what they said the day before. We tried to say that we had not been expelled because our *dompas* had not even been signed. They told us we had been dismissed and we should come back on the Monday to be re-employed. We then left accepting neither the dismissal nor what was said about re-employment. This was decided at another meeting we held. We also decided not to be divided or separated in any way. If the police came to the gates on Monday we would all get into the vans.

Then they came with vans and tried to arrest us

On Monday we all arrived at the gates again. The police were waiting for us in vans. They told us again that we were dismissed and tried to arrest some of us. They pointed at me to get inside a van. They also pointed at one of the committee members that he too should get into a van. When a young policeman tried to arrest a third worker, a shop steward, he started wrestling with the policeman and they both fell to the ground.

By that time I was getting into the van when the people pushed forward and said to me, 'You are not to get into the van. It was our decision that if someone was arrested we should all be arrested together.'

So then we told the police that they should come with other vans to accommodate us all. We would all get inside the vans. There were 179 of us who didn't go to work, who were standing locked outside the gates of Bowker's Park.

We will leave you to talk to your whites

When the police heard what we said they called for the big van. It came. But then the commandant said to the policemen they should leave those they tried to arrest. So they left me and the other two stewards.

Then the police went to the managers. We don't know what they talked about. But they talked and talked to the managers and then the commandant and captain went and sat inside their car. They talked there for a long time alone. Our managers were standing inside the gate while we were standing on the other side of the road. When the policemen eventually got out of the car they went to see the managers again and then came to talk to us.

'You see we policemen have nothing to do with this case of yours,' they said. 'This thing is between you and your whites. We are going now and we will leave you to talk to your whites. But if something other than negotiating happens that will cause us to return, then we will do our work on you.'

After that they left with all their vans. We workers were left alone. Then our managers came to speak to us.

We have expelled you, but will take some of you back.

'We have told you that you are expelled, but we are going to accept those of you we want back at work. But even to those we want back we will not

talk about your organisation,' they told us.

Our question now was, 'If you say we must get inside and work and still have nothing to do with our organisation, how are we going to work? Under what conditions? Because what we want is that you should talk to our organisation which is going to represent us to you concerning our complaints.'

Then this manager tried to divide us. He wanted to know who had joined the union. And he wanted to know if there were people among us who were unemployed. So he started saying, 'Stand according to your departments because I want to know how many of you have already left and are working inside the firm.'

'Nobody has left to go and work,' we said. 'We are all outside here.' He insisted. But we didn't like the way he was talking to us so we told him, 'The only people to tell us to stand in departments and whom we will allow to count us is the union.'

But he continued to try to divide us on this fourth day of the struggle. He said there were other people not from Bowker's Park among us. We denied it. Nobody had broken our unity.

We will tell you of our complaints

I said to him, 'When you said you expelled us, how can you do that when you still have our money here? The money that has continued to be deducted from 1970 to 1983, we from the Transkei, how are we going to get that money? We cannot get it from the Transkei and we never received it from the Department of Labour. When we went there they told us they sent it to Bowker's Park. Now we want to know about these things. So we want you to talk to the organisation which is going to represent us. You told us to elect a liaison committee and we did, but it never represented us. But you say you will have nothing to do with our organisation. Is it because it is illegal?' He could not answer.

'I will tell you those things you do with which we workers are not satisfied because we don't have a representative to tell you these things. We have many complaints which you never listen to. Our wages are R29 a week and R35 if you have long service. Our conditions of work are terrible. The women are insulted and called filthy names. Workers are beaten in the firm. One had his jaw broken and another was shot in the leg. A white foreman and a worker were fighting and the worker began over-powering the white.

So the foreman just shot him and left him lying there. Then he was taken to the police station and only then to hospital.

But the firm said nothing about what had happened. They didn't talk to us about it so we decided to take the case to court. We did so, but nothing happened and we heard there was bribery involved. The other worker was beaten so badly that he was off work for six weeks with wires in his jaw. He was back at work for two weeks when he was dismissed. In another case when a worker went to the police to complain of being beaten at work the police just beat him up again.'

All this time the manager stood and listened. There was nothing he could say, so I explained that it was for these reasons we workers joined the union. It was going to represent us concerning these things. But he simply repeated that the firm would not recognise our organisation and there was nothing more to say. Then he left.

Some are going back now

The company started bringing in scab labour from then on. They started with the skilled machine operators who were the first to go back. But even now production is not back to normal. Those machines for making butter in the Creamery are old and awkward. And not all the machine operators went back.

They contracted other workers secretly to go back. Some workers are going back now. They are trickling back, claiming hunger. But there were never any dismissals, no books were signed off. They gave us one week's wages. Holiday money was not given and neither was our pension money. And other money of ours is still there. Like the UIF money which the Transkei will not pay out, but is still being deducted from the wages.

Our numbers outside here have started decreasing. Some have gone back to the countryside and about 30 went inside, back to work. That is why we are such a small number now, remaining in Queenstown. There are 40 of us still left here. It is all the old people who are strong. Some young ones, and even some shop stewards, were the first to go back. But we are continuing. The spirit is still alive in us.