

Repression Against Unions.

While the number of trade unionists detained has not increased this year, a campaign of intimidation, harassment and 'strange events' has been stepped up against unions. This has been interpreted by unionists as just another attempt to frustrate and disorganise their activities. But some observers have noted that such incidents have been experienced by journalists, community activists, churchmen and even liberal critics of the government. The frequency and similarity of these incidents in different parts of the country suggest that they may be part of a campaign against all critics of government policy.

Some 'Strange Events'

There have been several incidents of the cars of unionists being tampered with. The consequence of this has, in some instances been fatal. While there is no direct evidence to suggest foul play, there exists suspicion that not all were 'accidents'.

Mr Jan Theron, general secretary of the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU), while in George for negotiations with a company, found that his three tyres had been over inflated, while one had been deflated. He had checked the tyres on the previous night and pumped them to normal pressure. He commented that if he had travelled to Cape Town he would definitely have had a blow out. Mr Theron said he could only conclude that 'this very unsafe situation had been deliberately created'.

Three trade unionists have died in car accidents this year. In March, two organisers of the National Union of Mineworkers, Mr Teboho Noko and Mr Paul Leboea died in a car accident near Welkom. It took the union two weeks to trace the bodies of the victims to the Teba Labour recruitment offices. Also in March, Stephen Maseko, a Pretoria organiser for the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) and a companion died in a car accident after the brakes failed.

In another strange event, the General Workers Union (GWU) offices in Cape Town were broken into in March. Describing the burglary as 'peculiar' the GWU pointed out that no money was taken — only a book containing the minutes of all union meetings over the past year and a few other union documents. Union officials expressed concern about the 'loud

hammering' heard by the caretaker on the night of the burglary and felt that 'bugs' might have been put into the office. Even more strange was that a combi with the same registration number which the caretaker said he saw at the scene of the burglary was seen two days later at the Caledon Square Police Station. Police sources confirmed that the vehicle belonged to the SAP, but said that the vehicle concerned 'was not near the scene of the burglary at the time'. This is the third known burglary at the GWU offices in the past year. The GWU has said that it was 'astounding' that the police were dismissing the available evidence so hastily. 'We are an open legal organisation with nothing to hide, and find it reprehensible that our offices are entered unlawfully in this manner' they said.

Harassment and Intimidation

Trade unionists within the progressive independent trade union movement cite quite a few instances of harassment and intimidation. The incidents range from the Group Areas police frequently visiting the home of one trade unionist within a short space of time to Security Police questioning union officials on company premises about their organising activities. The union concerned in the latter incident accuses the management of having called in the Security Police with the aim of 'intimidating and bulldozing' their efforts.

In the latest instance of police harassment the third annual congress of the Motor Assemblies and Component Workers Union in April (MACWUSA) was marred when police arrested the guest speaker, Frank van De Horst. They also barred two other speakers and many others from entering Port Elizabeth's New Brighton Township. Mr van De Horst, president of the SA Council of Sport (Sacos) was detained at a roadblock and taken to Security Police headquarters and questioned for three hours. Attacking the police action, MACWUSA trade unionist, Fikile Kobese, said that he 'saw this harassment and intimidation as a deplorable tactic to sabotage the congress'.

After the release of the six trade unionists in the Ciskei in March, SAAWU criticised allegations by Lt-General Charles Sebe that SAAWU was engaged in activities of the banned ANC. They saw this as an excuse to continue the harassment of unionists in the East London area, as SAAWU activities increased and the union gained strength. SAAWU said that the involvement of union members in activities outside the scope of the union had 'no sanction' from the union which was known to be functioning constitutionally.

Detentions

A trade unionist, Mr Dlaki Vani (AFCWU) in Queenstown and Mr Linda Ngodeka, a member of the union, were detained on 3 May. The detentions followed a stoppage at the Eastern Cape Agricultural Cooperative Creamery. Mr Ngodeka was released a few days later. On the 5 May, head of Security Police in the Border Area, Col AP van der Merwe, confirmed that Mr Vani was detained. However a few days later Lt-Gen Charles Sebe claimed that Mr Vani was in detention in the Ciskei and said that he was 'picked up' after a 'long search'. Numerous witnesses saw Mr Vani being taken away by police in Mlungisi township, Queenstown, which is some distance from the Ciskei. The African Food and Canning Workers' Union has expressed shock and outrage at Gen Sebe's statement and say the events can only mean that Mr Vani was handed to the Ciskei police by the SAP. They demanded to know how Mr Vani came to be in the custody of the Ciskei police. *The AFCWU has said that they did not have the slightest doubt that 'Mr Vani's detention as part of a co-ordinated campaign to destroy our union in the region'. They demanded his immediate release and alleged that his detention was strongly linked to the stoppage at the creamery in Cape Town.*

On the 13th May, the Minister of Law and Order confirmed in Parliament that Mr Vani had been handed over by the SAP to the Ciskei police.

Sidney Mafamundi, General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) General Secretary, and Monde Mditshwa, GAWU National Organiser, were detained on Friday 20th May in East London by Ciskei police. On Monday, 23rd May, General Sebe confirmed their detention but said they had been released on that day. He declined to say where they had been released. None of the union officials in the East London area was aware of their release and expressed serious concern about their whereabouts. They expressed fears that the two unionists were still being held. This was confirmed by the detained trade unionists who said they were released only on Wednesday 25th May. Their detention was condemned strongly by other trade unionists.

Court Cases

In March, the president of SAAWU, Thozamile Gqweta, was called to give evidence for the defence in a security trial in Zwelitsha in the Eastern

Cape. He was called in order to determine the admissability of statements made by the accused. Mr Gqweta gave horrific details of his own conditions of detention in 1982 during which he was subjected to electric shock treatment, assault, near strangulation and other forms of torture. Mr Gqweta was in detention in the Ciskei when he gave evidence.

In April, the former Transvaal secretary of MWASA was jailed for two and a half years for the collection and possession of literature published by the Pan African Congress. Mr Thloloe who was charged with four others, was found in possession of one such document. Mr Thloloe had spent ten months in detention prior to the trial. Mr Thloloe has appealed against the sentence and an application for bail pending the appeal has been made.

The marathon three year trial of AFCWU organiser, Oscar Mpetha (73), ended on the 6th June. Mr Mpetha and twenty-two others were charged on two counts of murder and of participating in terrorist activities. Mr Mpetha was acquitted on the two charges of murder but found guilty of terrorism. In his judgement Mr Justice Williamson said that although he suspected Mr Mpetha of planning the violence that occurred, there was insufficient evidence to show that 'he was the brains behind the events'. However it was clear that Mr Mpetha had encouraged the crowd who were bent on violence, he said.

Five of the twenty two accused were acquitted, three men were found guilty on two charges of murder and taking part in terrorist activities, and one man was found guilty on the two counts of murder. Sentences for all the accused have yet to be passed.

(Shereen Motala, Johannesburg, 8 June 1983)