

## NUTW - BROWN LUNG CAMPAIGN

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Cotton textile factories have been operating in South Africa for over twenty years. During that time thousands of workers have been working in such conditions that their hair is full of cotton by the time they finish a single shift. For all of this time - and today - these workers breathe in the air of their factory, full of cotton dust. Slowly, but surely workers start to have problems breathing. They are treated for asthma, sometimes it is said to be TB; sometimes they are said to be pretending to be sick to claim sick pay.

Until 1982 hardly a single worker in South Africa was ever told the simple truth that in many cases it was the cotton dust that was steadily ruining their health. The companies set up clinics at work and encouraged the workers to use the company doctor. In all these factories around the country only one worker, a white foreman at Industex in Port Elizabeth was ever found to have brown lung - the incurable disease from cotton dust which steadily cuts your ability to breathe.

Two years ago, however, NUTW launched its Brown Lung Campaign. It produced booklets and pamphlets for workers telling them of the struggles of workers overseas to fight dusty conditions in their factories and to force the authorities to compensate them for the damage to their health. Very soon thereafter the union employed the services of a doctor to do tests on our members to check how the dust was affecting them.

**The First Campaign.....**

The first employer where the campaign was done

resisted bitterly. He refused to let this doctor test workers at the factory and encouraged his sweetheart union to denounce the campaign as an irresponsible scare tactic by NUTW. He even forced workers to go to his own doctor who claimed no-one was sick from the dust. The campaign was attacked in textile newspapers. The union doctor was quickly said to be ignorant and "fresh out of school". For all their attacks however, one worker, Sister Maseko, will live to be glad she stuck with the union. She had worked 16 years in a dusty winding areas and had been affected by brown lung. Responding to the union's demand the company quickly moved her away from the dusty machine where she had worked.

Subsequent campaigns.....

Since that first campaign the union has tested over 2500 of its members in cotton factories in Mooi River, Hammersdale, Tongaat, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. Workers in these factories were all tested carefully. Union shop stewards were active in directing the campaigns - addressing workers meetings, interviewing members and explaining how the lung function test works.

Attempts to block the campaign.....

At Table Bay Spinners in Cape Town the company agreed to co-operate with the campaign. Management allowed the union's doctor inside the factory to measure the dust levels and to test members one by one to check their ability to breathe.

The members there had previously been members of the red card union - Textile Workers Industrial Union. Virtually all of them resigned from the union to join NUTW in 1982. Only 15 workers out of over 400 remained members of the red card union.

All went well with the campaign at first. Our

members were tested at the factory. Suddenly, however, the red card union decided to interfere. It wrote to the company stating that the union doctor was "unethical" because he was only testing NUTW members and not red card members! The red card union's General Secretary even went so far as to threaten the company with a legal case if it went on co-operating with the campaign. Fortunately, however, the threats and insults could not stop NUTW's members from continuing the campaign to its conclusion.

It may seem unbelievable but that's how it went this year at Table Bay Spinners. The red card union was not in the slightest bit interested in supporting the campaign or contacting us before they threatened legal action. In 50 years of existence their union hasn't assisted any of its members in this way. Its only contribution has been to try, like some employers, to block our campaign.

#### Results of our campaign.....

In the examinations of workers as many as 16 of every 100 spinners have been found to have symptoms of brown lung. More than 40 have been found to have been developing serious lung illness from the dust that they are working in. The union has campaigned for them to be moved to non-dusty work areas without loss of pay. We have succeeded with the majority of these demands and not a single worker has lost his or her job. The illness that these workers have will now not get any worse - BUT WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT THE CAMPAIGN?

Among these workers were 25 who have developed brown lung that is serious and disabling. For the rest of their lives they will struggle to breathe - and that struggle will grow harder and harder as they go on - EVEN IF THEY LEAVE THE COTTON FACTORIES.

For each of these 25 workers the union has processed

Workmens' Compensation claims. These claims are very slow and the money is not a fraction of what they have lost. You cannot buy new lungs. Several of these workers have now recieved over R1000 in compensation as well as life pensions of over R100 per month for the rest of their lives. They all continue to work at the factories earning their full wages.

Health and Safety Agreements to be negotiated.....

The Tongaat Hullets Group has three factories in Natal - Hebox in Hammarsdale, David Whiteheads in Tongaat and Prilla Mills in Pietermaritzburg. The union has almost 3000 members employed in these factories.

After brown lung campaigns were conducted at Hebox and Whiteheads the union submitted a draft agreement on Health and Safety for negotiations with the Group. These negotiations are among the first of their kind in South Africa but it is hoped that more and more cotton factories will agree to the basic demands put forward in this draft agreement.

We are demanding -

- A safe and healthy workplace;
- clean air and proper ventilation sytems;
- effective respirators where needed;
- reasonable access to the union doctor;
- affected workers to be transferred to dust free areas at the same rate of pay and to have opportunities to be retrained.
- company co-operation with claims for Workmens' Compensation;
- company recognition of the World Health Organisa-tion's level of 0,2 mg/m<sup>3</sup> as the Permissible Limit for cotton dust.

We will never give up our struggle for these demands until all textile workers have won SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS AND THE RIGHT TO BREATHE.